

**Inward, Christian Soldiers:**  
*Romantic Irony and Civic Trust in the American Mind*

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Ronald Jay Magill, Jr.  
aus Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; United States of America

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## *Inward, Christian Soldiers: Romantic Irony and Civic Trust in the American Mind*

### ABSTRACT

“One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony,” *Time* columnist Roger Rosenblatt wrote in response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. After two airplanes flew into the World Trade Center, many other pundits also claimed an immediate end to, of all things, irony. A few years prior, the 1990s saw a flood of books, articles, and concern for the state of civic trust and the rise of citizen cynicism in America. Simultaneously, pop culture was churning out situation comedies, advertisements, and movies drenched in ironic self-awareness, cynicism, and sarcastic knowingness, all of which continue healthily to this day, if not even more intensely. In debates by political pundits, however, cynicism and irony were frequently thrown around as a causes of civic decline; the attitude of ironic disengagement involved a wry, knowing view of the world and a distancing from the moral values of middle-class America. The media and intellectuals were to blame for fomenting this stance. But why were irony and the values of middle-class America so opposed to each other? What relationship does irony have to morality? What is the genesis of this opposition in the American mind?

“*Inward, Christian Soldiers: Romantic Irony and Civic Trust in the American Mind*” addresses these issues, specifically as irony plays a divisive role when it comes to those who “get it” and those who don’t, those who connect by sharing this worldview, and those who are distanced by it. Irony has been characterized, since Aristotle, as sly, knowing, disingenuous, anti-civic. But what sorts of philosophical values and ideals separate those who share irony as a worldview and those who lambaste the stance as snide and vain? How might irony be a defense against a culture perceived as inauthentic, saccharine, and untrustworthy?

Many of the answers to these kinds of questions come down to differing philosophical understandings of how one is to achieve inner freedom and maintain a sense of authenticity. The historical genesis of the ironic worldview is Romanticism and its understanding of how man attains happiness and freedom by going *around* society; this position sits in direct opposition to earlier Puritan notions of the same drive, which is to join with others *through* society to attain freedom and salvation, i.e. through civic trust, through the divine covenant secularized. What originates in German Romanticism is amplified in America by Emerson. Puritan notions, on the other hand, remain with Americans through our normative understanding of the social contract and its original Christian intonations. These dual mindsets—that of the ironist and that of the earnest, committed citizen—often take encampment on either side of the culture wars. Crucially, though they seem to fundamentally disagree, they both retain a shared and basic Protestantism: they both value inwardness, authenticity, sincerity, and individual conscience as the seat of certainty. The means are different, but both aim at correcting society. Irony continues the Protestant project.

This dissertation trespasses on the Olive Garden, *The Daily Show*, *The Simpsons*, German Idealist philosophy, American social criticism, and Protestant ideology alike. In the end, it aims to show that the debate about irony as civic decline is misled, and that calls for the “end of irony” will never work, that is, never seem convincing to ironists. Young, media savvy Americans are all ironists now; and renewed calls to believe are quickly ironized. Politicized calls for civic trust are belied by a political culture suffused with cynicism. And to express the value of authenticity, the ironist must perform it oppositely. So as the ironist leans inward, away from the social, away from a culture he perceives as shot through with inauthenticity, he takes his trust with him.

Für Peter Sloterdijk, *miser cordia alumni*.

*Many people are studying the past, but very few are studying the present.  
Keep your eyes open and your ears open.*

- Natalie Wraga, America-Russia analyst (1902–2003)

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## Introduction: The Stage of Irony

*If I am conscious when I speak that what I say is my meaning, and that what is said is an adequate expression of my meaning, and I assume that the person with whom I am speaking comprehends perfectly the meaning in what is said, then I am bound by what is said....If, on the other hand, what is said is not my meaning, or the opposite of my meaning, then I am free, both in relation to others and in relation to myself.*

- Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*

*“Here comes that cannonball guy – he’s cool.”*

*“Are you being sarcastic, dude?”*

*“I don’t even know anymore.”*

- two teenagers at “Hullabalooza” on *The Simpsons*

Indication of alienation. *The clearest sign that two people hold alienated views is that each says ironic things to the other, but neither of the two feels the other’s irony.*

- Friedrich Nietzsche, aphorism 331, *Human, All Too Human*

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Of these three quotations, I remember verbatim the above three lines from an episode of *The Simpsons*—that always perfectly calibrated cultural barometer.<sup>1</sup> The confusion about whether the first speaker’s comment is sincere or said in jest, meant or not meant, reveals that the speaker is unsure about his own intentions—and more importantly, about how much control he has over what he does intend once he utters it to others. Originally aired in 1996, this Simpsonian haiku of social satire remains telling, and one can easily imagine the second speaker’s response to this last line as “whatever.” Further reflection is just not worth the effort.

In fact, the entire mini-dialogue reveals a kind of giving-up of sorts, a nonchalance about communicating with an interlocutor. It displays a lack of commitment to dialogue

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<sup>1</sup> *The Simpsons*, episode # 724, “Homerpalooza,” Season 7; air date: June 19, 1996.

and to what Martin Luther, whose thoughts and sentiments would eventually create Protestant America, would have called “meaning it.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course the first speaker *is* being sarcastic. What he means by his quip is that the Cannonball Guy—Homer Simpson himself—is *not* “cool,” an attitude completely enmeshed with that of ironic detachment. In the scene, two teenage onlookers are observing Homer onstage about to be blasted in the stomach with a cannonball. Enthusiastic and anticipatory, Homer displays two traits that run strictly contrary to the logic of the rock-and-freak show he is in, “Hullabalooza,” which *is* cool (nonchalant, rebellious, subtly angry). When the speaker’s friend asks him if Homer is cool—that is, forces him to reflect upon what he’s said—the speaker does not recognize his own relationship to the statement he just uttered; he is alienated from what he means. Was he being sarcastic? Did he “mean” what he said? If he did, why did he not know? If he didn’t, why did he say it?

His last statement, “I don’t even know anymore,” suggests that the abundance of sarcasm the speaker uses normally has put him in state where he no longer recognizes how he intends his statements. As Kierkegaard’s somewhat perplexing observation above alludes to, the ironic figure of speech—which conveys something other than what the actual words in it mean—permits an evasion of responsibility when it comes to abiding by one’s overt linguistic expression. It allows the subject, or the speaker, to be what Hegel and then Kierkegaard called “negatively free,” that is, able to feel free only by negating the positive existence of something else; satire always requires an object of satirization. The psychological detachment created by ironic expression allows for a powerful inward gulf that permits a feeling of power and freedom, of remove from the immediate, of liberation from commitment. The ironic figure of speech, then, while creating this feeling for the subject, is consequently not “serious about its seriousness” (Kierkegaard) because it does not want to be bound by what is said. Instead, it wishes to “feel” free, undetermined, without a center or ultimate accountability. It refuses to be governed, to abide, to commit to meaning.

The ironist frequently uses this kind of ironic speech, but ironic speech alone does

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<sup>2</sup> For a unique examination, albeit with a psychoanalytic *Geschmack*, of what Luther meant by “meaning it,” see Erik Erikson’s enduring study *Young Man Luther* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), specifically chapter six, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning It.’”



not an ironist make—though it’s often a good indicator. More often, ironic speech and gestures emanate from a broader perspective of a self-regarding aesthetic distance from the everyday world. This kind of attitude has been characterized as withholding, disengaged, uncommitted, haughty. Precisely because of this association, for many social observers and political commentators over the past decade, this Simpsonian instance could be said to crystallize what is wrong with America’s *moral* fabric. Awash in irony, cynicism, psychoanalytic habit, and easy sarcasm, much American popular culture and everyday speech communicates in a way whereby words bear little relation to their literal meanings, or somehow always mean the opposite, or some variation thereof.

One need not go far from the routines of everyday life in America to discern a pattern of normal communication expressed primarily in ironic terms: “Great!” (in response to being asked how one is doing while one has the flu), “They’re right on time again,” (for someone perpetually late), “Super!” (as my father would say after a long, hard day on the job), or “Lucky us,” (after mid-level bad news), “Yeah” (meaning, no, wrong), “No, I don’t want to go,” (Yes, I would, i.e. to something very interesting), or “That must be fair and balanced reporting,” (Fox News’ tagline now used by liberals to ironically express clear bias). The always-context-dependent examples from everyday life and from popular culture are practically limitless. With the proper bodily and tonal cues—the true transmitters of irony—all may be turned into ironic meaning. The body and alliteration intervene to help translate invisible language into received meaning.<sup>3</sup>

In short, the forms of statements, the ways in which we express meanings through

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<sup>3</sup> Of the countless variations of verbal (note to mention performative and structural) irony possible to convey alternate meanings, a few of the more prominent are: Antiphrasis, which is irony of one word, often derisively performed through patent contradiction. Referring to a tall person, one would utter, *What’s up, shortie?*; Paralipsis: that is, stating and drawing attention to something in the very act of pretending to ignore it: *It would be inappropriate for me to dwell on the Senator’s drinking problem, as so many have already addressed his womanizing.*; Epitrope: a figure wherein one turns full interpretation of a statement over to one’s hearers, either ironically or in such a way as to suggest a proof of something without having to state it: a thug saying, *Come and get some of this.*; Sarcasm: use of mockery or bitter verbal taunts. For example, referring to a bad grade: *Great job, genius.*; Mycterismus: mock given with an accompanying gesture or tonal variations, such as a scornful countenance or enthusiastic banter. For example, by smirking or looking aside, by drawing the lip awry or shrinking up the nose, and responding (either with a look askance or enthusiastic) to a statement neither believed or upheld, *No doubt of that, Sir!!* Portions of the above examples excerpted from “Silva Rhetoricae,” compiled by Gideon O. Burton at <http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/Figures/I/irony.html>.

language are frequently askew of their intended content. To state it outright, this is the way that millions regularly communicate with each other through the medium of culture and everyday (importantly, *informal*) speech. It is how we identify people who are “with it,” and, for those who don’t understand ironic speech, who seem dimwitted. It is, as it has long been, a rhetoric of communicating much more than one could with linguistic utterances alone; it conveys a broader understanding of social reality. And so this is why the ironic figure of speech as a social event “looks down, as it were, on plain and ordinary discourse immediately understood by everyone,” as Søren Kierkegaard wrote in 1841. “It travels in an exclusive incognito...and looks down from its exalted station with compassion on ordinary pedestrian speech....It regards virtue as a kind of prudishness.”<sup>4</sup> Ironic speech thus requires a community of those who understand and those who do not. For those who do, irony necessitates a world of common references and a universe of meanings from which to choose; there is no joke quite like an inside joke. In this sense, irony has often been understood as elitist.

But precisely because ironic “activity” is a social event, it is also, importantly, a moral one. Seen in this light, the above Simpsonian example, translated into specific moral terms—as has always been done to the ironist—the first speaker is uncommitted, self-absorbed, and morally relativistic. He is not transparent. He does not offer up meaning as a clear vessel to those with whom he is speaking. He is not sincere, nor is he bound to a specific meaning in his expression because he transmits both possibilities simultaneously. Though he clearly *means* to express one meaning, that is, often the opposite meaning of the words, should he be met with discomfort by his interlocutor, he may escape through the hatch of literal meaning, or vice versa. In this sense, the ironist as a social actor is not concerned with helping an unwitting party to understand; he is more concerned with the cleverness of his own expression or with keeping communication among the elect. As such, he is often seen as self-absorbed. He will not share his meaning openly.

The ironist’s moral dimension, then, as we’ll see in the coming pages, has often been and continues to be conceived of as unserious, untrustworthy, insincere, and

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<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. Lee M. Capel. (London: Collins, 1966), p. 265.

incapable, fundamentally, of human connectedness or true belief. And for those fretting over the state of American society, on both sides of the political aisle, such a state poses problems for the social body as a whole because it casts into ambivalence stable ethical relationships with other citizens—promises and accountability, political responsibility, civic duty—and, closer to home, the value of sincerity and intimacy among friends, colleagues, and neighbors. The ironist, the oft-repeated argument goes, is fundamentally a bad citizen. And in America, a bad American.

Yet irony as a device used as social critique has a long tradition in America, from the satires of Sarah Kembell Knight, Joseph Green, Francis Hopkinson, to William Byrd's jocular *History of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (1728); from the Connecticut Wits (John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight [grandson of Jonathan Edwards], and Joel Barlow) to the riotously imaginative Washington Irving, whose satirical *History of New York* [by Diedrich Knickerbocker] (1809) made him immediately famous, and about which Sir Walter Scott declared made his sides hurt from laughter. Slightly earlier, Philip Freneau, the eighteenth-century revolutionary poet wrote feverish satires against Tory sentiment even during his early days as James Madison's roommate at Princeton.

Freneau and another Princeton classmate, Hugh Henry Brackenridge—whose *Modern Chivalry* ironically lampooned the problems of democracy in a western Pennsylvania backdrop—while engaged heavily in the satirical arts, did not speak to irony as a worldview *per se* as much as they employed it to a higher cause: American independence, anti-Federalism, and the birth of the republic. Theirs was irony in the mode of satire, as a utilitarian literary weapon with a well-honed tradition reaching from Xenophon to their contemporary Jonathan Swift and the essays appearing in the *Spectator*, all of which indeed influenced both writers, and both of whom will be addressed in the coming pages. Of course, there is an entire literary history of examples of irony and satire used in America in the realm of letters in an effort to critique broader culture and society.<sup>5</sup> As much as they were criticized in their own time, they just as often found a

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<sup>5</sup> When looking for the tradition of ironic, witty satirists in America, start here (alphabetically, not chronologically): William Austin (1778–1841); George W. Bagby (1828–1883); Joseph Glover Baldwin (1815–1864); Lewis Gaylord Clark (1810–1873); Willis Gaylord Clark (1810–1841); William Cox (?–1851); Frederick Swartout Cozzens (1818–1869); David Crockett (1786–1836);

receptive audience ready to understand and sympathize. It is important to note at this juncture that though I will be touching on these figures, the crux of this essay concerns writings about the ironic attitude in contemporary social criticism.

To that point, beyond Freneau, Brackenridge, and Irving: since the inception of serious European dialogue about *irony as a social attitude* in the late eighteenth-century, it has been conceived of as corrosive to public life, seen as an ethical show-stopper, brandished as a poor—if not impossible—neighbor and confidante. This belief has often originated from the perspective of a religiously rooted moral commitment to public well-being. As, later, the spiritually curious, seeking, Scottish novelist Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1833 would lament in the autobiographical *Sartor Resartus*:

Often, notwithstanding, was I blamed for my so-called Hardness, my Indifferentism towards men; and the seemingly ironic tone I had adopted, as my favorite dialect in conversation. Alas, the panoply of Sarcasm was but a buckram case, wherein I had striven to envelope myself; that so my own poor Person might live safe there, and in all friendliness, being no longer exasperated by wounds. Sarcasm I now see to be, in general, the language of the Devil; for which reason I have long since as good as renounced it. But how many individuals did I, in those days, provoke into some degree of hostility thereby! An ironic man, with his sly stillness, and ambuscading ways, more especially a young ironic man, from whom it is least expected, may be viewed as a pest to society.<sup>6</sup>

Speaking in part through the figure of Professor Dr. Herr Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (“Devil’s dung”),<sup>7</sup> and in part through Teufelsdröckh’s “editor,” Carlyle tells of his woes

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Charles Augustus Davis (1795–1867); George Horatio Derby (1823–1861); Samuel Griswold Goodrich (1793–1860); Joseph Green (1706–80); Asa Greene (1788–1837); Charls Graham Halpine (1829–1868); Samuel A. Hammett (1816–1865); George Washington Harris (1814–1869); Johnson Jones Hooper (1815–1862); John Pendelton Kennedy (1795–1870); David Ross Locke (1833–1888); Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (1790–1870); John Ludlum McConnel (1826–1862); Cornelius Matthews (1817–1889); George Pope Morris (1802–1864); Robert Henry Newell (1836–1901); Henry Junius Nott (1797–1837); George Denison Prentice (1802–1870); John Sanderson (1783–1844); John Godfrey Saxe (1816–1887); Henry Wheeler Shaw (1818–1885); Seba Smith (1792–1868); William Tappan Thompson (1812–1882); John Trumbull (1750–1831); Nathaniel Ward [1578(?)–1652]; Mrs. Frances Miriam Berry Witcher (1811–1852); Henry Augustus Wise (1819–1869). The above collated from *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907–21).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh, in Three Books*. (New York: AMS Library, 1969), pp. 104-105.

<sup>7</sup> The use of the name Diogenes references the figure of Diogenes of Sinope (c. 412/403-324/321 B.C.), the ancient Greek philosopher-in-a-tub who remains, with Crates of Thebes (c. 368/365-

in love and confusions in religion. He was confronted with what he saw as an outdated Christian church that was out of touch with the moral and social complexities ushered in by modern social structure and industrialization. Carlyle—who had moved to a remote farm for six years to escape the city and his success within it, who translated Goethe and was friends with Emerson, even if critical of *The Dial*, telling Emerson of society and its messes, “Come back to it”—in the above passage, tells the reader how he had resorted to

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288/285 B.C.), an oft-cited (and, in the modern period, obligatorily nodded to) figure of the Cynic (Gr. “dog-like”) movement in philosophy. Its founder, however, Antisthenes (c. 445-after 366 B.C.) was throughout Antiquity held as the founder of the Cynics; he was also the only “member” present at Socrates’ death—a figure and event that had important influence on the Cynical impulse and its rhetorical methods. Though not technically a school (there were no Cynic classes, for example, as there were with Stoics, Pythagoreans, or the Platonists in the Academy), the Cynic movement was influential by means of mimesis, by those wishing to espouse its principles copying the character of older Cynics. As with all things Antiquity, literary myth and parable have more solidly secured the figure of Diogenes as a staple of the Western philosophical repertoire. His actual teachings, however—like many contemporaneous Greek schools—were primarily concerned with moral instruction for human happiness, or *eudaemonia* (εὐδαιμονία). Among the principles Diogenes espoused and promoted to this end were (1) that there was an observable ethical norm seen cross-culturally and among animals (2) that Greek society was at odds with nature and therefore produces false values (3) that human beings needed rigorous exercise and discipline (4) that the goal of this discipline was promote a happy life, freedom, and self-sufficiency, and (5) that in order to help others to achieve this it may be necessary to deface and subvert existing authorities corrupting the way to true happiness. It was because of Diogenes’ actual acts of social antagonism, which frequently overstepped accepted social mores, that Plato famously regarded him as “Socrates gone mad.” Specifically—and now numismatically verifiable—it was Diogenes’ defacing of public currency that was his *coup de grace*; he was exiled from Sinope for doing so.

The figure of Diogenes appears plentifully throughout the literature on modern cynicism and irony, given the explicit relevance of his ideas and actions of social resistance to mainstream values and to an individual interiority preciously guarded by the modern sensibility. Prior to the twentieth century, works such as Christoph Martin Weiland’s *Socrates Mainomenos or, The Dialogues of Diogenes of Sinope* [1770], Denis Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* [1805], and Friedrich Nietzsche’s (first book) *The Birth of Tragedy* [1872], and *The Gay Science* [1887] featured the famed Cynic for his character of resistance. Most recently and noteworthy, it was German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s intricate and magisterial work, *The Critique of Cynical Reason* [trans. Michael Eldred] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), [originally published in German in 1983 as *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* by Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/Main] that brought Diogenes center stage in the consideration of cynicism, kynicism, irony, and the philosophical justification for an active and generalized social resistance to contemporary social life, as well as an understanding of how the powerful can use cynicism to nefarious—if obvious—ends.

A valuable resource for the historical context and a thoroughgoing reading of the Greek Cynic movement in philosophy and literature, as well as its migration into modernity, is R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) [with some translation by Michael Chase]. The authors themselves recommend as the best introduction in English to the Cynic tradition as D. R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the Sixth Century A. D.* (London, 1937).

an attitude of mocking superiority, of ironic distance to shield his inward, private self.

Carlyle posits the ironic tone as a shield, sarcasm as something in which he had aimed to “envelope” himself, so that he could “live safe” there. These images paint a clear picture of irony as something with which one defends oneself from the outside, of an inner self that guards itself with outward remove. In the reflection of this passage, this attitude for Carlyle—himself an aesthete and a skeptic, a *vitalist* who had experienced a sort of cleansing Christian rebirth—is a fundamentally anti-civic stance. It made the habitual practitioner of irony a bad citizen, a pest to his fellows.

This view of the disengaged subject, of the ironist, has not changed much in the last one-hundred-seventy-three years. For those concerned with America’s present-day social health, let alone for that of the nineteenth-century Scotsman or eighteenth-century American satirists, this sort of ironic or sarcastic attitude as a relationship towards the public—pitched frequently as not taking seriously one’s civic responsibilities or ethical responsibilities, a lack of commitment to principles, a focus on the self, a dismissal of others, a constant protection of oneself against them—has been branded as affecting our immediate relationships and the broader civic culture as well. And if such a detached social stance—once relegated to philosophical skeptics, the literati, and aesthetes (that is, to the aesthetic realm)—migrated to the very center that it originally condemned or scoffed (the moral), it would provoke further alienation and social/generational tension.

According to many American and European social theorists and philosophers, such an event, the story goes, is and has been occurring in the West; it was called cultural modernity, and it took particularly good root in America, with its massive cultural machine enabling the proliferation of the attitude of social outsidership to migrate to the commodified middle at a rapid gate. This appears in some places as the attitude of *cool*, of a style of being wherein the subject imagines himself as “outside” mainstream culture while very much a part of its reification through commodifying his dissent.<sup>8</sup> In other,

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<sup>8</sup> This logic—made explicit in the social criticism of Theodor W. Adorno, Daniel Bell, Lionel Trilling, Mark Edmundson, and Thomas Frank—runs confidently through countless advertisements today, beginning earnestly in the early-1990s. The formula is simple: “Be different, not like everyone else. Be a rebel, an outsider, and buy (*fill in product or service here*) and (*use one of these phrases*: “*Blaze your own path*,” “*Think different*,” “*Get out of the box*,” “*Break the routine*,” *etc.*).

more politicized contexts, as we'll see, the attitude appears under names like “aesthete,” “narcissist,” “relativist,” and, on occasion, “the liberal elite,”—a detached, wry view—*né* “disenchantment”—has become a default reaction towards politics and broader social hopes for the future for people in the West.

Though irony as a weapon against corruption, oppression, and abuse is long in tooth and tradition, the ironic attitude is fundamentally borne of Enlightenment goals (and its concomitant metaphysics/stories) becoming less credible, of ideologies being discredited, of seeing in plain view the hypocrisy of supposed moral leaders, of high goals seeming now in name only, as fodder for inspirational posters and coffee mugs, but not for guiding ones' choices or beliefs, not for illuminating a vision of a better world, not for accurately perceiving reality, certainly not for building private hopes about how one will contribute to that end or adjust to the world situation. And because of this blasé attitude, this social detachment, this degeneration of belief, some commentators reiterate, things all around us are getting worse. The noble public in America has lost its ability to impinge on the inner life.

Given the recent intensity of these sorts of concerns, specifically about the deleterious social “effects” of sarcasm and irony on society, one is bound to wonder: how did this happen? What's so bad about irony?

### *1.1 The Problem and Thesis*

As “civilized” social beings, as moral beings, we guard integrity and character (and often merely the perception of them to others) in a variety of ways (and oftentimes by quite uncivil means). When we view corruption, immorality, easy escape, or general lack of character in our immediate social environment—things, thanks to media proliferation, more publicly visible throughout the second half of the twentieth century—we often remove ourselves mentally and emotionally. We disengage. We attempt to keep our own integrity intact when we perceive the absence or abasement of it in our environment, be it personal or national. We simultaneously attempt to remain “authentic”—the quintessentially modern value—to ourselves. This move inward is that of ironic

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What are you waiting for?” (*Insert logo of giant, most likely global, corporate entity*). Done. Dissent from the mainstream brought to you by the center of mainstream commercialism.

detachment—the bemused, distanced view that has settled in to the normative citizen often said to be inhabiting cities throughout Western industrial societies.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, when national identity struggled to make sense of itself and define what it should be in this new time, there were calls for a new earnestness, a new sense of sincere commitment to the common good. Though such calls have been with Americans since they began their religious errand in 1620, throughout the discussion of national identity in recent years, many academics and journalists argued that for this American life in jeopardy, in order to be healthy again, to get back on track (the traditional form of the jeremiad), it had to shed the pithy and reactionary attitude that was spawned by television, pop-culture makers, and the intellectual elite. It had to shed, of all things, its irony.

Contrary to irony's degradation in some political discourse<sup>9</sup> that it is a disease and to be rid of as quickly as possible to avoid the devastation of character, in what follows I would like to portray ironic detachment as a strategy for maintaining personal integrity, as a complex reaction to an ambivalent world. American religious conservatives have attempted in recent years to claim the entire debate over moral values, often to the silence of secular liberals, and surely the criticism of ironists. But interestingly enough, there is a protective religious dimension to ironic detachment, as Carlyle's excerpt suggests; and as such, it's worth seeing what kinds of values and motivations hide in the ironic attitude, worth asking what it is trying to do.

To be sure, ironic *communication* values, above all, the sacredness of interiority, of locating souls of like tenor, the roundabout conveyance of sincerity, the maintenance of authenticity in the face of a culture or society it perceives lacking it. It also enables individuals to maintain a skeptical stance towards outward events and people whom they deem distance-worthy. As a debate about narratives of national identity, then, about *values*, this dissertation aims, in part, to reclaim some territory lost to conservative critics who have made broad claims over the national character, who have defined and delimited the sorts of attitudes that count as "American." Unfortunately, they have

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<sup>9</sup> This word has been so overused by postmodernist writers and insecure graduate students that the mere mention of it should make readers roll their eyes or stop reading altogether. I use it here because as a noun it does accurately capture the notion of the parameters of a conversation that I will be reviewing. I will attempt to apply it as painlessly as possible in all future incidences.



overlooked some indisputably American secularist, freethinking traditions. I will be addressing aspects of this tradition and, importantly, its intellectual and religious roots.

But as part of this tradition, irony as a method is problematic because as a social activity it both negates civic trust with distancing and *needs* the social world to function; it thus evidences a kind of balancing act, a psycho-strategy.<sup>10</sup> As such, it gets into trouble, for it performs this strange paradox: on one hand, ironic detachment does an injustice to civic trust because of its entrenched suspicion of overt meaning, its refusal to faithfully engage, to fully join with the body politic; on the other, it helps an individual faced with increasing incivility and decreasing political trust to *maintain the values* of sincerity, equanimity, tempered passion, authenticity, and honesty—though expressed and *performed* oppositely, as distanced, ironic, skeptical—that are essential to civic and psychic health to begin with.

America's long-standing conflict between valuing both individual freedom and community commitment—a division traceable to the Puritan religious ideology—bears its Hydra-head in the ironic attitude's tensions, in what it is trying to do against what it does. It almost seems that when “irony” becomes the condemnatory cry of those who have deemed themselves keepers of the civic gate, that there is a storm passing overhead, and ironists are holding down the fort until it passes.<sup>11</sup> Scratch the surface of this debate over

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<sup>10</sup> I take my use of this term as used by the eminent art critic and philosopher Donald Kuspit in *Psycho-Strategies of Avant-Garde Art*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Therein, Kuspit argues that the motivation of modern art is fundamentally therapeutic; it aims to heal both society and the artist. Postmodern art, Kuspit contends, mocks the possibility of healing and forces art into a state of narcissism, cynically ridding it of its social and moral force.

Professor Kuspit, once a doctoral student of Theodor W. Adorno at the University of Frankfurt, Germany, was my mentor and advisor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook; I owe a great debt to his influence on my own thoughts about culture, art, and philosophy.

<sup>11</sup> Importantly for the immediacy of the topic: I had not known of Sloterdijk's reference to the feeling of “holding down the fort” [“The question of survival, of self-preservation and self-assertion, to which all cynicisms provide answers, touches on the central problem of holding the fort and planning for the future in modern nation-states” (p. 8, *Critique*)] until well-after employing the same metaphor myself. As such, I found it to be oddly telling, confirming, and relevant in the description of an intangible cultural situation. Specifically, Sloterdijk uses the metaphor to describe the “in-dwelling” tendencies of the modern consciousness of subjective inwardness (*vis á vis* Heidegger), as something contained “in a fort,” or holding down against some “outside” storm. To amend: though an excursus on Heidegger's relevancy to the topic of irony and civic trust would require an entirely new dissertation (or three), this germane excerpt from *Being and Time* is here worth recounting at length, as it does, in notoriously Heideggerian terminology, spell out a worldview pretty clearly: “When concern holds back [*Sichenthalten*] from any kind of producing,

irony and civic health, and it reveals much older and more fundamental *agreements* about the individual's duty to society and the proper ordering of one's internal life.

As a culture fascinated with speed and energy, contemporary America glosses over these much more fundamental agreements, often turning public discussion into a kind of quasi-theater, rather than a true attempt to discover shared philosophical views. But the surface was deeply scratched, I believe, in the sustained debate over irony and civic trust that took place in the late 1990s in the United States among political and social critics, urbane editors, political scientists, clergy, online magazines, and others concerned with the state of civic trust in America. This debate reveals in part the paradoxical intricacies of the mutually dependent notions of civic duty and civic remove essential to the character and conflict of the American mind: where civic trust should endeavor to foster health in the entire social body, the ironic stance runs contrary to this in that it creates a social distance between the individual and the social world of which he is a part. It is however, simultaneously, a *preserver* of the individual authenticity and sincerity necessary to engage in civic life when the world around it seems to have become radicalized, extreme, and cynical. Irony protects one against these ever-present human tendencies.

Yet, crucially, instead of pitting irony entirely against the "religious mind," I would like to argue that ironic detachment in America today is essentially a secularized mode of Protestantism, a religious inclination that has had its metaphysical legitimacy removed. It is religious impulse by another name. What I am hope to suggest is that the ironic worldview spoken of today is spawned by a fundamentally Protestant stance and attempt

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manipulating, and the like, it puts itself into what is now the sole remaining mode of Being-in, the mode of just tarrying alongside....[*das Nur-noch-verweilen bei...*] This kind of Being towards the world is one which lets us encounter entities within-the-world purely in the *way they look* (εἶδος), just that; *on the basis* of this kind of Being, and as a mode of it, looking explicitly at what we encounter is possible. Looking *at* something in this way is sometimes a definite way of taking up a direction towards something—of setting our sights towards what is present-at-hand. It takes over a 'view-point' in advance from the entity which it encounters. Such looking-at enters the mode of dwelling autonomously alongside entities within-the-world. In this kind of '*dwelling*' as a holding-oneself-back from any manipulation or utilization, the *perception* of the present-at-hand is consummated. Perception is consummated when one *addresses* oneself to something as something and discusses it as such. This amounts to *interpretation* in the broadest sense; and on the basis of such interpretation, perception becomes an act of *making indeterminate*" (pp. 61-62) *Being and Time*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962 [*Sein und Zeit* first published in 1927]). To my ears, this sounds exactly like the Heideggerian version of describing modern ironic detachment, which "holds" itself internally (dwells) while surveying the world from within its shell.

at inward freedom, communicative charity, and duty to question authority.

As such, while reading through the literature from within this debate I have been concerned with asking the following: Why has irony figured so prominently in the debate over civil society in America over the last dozen years? What is it about irony and its relationship to morality that strikes such a public nerve? Why, in effect, did irony assume a moral quality? What are irony's philosophical assumptions? What are the normative pictures implied by the "good citizen" that the ironist supposedly contradicts? Given how widely irony has been interpreted as a quality of persons, what exactly is meant by that word anyway in the debate over irony as a social attitude? And, importantly, why has this it been skewered as the harbinger of the twilight of civic trust in the United States? Do ironists make civic culture less healthy, or is an unhealthy civic culture, caused by other events and situations, making people ironically detached? What about irony makes it, as Carlyle wrote in 1833, "a pest to society"?

Given these initial and broad questions, it is immediately clear that this thesis is both an exercise in intellectual and an attempt to describe a sensibility. I do not profess to exhaust the enormity of the possible responses and explanations to the above questions and concerns. Rather, I hope to offer some engaging interpretations of this sensibility and its historical motivations; I would like to trace the sentiment to some of its intellectual and religious motivations.

As Susan Sontag argues in her influential 1966 essay "Notes on Camp," to describe a sensibility falls between the realm of intellectual history and social history; it does not try to strictly map out the ideas or the behaviors of an era, but rather tries to describe the tastes and predilections of its subject: "Taste has no system and no proofs. But there is something like a logic of taste: the consistent sensibility which underlies and gives rise to a certain taste."<sup>12</sup> I would like to argue that the ironic attitude is such a sensibility, borne of a philosophical worldview that continues its life today. Made widespread in nineteenth-century Romantic ideology as the only *authentic* way with which to engage the modern world, irony has in the present American debate acquired a heightened *moral* dimension (as much in America often does) because it is overtly antithetical to another historical,

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Against Interpretation*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), p. 276.

religiously rooted expectation: civic duty and good citizenship.

As a problem for civic engagement—the willful and conscious maintenance of the idea of a cohesive society that respects each actor’s privacy and benevolence—then, ironic detachment has been described as stressing a focus on the self over the loftier goals of social progress, over the work of the nation; it values the aesthetic over the moral, and it believes that the moral cheapens the aesthetic and is pedantic. It is in Romanticism where *the concept of irony* took on this existentially permeating quality and, moreover, became decorated with moral qualities. Accordingly, I will address some of the dynamics and philosophical motivations of the Romantic mind in order to make the comparison more clear, in order to claim that though Romanticism as a cultural period is both disparate and historical, many Americans (mostly secular progressives) remain in the grips of such a variety of the Romantic worldview. And it is this worldview that stands in apparent opposition to the religious worldview of those vying for a new earnestness.

### *I.2 Structure & Scope*

These are, of course, extremely broad, complex, merely theoretical-interpretive problems that I cannot fully capture in this essay. But the “problem” of irony is not merely a theoretical curiosity; it is a living interpretive schemata that has, as we’ll see, very real effects on social life. Concerning the overarching territory of the modern ironic phenomenon beyond mere academic study, the anthropologist George E. Marcus writes, “The problem of dealing with ambivalences and impasses of irony’s deep critique of rationality and realism is not merely academic, but is a complex feature of contemporary social life and should be the primary focus of contemporary research.”<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard had seen the phenomenon of irony and social life in exactly the same manner a century and half prior. The “problem” of irony is always, by implication, a problem of the present beginning in modernity. Uses of irony indeed are plentiful before that time, but, as noted, irony as a generalized (and often seen as problematic) social attitude addressed by academics, politicians, political scientists, and other intellectuals is a recent occurrence.

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<sup>13</sup> George E. Marcus, “The Predicament of Irony,” in *Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice, and the Moral Imagination*, James W. Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 210.

Structurally, therefore, I will begin my discussion in Chapter One, “Excurses on the Genesis of Irony as a Worldview,” with a brief history of the term *irony* and how it was deployed, beginning with the Greeks and leading up to German Romantic irony, as well as how this German thought influenced American Romanticism. I discuss Romanticism primarily because irony was for the first time discussed as a method by which the sacredness of the individual self could be guarded from the onslaught of the social, bureaucratic, techno-rational world. I will discuss some of the philosophical tapestry of this form of irony as woven by the German philosophers Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schlegel, Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, and the Great Dane, Søren Kierkegaard. These figures, among others, addressed (and through promoting certain incremental ideas enabled successors to address) irony explicitly as a *worldview*—and they were the first to thoroughly consider irony as such. I review these figures in order to utilize some of the philosophical background as to why such an attitude might be useful in a given social or cultural situation, what its inner workings are, and, crucially, how those *moral valuations* of irony are playing out in today’s political consideration of irony in civic life. Indeed this was movement inward, away from *civitas*.

I will also here discuss some of the wit and irony of a few early American satirists in that saw the beginnings of, yes, “fake news,” into existence as social criticism in America, a form that is now one of the dominant means of social critique on television and in print. While not the same as the ironic attitude I will be discussing in European Romanticism, this vein of irony in America enables the reader—and particularly the conservative critic of irony—to see that irony as critique of power is one of the most *American* of traditions, particularly in that it embodies an entrenched antagonism and skepticism of moral or political authority, and in doing so is exercising democracy. It is exactly this mode of satire that moves from a literary weapon into an *entrenched view* of politics and society in Romanticism, both German and American. The end of this chapter, in order to move forward with the broader argument, makes some summations about the qualities of modernity generally.

In Chapter Two, “Contemporary Irony,” I will address the characteristics of the contemporary ironist as posited and described by a host of philosophers, social scientists, and other intellectuals, particularly as they make the claim that irony has become the

dominant form of contemporary life. Thereafter, distinctions between irony and cynicism—two closely related views—are addressed in order to clarify that irony is something, unlike cynicism, that retains hope. Lastly, this chapter offers a constructive description of the ironist character and his qualities, and a short foray into the concept and character of “cool,” one of the overarching—and too little investigated—popular social attitudes.<sup>14</sup>

Chapter Three, “Irony and Civic Trust,” gets to the crux of this dissertation: the discourse about irony and civic engagement in the United States during the 1990s, when both conservatives and liberals alike were fiercely battling for the definition of American identity and what kind of person comprised the *right* kind of American. While neoconservative and liberal commentators were lambasting the disengaged subject and the loss of civility in American life, popular culture was simultaneously churning out situation comedies, advertisements, and movies drenched in sarcasm, faux nostalgia, and irony that were the ire of those concerned. Urbane general-interest magazine editors and writers, novelists, and columnists were likewise honing their critical skills through wry wit and sharp tongues. Each tried to summon up an “authentic” claim to American identity. I will look at some of the key elements of, and contributors to, this debate, as well as reference the cultural emanations (advertisements, television programs, symbolic cultural “characters”) relevant to the identification of an “ironic attitude” in both the political commentary and in popular culture.

Thereafter, in Chapter Four, “The Roots of Inner Dependence,” I will investigate how the Romantic mind, discussed in Chapter One, derives the concept of interiority and distancing ultimately from Protestant ideas; it does so in order to prevent the further rationalization of sacred interiority, mystery, and the self. This “inward turn,” this sort of “inner emigration”<sup>15</sup> remains as a means of pursuing integrity of personality and a sense

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<sup>14</sup> February 2005 saw the release of the film *Be Cool*, which displays several varieties of cool, from urban hip-hop cool, faux “wannabe” cool of suburban white guys attempting to “act black,” and old-fashioned gangster cool. With several strands of cool competing, and because cool values authenticity above nearly all else, each version vies to be the *real* cool. *Be Cool* itself is one such emanation of this contest, as it surveys all the other versions. Crucially, the white attempt to be black cool will always be cast as inauthentic. This will be discussed further in section 2.4, “Cool.”

<sup>15</sup> This term was used by the philosopher Hannah Arendt in her famous description of Adolf Eichmann and other Nazis who “frequently had held positions, even high ones, in the Third Reich and who, after the end of the war, told themselves and the world at large that they had

of freedom. Crucially, then, this Romanticism—in both Germany and America—is built upon the Protestant-inspired view of the “inner man” and from the notion of inwardness stemming from the broader Christian tradition. I will thus address the world-shattering view of the Protestant religious ideology—inspired by the philosophical heritage of the Stoics and Augustine—and specifically the intensification of reflections upon interiority and salvation the English Calvinists forwarded in an effort to desecrate salvation. It is from these earlier religious notions of civic union smashing into the power of Romantic irony removed, that the current debate over the split between irony and civic trust acquires its electricity and vitriol in the American consideration.

But varied emanations spring often from common roots. This is the culminating narrative I will be telling in Chapter Five, “Irony and the American Mind,” a consideration of the historical and philosophical perspectives on the *particularly American* version of the conflicts and ambiguities among irony, trust, faith, and public life, as prepared by the philosophical groundwork already covered. For all its variety and span, American belief is bound by some very fundamental similarities, one of them being the persistence of a view of salvation being possible only in isolation, apart from others; yet that we are our brother’s keeper remains as well a dominant sentiment. So “how are we to understand,” asks Harold Bloom in *The American Religion* (1992), “an American spirituality that, to be authentic, seems always fated to make the believer, ultimately, a worse citizen?” This tension is the one that surfaces in the debate over irony and civic trust in the 1990s. Thus, having reviewed some of the writing on irony as a worldview and the religiously-inspired notions that encouraged it, I will talk here about how these two divergent strains stem from a like appraisal of inwardness and are fundamentally not

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always been ‘inwardly opposed’ to the regime.” Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 126-7. The term was originally used by the German Expressionist writer Frank Theiss to refer to writers who had stayed in Germany after 1933 but who detached themselves emotionally and psychologically from the political realities (and thus reality, generally) of the Nazi regime. These writers were primarily Christian. The term had come to signify a movement into the inner recesses of the soul as caused by unbearable realities surrounding the agents in question. The term *innere Emigration* had also come to signify a tradition: that of German-Christian inwardness over pragmatic utilitarianism, often pitched as Jewish. This, minus the German-Jewish contraposition, is precisely the view of Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* as well as the motivation behind Adorno’s “negative dialectics,” both of which were, fundamentally, justifications for inaction in defense of human integrity and non-utilitarianism.

in conflict.

A final summation on scope: though I will be reviewing literature on irony that is Western, particularly American, British, and German, *my ultimate concern is the debate about the ironic attitude in the present-day United States*, which forms Chapters Two and Three of this work. More specifically, I will be teasing out the conception of irony and its relation to civic health in commentary by political pundits, social critics, and political scientists in recent decades, as well as some of the popular culture that is a focus of their concern.

The scope of the readings, it should be noted, are from the realm of those read and written by intellectuals and academics. That is, the conversation about irony and civic trust takes place in journals, books, and magazines read by a relatively small group of people, usually professors or the literati. Though the topics of irony and civic trust affect all citizens in some way as the broad and unshakable twin poles of democratic citizenship—trust and distance—they are not necessarily addressed in this sort of meta-observatory way in other popular cultural forms—nor should they be expected to—however much irony and civic trust play in their social dynamics and narratives.

Furthermore, I will focus the center of the debate about irony and civic trust on recent commentary because there is a consensus among philosophers, social theorists, and cultural historians that irony and cynicism as *widespread* (i.e. *not* limited to a small entourage of aesthetes or intellectuals) public “problems” is a recent occurrence, one particular to the second half of the twentieth century, and, more particularly, to the last three decades. This consensus has guided the selection of my textual sources. Though political commentators and the socially concerned both were utilizing and commenting on these attitudes in classical Greece, eighteenth-century England, and nineteenth-century Germany and Denmark, *ironic detachment as a widely shared sensibility* has been most often associated with late modernity and so-called postmodernism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that I will not be entering into the debate about postmodernity in this essay—whether it is the age we are in, when it started, or if it exists at all—but, although I possess far less wisdom and knowledge necessary to participate in the actual debate, I think Jürgen Habermas’s arguments about the persistence of social modernity—meaning there is not yet reason to believe there is a “post-” to this term, are clearly accurate accounts of the behavior of nations, laws, and peoples in the present day. I find little practical evidence to believe that social modernity is over. As conceived by Habermas as Kant’s shared Enlightenment goals for—and progress towards—more freedom for more people, individual liberties and fostering self-determination, transparency of government practices, and the good faith efforts for the alleviation



Thus, at this point, a fair warning: this essay will be drawing from a variety of sources—from Protestant theology, to German Idealist philosophy, to late twentieth-century American social criticism, to Kenny Loggins, *The Simpsons*, and franchised suburban eateries like the Olive Garden. I do this to expound on the topic of irony and civic trust as a living, breathing tension, as a contemporary socio-cultural event with perceptible intellectual roots, as a diffuse and unruly phenomenon. As such, this might be seen as a work of “cultural studies.” As the literary historian Linda Hutcheon has remarked in her lengthy work on irony, *Irony’s Edge*:

the examples discussed in detail or in brief come from a range of media—music, fiction, academic discourse, film, opera and popular music performances, visual art, museum exhibits. This choice represents my recognition that irony “happens”...in all kinds of discourses (verbal, visual, aural), in common speech as well as in highly crafted aesthetic form, in so-called high art as well as in popular culture. Therefore, when it comes to the politics of irony today, the scope of possible examples is going to be enormous and daunting.<sup>17</sup>

I therefore ask that the reader bear with the need to reasonably travel outside the confines of delimited academic disciplines—as American Studies is widely recognized to do—in order that the discussion is best informed, and so that we may return with a broader perspective on the subject in the present.

### *1.3 Methodology*

A quick explanation about the way I’ve gone about this inquiry, as such a study leaves much to desire in terms of certainty and positive conclusions, of finality. When writing about irony, we ought to at least be honest about the messy nature of this sort of humanistic writing and not try to compare it to strict social scientific formulations.

Empirical testing, consensus, and corroboration comprise the methodology for scientific investigation, and, to be sure, this is the best way for science to work. It is the best way because it results in getting practical things done in the world. Among more

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of poverty and humiliation, social modernity seems to persist quite healthily. We’d be in deep trouble if it did not. Cultural modernity, of course, is a different story altogether.

<sup>17</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 5.

vague phenomenon, like the “ironic attitude,” however, written about in the field of American Studies, these sorts of goals of objective corroboration, of correspondence or representation, are not possible. As the political scientist William Chaloupka has written in his incisive book about American cynicism, *Everybody Knows* (1999): “The tools of social science were not designed with this investigation in mind. Given the rural and pious roots of American political culture, we are not prepared to see cynicism of daily life as distinctive and socially important.”<sup>18</sup> This sort of subject is thus *interpretive* (rather than being a “theory” of the ironic attitude) from the outset.<sup>19</sup> There is not going to be a way

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<sup>18</sup> William Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> An extended word about interpretation and theory: Anthony Giddens writes in the introduction to Max Weber’s 1904 *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. Talcott Parsons. [New York: Routledge, 2001], “the tradition of *Geisteswissenschaften*, or the ‘hermeneutic tradition,’ [for English speakers: the humanities] stretches back well before Dilthey, and from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards was intertwined with, but also partly set off from, the broader stream of Idealistic philosophy. Those often associated with the hermeneutic viewpoint insisted upon the differentiation of the sciences of nature from the study of man. *While we can ‘explain’ natural occurrences in terms of the application of causal laws, human conduct is intrinsically meaningful, and has to be ‘interpreted’ or ‘understood’ in a way which has no counterpart in nature*” (italics mine). Herewith, then, an epistemological word about theories that is by now a well-worn path.

A “theory” is *fallible*. A theory must have the possibility of falsification by counterexample. Thus the sort of explanation I’ll be doing is not really a theory at all. This is no new point, but the use of the word “theory” in so many books of cultural studies over the past twenty years has done damage to the word’s unique and useful meaning. What many of those books should claim, rather, is that they are offering an *interpretation* of some phenomenon, that is, they are hermeneutical. This model gives up the idea of matching statements to some other means of representation or correspondence. Where no match is possible, calling something *interpretation* rather than *theory* is much clearer idea for the reader of what the author is doing: offering an interesting take on some kind of non-scientific phenomenon.

To clarify further and more specifically: a theory is proposed by a human being about a natural phenomenon, let’s say, about how copper will behave under certain conditions. The person then offers his or her guess at what will happen and why it will happen—hypothesis and theory, respectively. The theory can then be tested repeatedly to find out if it is true, that is, if it corresponds the behavior of the copper.

This note is necessary due to a deep respect for John Dewey’s and especially Richard Rorty’s description of what we can do to best keep writing and inquiry clear. It’s just not helpful for conceptual clarity to call an interpretive account of nonscientific phenomenon a theory. It is unhelpful because framing the question in this way perpetuates the idea that a correct representation of this sort of phenomenon is possible.

It is not possible. To speak about “proving” the existence of irony as present in American “mind” would require an ultimate template with which to match up. It would necessitate saying that the theory I have either corresponds or does not correspond to the “reality” of the phenomenon. Something vague like “irony in culture,” thus presents the following intellectual puzzle: in order for us to get to the “reality” of the phenomenon beyond interpretations of it would require some ability to have *direct access* to the information or thing. And one just cannot go

to prove whether or not an ironic attitude exists among a *majority* of the population in America. And that is not my goal in this essay; rather, I will treat the subject as a diffuse phenomenon. I have not conducted any primary surveys, though I have referred to primary social science research concerning the measurements and makeup of civic health. There will be no attempt to demonstrate the existence of a quantifiable majority of citizens considering themselves to be ironic in their approach to the world (where even a “no” response would be dubious, no?). I am not setting out to prove the “reigning” of irony in American life by measure of statistics or social science metrics.

Instead, I wish to fit the debate about irony and trust into larger historical and philosophical considerations. I am interested in creating an appealing, humanistic way to talk about the intellectual history of this attitude within the context of the debate about irony in American life. I am doing so in the hopes that it may be seen for its liberating potentialities as well as for its problems, vulnerabilities, and laments, that we may understand it as a sign of hope rather than of social degradation. Irony is too serious and too necessary to democratic thinking to let its overriding characterization be such.

One more conceptual distinction: since I will be tracking the rather vague and messy question: *Why was irony attacked as a decadent moral quality?* I want to make clear that this is an entirely different question than the correspondence-theory-of-truth version: “Is irony *really* a decadent moral quality?” Such a question would require both the belief and the possibility that finding an answer to that inquiry was discoverable. It is not; and the long line of thinkers rejecting such a possibility, from Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, to John Dewey and Richard Rorty, have done well in presenting the case against it. Posing the question in the first way rids one of the illusion of matching a description with another version to see if one’s description is correct. This model would be to continue a representationalist view of knowledge that, though (arguably to some) applicable to the hard sciences, is not applicable to the humanities. This is both liberating and burdensome.

Some rhetorical techniques relevant to method: I will be using a *construct* of the

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and observe “irony in the American mind” like one can the mating behavior of silver-backed gorillas or copper. There’s simply no way to measure what I have to say against the impersonal version of the truth.

contemporary ironic figure (particularly in Chapter Two) that will not, of course, be true for all people in every enclave of American society and culture. It certainly is not assumed by every American citizen. This is no way, however, negates the importance of the issue: Columbine-style shootings have not occurred in a majority of schools across the United States, yet the issue of violence in American schools is important. As a type, a construct, then, the use of the general social character will be helpful.

To this point, the British literary theorist and critic Terry Eagleton objected to German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's diagnosis of the *generalized* cynical character, whom Sloterdijk saw as the default personality type in twentieth-century Western culture, on the basis that Sloterdijk attributes to a whole society what is in fact a highly specific mode of consciousness. Eagleton writes: "Some yuppie stockbrokers may be cynically aware that there is no real defense for their way of life, but it is doubtful the Ulster Unionists spend much of their time being playfully ironic about their commitment to keeping Ulster British."<sup>20</sup> Sloterdijk wishes to tell a big story; Eagleton believes that doing so glosses over the important little stories that would often contradict the broad Germanic strokes of totalizing philosophy. Timothy Bewes, however, sociological author of the thoroughgoing *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (1997), disagrees with Eagleton's criticism, saying that

it is misdirected on two accounts: first, in its assumption that any cultural analysis must be applicable *tout court* to each and every member of that culture (assuming that 'cultural' borders can be as easily identified as national or religious ones), and secondly—a related point—in its disregard of the cultural and political pluralism implied in Sloterdijk's analysis. Enlightened false consciousness by definition may only describe a social minority.<sup>21</sup>

Both Eagleton and Bewes have worthwhile points. Eagleton is right to say that broad generalizations miss out on actual, local communities that are not represented in the description of a "cynical culture" as determined by Sloterdijk. Yet, as Bewes alludes, self-consciously broad strokes about philosophical history and contemporary culture don't aim to capture all the fine details; this is more fitted to books of sociology. Thus I will be utilizing the narrative tactic employed by Sloterdijk to attempt to tell a big story about the

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<sup>20</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*. (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 39-40.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity*, (London: Verso, 1997), p. 25.

intellectual heritage that gave rise to the current ironic attitude, regardless of whether fourth-grade teachers in southern Illinois partake in the attitude or not.

But more important than trying to justify using a historical construct as a narrative tool, and certainly more intellectually perplexing, is to ask how these characteristics are supposed to have transferred through eras—a difficult and unwieldy task. In many contemporary volumes on irony or cynicism as a worldview, there is an assumption of attitudes traveling through time and space, like a contagion or some kind of Hegelian traveling machine of “Progress.” Chaloupka, though a specialist in his own right, in speaking of modern American cynicism nonetheless handles this deftly when he confesses, “It is a tricky game, trying to locate the cusp of a change as intricate and slippery as the turn toward cynicism.”<sup>22</sup>

In order to address this tricky intellectual and historical quandary, I have tried to identify some common and deep assumptions in Protestantism that cross cultures, as well as identify certain real figures and influences that bridge the Atlantic divide as regards Romantic irony. But I wonder, too, if “transmission” is the most useful way to think of the ironic worldview. As we’ll see, Friedrich Schlegel held that irony as a response to the modern world was both “*involuntary and yet completely deliberate.*” Though I will be using narrative strategy to say that cultural characteristics of the past have come into the present, that certain mental habits formed at different times and places can be detected today, I would like simultaneously to explore the idea of the ironic mentality as something that is more like an always-renewed attitude adopted in the face of oppression, humiliation, and affronts to personal integrity, rather than as a “thing” that has been passed on like a genetic code. Investigating this model questions the view of the ironic attitude as if it were on history’s monkey bars, swinging only from text to text, mind to mind, into the present—a view that seems quite untenable.

#### *1.4 Omissions & Objections*

Suffice it here to say, the sheer amount of literature on irony as a rhetorical device is simply immense. One begins to envy Kierkegaard in that when he wrote on the subject,

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<sup>22</sup> Chaloupka, p. 60.

there was far less to read. Several of the most cited volumes in much of the recent work on irony, however, are Wayne C. Booth's *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974), D.C. Muecke's *A Compass of Irony* (1969) and his *Irony and the Ironic* (1970), and Norman Knox's *The Word Irony and Its Contexts 1500-1755* (1961). Of the many other volumes, I will be omitting those that do not deal with the ironic worldview, except where authors have expounded beyond the use of ironic speech into the psychological motivations for its deployment, such as in *The Meaning of Irony: A Psychoanalytic Investigation* (1994) by Frank Stringfellow, Jr., who discusses the uses of irony in Swift and Kafka, but for the purposes of entry into the discussion about the psychoanalytic components that go into the ironic moment. I will not be entering into literary analysis of markedly ironic authors such as William Shakespeare, Henry Fielding, Jonathan Swift, William Makepeace Thackeray, or Oscar Wilde, among countless others, all of whom employed irony as a trope, and all of whom did it better than I could ever do justice. Though I will be discussing some American satirists, it is to point to the tradition of ironic writing in America rather to perform any variety of literary analysis.

One example of omission is A. E. Dyson's *The Crazy Fabric* (1966), wherein he discusses the literature of Swift, Fielding, Sterne, Gibbon, Peacock, Thackeray, Twain, Butler, Wilde, Strachey, Huxley, Waugh, and Orwell. He analyzes the varied uses of irony in each of these authors, such as Fielding's use of satiric and comic irony, Gibbon's dismissive irony, and Wilde's socialist aestheticism. Though a thoroughgoing account of the uses of the ironic mechanism, it is not useful to this inquiry, as irony here is conceived as technique, rather than as a total perspective that is shared by more people than just a coterie of writers and readers. "My approach," Dyson writes, "has been through the individual flexibilities of the various writers and through close attention to their personal mood and tone. I have restricted myself to prose writers."<sup>23</sup> Where Dyson does enter into the discussion of the broader existential situation of the ironist, to be fair, he writes, "At best, he is a moralist to whom cruelty and rejection come more naturally than forgiveness and charity. At worst, he may be a sick man, shuddering at evils which have their true origin in himself."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> A. E. Dyson, *The Crazy Fabric: Essays in Irony*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), p. xi.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

By neglecting to address the social, historical, or philosophical considerations under which the selected writers have deployed their ironic tactics, Dyson, for example—without fault to him or the dominant critical model under which he wrote—assumes the position of the critic who deifies writers with the complete capacity for autonomous choice, without recourse to the social conditions wherein irony might be practiced among “regular” people as well. In doing so, Dyson does not speak to the ironic as a social temperament, as a lived worldview, rather—along with the tragic, comic, and romantic—it is a category of strict literary analysis.<sup>25</sup>

The reason I have omitted utilizing work on irony that treats only its rhetorical or formal aspects is that when these authors speak of irony as a device, they treat it as a *willfully selective* use of language, detached from philosophical influences and views held by irony’s users.<sup>26</sup> The assumptions made by books like Booth’s and Dyson’s are that an agent-author chooses to use an ironic rhetorical strategies or say ironic things to an interlocutor or reader in order to convey a meaning to them. As regards irony specifically, this treatment of the concept retains an air of formalism and literary exclusivity; it

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<sup>25</sup> This, of course, has much to do with the influence of the dominant literary critical practices of the day. Under the influence of Canadian critic Northrop Frye, whose *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) formed the new mode of engaging with literature in the wake of the New Critics of the 1920s to the 1940s, hordes of literary scholars and critics emphasized the formalistic, self-contained character of works of literature. Avoiding elements external to the work in question, critics focused solely on aesthetic elements —“structures” — internal to the work alone. Literature was conceived as an autonomous thing-in-itself; neither the author’s intentions nor the social or political situation under which he or she labored on the work were to be considered in the final analysis. Criticism could be built as an objective system, Frye thought, ridding the field of sloppy subjectivism, in which he thought it was mired. At the root of all literature, he had deduced, were four main narrative categories: the comic, romantic, tragic, and ironic. A clergyman, Frye held dear to the notion that literature was the one place where modern man could be free. In this sense, literature was a secularized religious impulse, a refuge for the Christian humanist, a way to escape the world. Terry Eagleton writes that Frye’s critical model displays the oddly antagonistic aims of “computerized efficiency” with the “most Romantic of yearnings” [*Literary Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 93]. The literary structuralist model met its death as a dominant academic mode in the 1970s, giving way to critical models that saw these internal structures not as naturally occurring kinds, but something made, something post-structural, as in the social, psychological, identity, and philosophical considerations that comprise works of literature.

<sup>26</sup> Similarly, when hearing of deconstruction’s popularity among U.S. academics in the past few decades, recently deceased French philosopher extraordinaire Jacques Derrida noted that only in America could deconstruction become *technique* rather than philosophical vision. The method of reading—specifically, of reading Levi-Strauss—became subsumed under the predominantly pragmatic conception of thought in America; that is, it was a tool to be used.

discounts the possibility of the involuntariness of irony's deployment or of its existence superceding the perception of its tactical use.

The formalist model of irony also neglects to address the underlying considerations from which the ironic attitude arises. Given the aforementioned critics' preference for a worldview that sees the subject with perfect agency standing apart from the world of events and objects—and thus being able to afford the distance that irony requires—the troublesome philosophical problem of this model is left uninvestigated. A more philosophical take, such as Kierkegaard's, for example, makes clear that the *very relationship* of subject to world is what gives initial rise to irony's ambivalence.

Lastly, when irony is treated solely as a literary device it is removed from its actual, not imagined, uses in everyday life, which is the realm of objects and events from which irony takes its key, and often the arena from which writers have taken theirs. This sort of treatment casts ironic speech into the realm of literature and away from the role of irony in public life and dialogue, specifically defined as the place of social interaction and conflicting philosophical views, as well as the arena in which concepts such as “civility” and “public” take their very meaning. These two words have their origins in Greek. And as long as they have had words to delimit them, a word for irony has been there, too.



## Chapter One: Excursus On the Genesis of Irony As A Worldview

*Irony in the eminent sense directs itself not against this or that particular existence, but against the whole given actuality of a certain time and situation.*

- Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* (1841)

*The ironic life is a life keenly alert, keenly sensitive, reacting promptly with feelings of liking or dislike to each bit of experience, letting none of it pass without interpretation and assimilation, a life full and satisfying—indeed a rival of the religious life. ... The ironist is ironical not because he does not care, but because he cares too much.*

- Randolph Bourne, 1913

*Confronted with a randomized world, irony enacts suspensiveness, which implies tolerance of fundamental uncertainty about the meanings and relations of things in the world and in the universe.*

- Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent* (1987)

*Enjoy Uncertainty. Give Chance A Chance. Life is Random.*

- Advertisement for Apple iPod Shuffle, 2005

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The history of irony is long, complex, and debatable. Yet this much is clear: what begins as a rhetorical trope and a vague character trait transforms in Romanticism into an entire worldview. From there, irony, while retaining all of its garnered linguistic and situational meanings, comes as well to describe an entire personality type inhabiting advanced industrial nations.

From its earliest days, in pre-classical Greece, irony (*eironeia*; εἰρωνεία) was a part of the field of rhetoric; it was deployed as a method or technique of oral communication.<sup>27</sup> For the playwright Aristophanes, for example, irony was, simply, straightforward lying. The fox, deceptive and sly, was its quintessential caricature. Demosthenes and

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<sup>27</sup> Contrariwise, in a rare exception to the rule, D.C. Muecke writes that G. G. Sedgewick's research found that "'*Eironeia*, as the Periclean Greeks conceived it, was not so much a mode of speech as a *general mode of behaviour*,' and the word, down to Aristotle, was a term of abuse connoting 'sly-foxery' with 'a tinge of 'low-bred.'" *The Compass of Irony*. (London: Methuen and Company, 1969), p. 47. The consensus as I have found throughout the literature on the genesis on the term, specifically in Knox (note below), is that this conception was not a significant enough departure to warrant adjustments to the idea of irony in classical Greece as primarily a rhetorical device.

Theophrastus used the term to mean deceptive self-deprecation, a “vicious dissimulation of one’s political and social powers.”<sup>28</sup> In Theophrastus, the ironist was someone “who could never be got to do anything, or to commit himself in speech so that he was forced to take sides in an active discussion. This is irony which has become a social vice.”<sup>29</sup>

*Eironeia* acquired its first noticeable significance in the dialogues of Plato (BCE 428-347), referring to the discursive methods employed by the figure of Socrates, such as praise-by-blame, blame-by-praise, sarcastic commendation, disingenuous self-deprecation. For Plato, irony was “mocking pretense and deception,” and this sort of methodology of social interaction would later be fittingly described in the early nineteenth century as Socratic Irony. In the various dialogues, Socrates would feign innocence or naïveté when questioning his interlocutor in order to “draw the truth out of him,” in order to show the speaker that he already knew answers that he thought required special knowledge or that he did not know. Oppositely, Socrates would use the technique of feigning ignorance to show a speaker that he did *not* know what he claimed to know, thereby dispelling the speaker’s proclaimed wisdom or expertise. In this sense, Plato deployed the tactic as a method of showing ignorance where there was previously hubris, or showing that knowledge was inside one and merely forgotten; for Truth resided in the Forms, which were eternal and ever-present, ultimately knowable through philosophical discourse and reflection. The Platonic epistemological story had each person already containing knowledge that only need be remembered with the help of philosophy. It is with Socrates that irony first comes to be as an entire mode of engaging the public—especially for engaging the public.

Yet in his *Rhetoric* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (BCE 384-322) referred to irony with slight distaste. Playing down one’s virtues and intelligence—often translated as a “self-depreciator”—as in Socratic irony, was a characteristic of irony for Aristotle.<sup>30</sup> But

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<sup>28</sup> Norman Knox, *The Word Irony and Its Contexts 1500-1755*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1961), p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 4.7.3-5., trans. Martin Ostwald. (New York: Macmillan/Library of Liberal Arts, 1962), p. 104. Aristotle’s use is translated at “depreciator,” and not “deprecator.” Ostwald notes, “‘Self-depreciation’ is perhaps the least inaccurate rendering of *eironeia*. The best description of the quality is found here: it is the exact opposite of boastfulness and involves qualities such as understatement, pretending ignorance, mock modesty and the like, but

he did not regard this sort of personality as pernicious *or* ideal; irony was more subtle because it was highly context-dependent. Yet it was definitely not a virtue and was interpreted ultimately by Aristotle as a form of dishonesty in civic life. The virtuous citizen avoided both boastfulness and understatement, and instead presented himself sincerely. He was engaged, forthright, generous, modest, and un-self-conscious in his dealings with others: “When an individual has no ulterior motive, he speaks, acts, and lives his real character...[The self-depreciator] disclaims especially those qualities which are highly valued by others, as Socrates used to do.”<sup>31</sup> Aristotle’s description undoubtedly moves irony into the moral arena, conflating what had been a rhetorical technique with a character type defined by having ulterior motives, being sneaky, immodest, and overly self-concerned. It will be quite plain to see how these conceptions of the ironist and the virtuous citizen resonate in the contemporary debate.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (BCE 106-43), influenced by Aristotle’s writings but not his subtle disdain for the ironic man, made reference to irony, particularly in *De Oratore* (BCE 55) and *De Inventione* (BCE 99), as it was used by Socrates. The historian Norman Knox writes that

it was in Cicero that irony first attained to a complete and positive dignity; he was flattered to be thought an ironist worthy of Socrates’ company. And it was Cicero who, for the first time in extant literature, distinguished between irony as a mere figure of speech and a pervasive habit of discourse....[but] Cicero does not imply a habit of thought or anything approaching a philosophic view.<sup>32</sup>

Here irony teeters on the brink of a mode of speech and a philosophical worldview. The aristocratic Cicero was glad to be seen as an ironist, perhaps because the attitude implied a certain degree of elitism, exclusivity, and distinction.

Cicero’s definition was honed by the influential Roman orator and rhetorician Quintilian (Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, c. 40-95 CE). In his *Institutio Oratorica* (93 CE), Quintilian refers to irony as three distinct moments: “(1) a brief figure of speech embedded in a straightforward context (‘trope’); (2) an entire speech or case presented in

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sometimes has overtones of slyness. Self-depreciation, in the form of feigned ignorance, was frequently attributed to Socrates” (e.g. Plato, *Apology* 38a; *Republic* I. 337a; *Symposium* 216e).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

<sup>32</sup> Knox, p. 5.

language and a tone of voice which conflict with the true situation ('schema'); and (3) a man's whole life as colored with irony, as in Socrates, who assumed the role of the innocent man lost in wonder at the wisdom of others."<sup>33</sup> In this last case, patently for the first time, irony is conceived of as an ethos, an entire mode of existential engagement.

Yet still, according to a number of scholars (Knox [1962], Muecke [1969], Seery [1990], Colebrook [2003]), irony's definition remained relatively stagnant for the following fifteen centuries, until sixteenth-century Britain, where it retained and solidified the meaning that Quintilian had laid down in the *Institutio Oratorica*, as a simple mode of speech; and it is how we still popularly conceive of the term as a moment "in which something contrary to what is said is to be understood."<sup>34</sup> But even during the English classical age the word continued to be a technical element of refined speech, reserved mainly for wordsmiths, not something eminently present in everyday life; certainly not something that could be described as capturing the imagination of an entire era, or conceived of as a mode of interpretation among everyday citizens. This is clearly not at all to say that prominent writers did not utilize irony in their literary works in earlier eras, particularly during the age of Reformation and the northern and English Renaissance: Martin Luther, Desiderius Erasmus, Sebastian Brant, Johann Pauli, Francois Rabelais, Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare all obviously and effectively deployed irony as a trope. Yet confined to use by intellectuals and literary types, irony was not widespread as a means of apprehending broader social life. As Knox notes, "[while] the contribution of the English classical period was to introduce certain Classical concepts of irony into the main stream of English literary culture and to develop these older concepts in small ways....it did not stimulate anyone to extend irony into startlingly new realms."<sup>35</sup>

However, the third earl of Shaftesbury (d. 1713) described a "soft irony" that "spread alike through a whole character and life." This can accurately be described as an

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio Oratorica*, 9.22.44. ("*contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est.*")

<sup>35</sup> Knox, p. 8. English Classical period, taken generally to range from 1500-1660, a.k.a the English Renaissance, refers to the influence of classical tragedies and comedies on authors of the time, or to the lasting quality of the literature into the present day. For more on the qualifications of such a distinction, see C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature, Fourth Edition* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1980), pp. 82-84, 156-159.

early take on irony that holds it as a worldview. For Shaftesbury this kind of ironic view was both a sign of goodness and the expression of the perfect way of life. Irony's ethical implications here are the reverse of those held by Aristotle and his followers insofar as irony was something to be cultivated, something toward which one should aspire. As such, in this totalizing aspect, Shaftesbury was seeing irony in a "modern" way, from the subjective, existential angle of individualism rather than from Aristotle's objective politico-social one. Shaftesbury's emphasis was on the ironic attitude, of which, for him, the ironic manner was only the external expression of a broader apprehending of reality.

Shaftesbury described the degree of opposition between praise and blame as something that should be kept to a minimum; one should avoid "satiric virulence or comic buffoonery." Rather, one should cultivate a grand ethical fusion of modest self-abnegation, gentle gravity, and a general tolerance of all things—all the while hiding one's reservations. This type of (now famous, English) reserve Shaftesbury recommended was evidentiary of the valuation of the individual, of the spirit within over the externalities without. Holding back centered the subject so that he was not disturbed by the "immediate changes and incessant eternal conversions, revolutions of the world."<sup>36</sup> Perhaps more than anyone, he was internally grounded.

Interestingly, Shaftesbury maintains that the ironist may often be the only audience aware of his own irony and, as a consequence, the world might find him "puzzling." Nonetheless, so long as he lived "disinterested and unconcerned," the ironist would become increasingly independent of the world, he could accommodate all appearances to his view, which put "everything in its due light." This is a thoroughly modern political and social attitude insofar as it is pluralistic, even if slightly aristocratically inspired. Socrates for Shaftesbury had obtained the high-watermark of ironic disengagement such that the Greek philosopher was interpreted as

a perfect character; yet...veiled, chiefly by reason of a certain exquisite and refined raillery which belonged to his manner, and by virtue of which he could treat the highest subjects, and those of commonest capacity...together,...both the heroic and the simple, the tragic and the comic.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp. 194-195.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

For Shaftesbury, then, irony was a goal of human being, a strategy to be implemented in all of life in order to acquire the mental distance necessary for happiness and freedom. It allowed the subject to soar above the social world and the mass of opinion. It allowed him to feel superior, to be free from constraint.

This increasing flair for the ironic mode of speech and writing continued in the eighteenth century, coinciding with the rattle of social and cultural modernity and the increasing attention paid to the burgeoning concept of the individual. Consequently, irony began to acquire more widespread popular mention and use. In addition to Shaftesbury, the satires of Defoe and Swift during the 1720s, concomitant with the plethora of pamphlets and periodicals—*Tatler*, *Scots Magazine*, *Courant*—and the general increase in literacy, saw rapid consumption of the popular witty, daily journal *The Spectator* of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele.<sup>38</sup> The proliferation of irony as a method of public engagement in the realm of letters would become an increasingly common means of expressing both ambivalence and raillery at political and social events and figures—that is, at power, as critique—in both literary production and in increasingly, too, in common speech.

Swift's time-tested exemplar of satirical writing, *A Modest Proposal* (1729), for example, suggests that the suffering Irish poor should simply sell their children to the English for “not above the value of two shillings” for income to stave off famine, for “a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or ragout.”<sup>39</sup> This method of blame-by-absurd-recommendation was utilized to draw attention to the blatant social negligence—and Parliamentary tax-plundering—that the English were displaying towards their desperate Catholic neighbors in the 1720s. In one of earliest deployments of irony as a literary

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<sup>38</sup> For a lively and informed discussion of the importation of literary culture from London to the colonies and the effects it had on the self-defined sophistication of eighteenth-century cosmopolitans, see Ned C. Landsman, *From Colonial to Provincials: American Thought and Culture, 1680-1760*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 31-56, Chapter Two, “Transatlantic Republic of Letters.”

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Swift, “A Modest Proposal,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 2146.

social corrective, Swift combines the uniquely unfit combination of logical clarity, compassion, and total naïveté in relaying his enormous plan for fixing a social ailment. Irony is deployed in the spirit of Christian charity in order to highlight the hypocrisy of avowedly Christian neighbors.

After 1755 irony began to intone several new meanings, particularly in Germany and France: writers and philosophers become self-conscious of irony *qua* irony. This reflexivity occurs less so in England; and Dr. Johnson's Dictionary retained irony's definition as Quintilian had offered: "a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words." Though on the cusp of change, Johnson's codification helped constrain the concept of irony to the confines of literary usage.

### *1.1 Two Early Examples of Early American Irony: Freneau and Brackenridge*

Not to be neglected, of course, is the widespread use of irony as a literary device in America during the mid- to late- eighteenth century, when pamphleteers and almanac-makers were arguing either side (though mostly on the Whiggish one) for colonial independence. Though the literature of the time—whether political philosophy or sermons—does not approach irony as an attitude as it does in Shaftesbury or German post-Kantianism, for example, the issue of civic trust and personal salvation are seemingly more heated because they are the crucial poles in the developing sense of national unity. Thus those using satire—for example, Nathaniel Ames of Massachusetts, Hugh Henry Brackenridge of Pennsylvania, the Connecticut Wits, and Philip Freneau of New Jersey—are doing so in order to goad an uncertain mass of individuals to (or in the case of the Connecticut Wits in Harford, against or ignorant of) the revolutionary cause. That is, irony is used in the service *of* something; in this sense it partakes in the form of Socratic irony, which contains the ethical impulse; as such, it is deployed in efforts of swaying readers to an opinion. And it's worth discussing here for a moment not only because the chronology allows it, but because as satirists using "weary irony" in America, they evidence the deep tradition of irony in America—contrary to complaints about it in the present—as helping citizenship along.

Drawing on British, Scottish, and Irish influences, the works of Philip Freneau, born and raised in Monmouth, New Jersey, and America's first homegrown poet-satirist, were of tremendous importance in gathering strength for the revolutionary and then anti-Federalist causes. "Like a disgruntled Daumier with a bad spleen," writes biographer Jacob Axelrad, "Philip Freneau caricatures the so-called leaders, the elite of society, whose one concern is, now as always, with themselves, their own pleasures and profits."<sup>40</sup> Freneau was likely influenced politically in this direction early on: his roommate at Princeton was James Madison. Freneau was also friends at Princeton with Hugh Henry Brackenridge, the Pennsylvania author of the three-volume political satire *Modern Chivalry* (1792/3). Freneau and Brackenridge were already writing and publishing satires together against the Tories at Princeton, and both belonged to the Plain Dealing Society, a Whig-sympathetic organization set up to counter the Well-Meaning Society, which had overt loyalist Tory affiliations. Satire played an influential role in their spirited public exchanges, and each was inspired as well by Princeton president John Witherspoon's pamphlet "Ecclesiastical Characteristics," which with biting satire (and a subsequent satirical "apology") hunted down the waning religious interests of the clergy of Witherspoon's native Scotland.<sup>41</sup>

Having studied theology, the fractioned reason for The College of New Jersey's existence, Freneau became disquieted with the field, calling it "the study of nothing" and writing in his college notebook: "Farewell to the study of Divinity—which is, in fact, the Study of Nothing!—and the profession of a priest is little better than that of a slothful Blockhead."<sup>42</sup> Though raised French Protestant, Freneau was a populist, Deist, and secularist, to be sure, and one who was against the vain seriousness of the clergy, wealthy merchants, businessmen, and politicians he believed had no interest in the larger cause of human liberty that was being waged in the hearts and souls of the citizenry. In this sense Freneau, who deemed himself instead of A. M. or LL. D an "O.M.S.," or, One of the Swinish Multitude, was a more serious person than those clergy he despised; he was afraid

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<sup>40</sup> Jacob Axelrad, *Philip Freneau: Champion of Democracy*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), p. 60.

<sup>41</sup> See John Witherspoon, *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon: Late President of the College at Princeton, New Jersey* (Montville, NJ: Sprinkle Publications, 2001)

<sup>42</sup> Axelrad, p. 51



of that man who was never known to transgress the demands of strict sobriety in drinking. [They are] cold and unfeeling...continually anxious to collect a hoard which it is most likely he will not long exist to enjoy. To be always serious is not true wisdom. Life should, in a certain degree, be chequered with folly.<sup>43</sup>

Satire fits hand-in-hand with such sentiments, and Freneau's appeared in *The Freeman's Journal* publishing essays called the "Pilgrim Papers" and under the general series *The Philosopher of the Forest*. And he had earlier appeared in *The United States Magazine*. His output throughout his manic career was immense. His modesty about it, however, always apparent and abiding: "Fellow Citizens: After having debated the matter with myself at least twenty times," Freneau writes in his satirical *Letters on Various Interesting and Important Subjects* (1800), "at last I have determined to publish all my letters...that may amuse the ignorant, whose brains, like my own, are not able to bear deep reasoning, because they have never learned Latin."<sup>44</sup>

The book continues in an address to the debates of the time in this ironic tone, displaying all varieties of learning for which Freneau was known and in which he was profoundly capable, particularly in discussing the future political and social shape of America. Throughout his wildly prolific career, in fact, unlike the earlier poets of the Puritan vein, Freneau was more concerned with the future of this young country than the past of tradition. Anne Bradstreet, Michael Wigglesworth, and Edward Taylor had seen the world was a chimera; heaven was the sole reality. The good place was not here, but hereafter. Oppositely, for Freneau, the world, the little, scarce-known world of America, with its dreams and aspirations, was the one reality above all others. Heaven, if it was to be found at all, must be found on earth. Biographer Axelrad writes,

As [Freneau] delved deeper into the mysteries of Religion (sic) and confronted its dogmas with the realities of his own life, he gradually reached the position of the Deists. There is a God, no man could deny it—but men were still doomed to live, to suffer, and to die. That was the substance of all history, the fate of all men.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 190; originally from *The Daily Advertiser*, New York City, February 5, 1791.

<sup>44</sup> Philip Freneau, *Letters on Various and Important Subjects*. (Del Mar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1976), p. iii.

<sup>45</sup> Axelrad, p. 52.

With this attitude Freneau ventured out to sea as a captain on a trade frigate, unable to support himself as a writer. Sailing from New Jersey into the Caribbean amidst storm and sickness, Freneau's experiences hardened him to the harsh realities of human nature and vulnerability. This was particularly so when he was captured by the British as a soldier and suffered plentifully as a prisoner of war for several weeks. Faith in human goodness understandably declined. Whereas Freneau's satires at Princeton were written lightly and partly in jest, his writings now took on the deadly seriousness of satire, for "the stakes were too high for trifling." After his experiences in war, Freneau returned home a cadaverous, gray man who has seen human nature in all her cruelty, and he saw, as Axelrad writes, "the world up close and, 'not from a distance.'"

And for those who continued this aesthetic distance amidst so much hard reality, Freneau had nothing but contempt, he "deplored the effete, disengaged writers of Philadelphia, the custodians of its culture and the purveyors of its morals, especially the soft and sentimental poets whose music had no relevancy at all to the 'times that tried men's souls.'"<sup>46</sup> He was after military men, too. In "General Gage's Soliloquy" about the British general who had boasted that four regiments were enough to quell any disturbances in Boston, Freneau lampoons as the General as a feckless instigator of all the trouble and victim of his own malevolence:

A life like mine is of such mighty worth,  
I'll wrong my King if I should sally forth.  
A random bullet from a rifle sent  
Might pierce my heart, and ruin North's intent.<sup>47</sup>

Not only does Freneau engage the satirical arts against the British and effete Philadelphians, but "with more understanding than charity" he goes after all manner of men who are more interested in exploiting the everyday man for the purposes of profit and advancement. In "The Expedition of Timothy Taurus," Freneau castigates "the self-seeking, mean-minded merchants, the insensitive lawyers and ignorant judges, the grasping doctors, and the flesh-pot clergy."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>47</sup> *The Poems of Philip Freneau Written Chiefly during the Late War*, p. 66-71; Axelrad, p. 64

<sup>48</sup> Axelrad, p. 65.

Called in 1791 by then Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson at the request of his friend James Madison to edit *The National Gazette* in Philadelphia, Freneau took careful aim particularly at the editor of the politically competitive *Gazette of the United States*, John Fenno. Freneau and Fenno—both in Philadelphia—lashed out at each other in print, each claiming the other a pawn to larger political purposes. Freneau used sharp irony while going after the Federalists, claiming, like many believed, it was an ideology of the rich and powerful scheming to keep their power. Pretending to be writing the news of 1801 (instead of 1792), Freneau sardonically writes some “fake news,” *a la* today’s Jon Stewart and *The Onion*:

On Monday last arrived in this city in perfect health, his Most Serene Highness and Protector of the United States, who on Wednesday next will review the regular troops which compose the garrison....Yesterday came on before the Circuit of the Protector, the trial of James Barefoot, laborer, for carelessly treading on the great toe of My Lord Ohio. [He was found guilty and] the court fined him only 100 pounds or ordered him to be imprisoned for six months....A few copies of the act to restrain the freedom of the press may be had at this office.<sup>49</sup>

Beyond this futuristic sarcasm in the vein that would be seen a century later in the novels of Edward Bellamy, Freneau also went after Fenno for slandering foreigners—a fact that Freneau, the son of a French immigrant himself, found entirely hypocritical in the young nation of European and African descendants. Freneau paraphrased Fenno in the June 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the *National Gazette* as claiming that “the abusers of government are persons from other countries who having lately escaped from bondage, know not how to enjoy liberty.” In response to his own summation, Freneau counters publicly that, “John Fenno swears you foreigners are a set of rebellious dogs!” And further:

Nine pence a day, course fare, a bed of boards  
The midnight loom, high rents, and excised beer  
Slave to dull squires, King’s brats, and huffish lords  
(Thanks be to Heaven) not yet in fashion here!<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, in response to the “general welfare” clause of the Constitution, which anti-Federalists saw as a wide opening for the abuse of civil liberties and positions of influence,

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>50</sup> *The National Gazette*, July 18, 1792.

Freneau ironically jested at how to get rid of representational government altogether—as Federalists seemed to him to be heading dangerously in that direction, at once bolstering the power of the wealthy minority seen to be running Hamilton’s Federalist program: “Get rid of all constitutional shackles,” he writes, “confer titles; dwell on the dangers of the mob; continue and enlarge the public debt; establish a bank for the enrichment of the masters; provide a standing army; and enact any other laws the rich may need to preserve their power.”<sup>51</sup> These and other ridiculing sarcasms met at least half of a public ready to hear them, ready to interpret their Swiftian undertones in a spirit of knowingness and increasing solidarity.

Naturally there were those not so ready. Freneau, a self-admitted populist and, again, “one of the swinish multitude” (indeed he had spent the better part of his life around sailors, merchants, and farmers), was mocked by men of learning like Myles Cooper, president of King’s College in London, for whom Freneau’s satires were an abasement of virtue and a profound shame to “honest minds and true gentlemen.” As Axelrad writes,

[Freneau’s satires] may have had no persuasive power over King George III and Lord North; [but] on the minds and tempers of King’s pious and political defenders in New York they did have a rasping, grating effect. To the Tories, the satires were not poetry at all, but frothy effusions without pretense to any literary merit, offensive only their sensitive and cultivated souls.<sup>52</sup>

Nonetheless, Freneau had seen far worse than literary jabs at his talents, however much the barbs did wound. And Royalist mimicry would not to unchallenged—with the soberness of insightful ridicule, Freneau reached out and sought to drown it with laughter. Importantly, from his years fighting in print and with arms, from sailing and seeing the frailty of human being and the corruption and greed of war profiteers, Freneau took this one lesson: no one could be trusted but the people themselves. All history, he like many held dear, was proof to the simple truth that no one else could be relied upon to guarantee freedom but the governed. This was a satirist of utmost moral conviction.

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<sup>51</sup> Axelrad, p. 228.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Likewise, “Nothing conveys the image of an American culture still in the womb than the life, legend, and literature of Hugh Henry Brackenridge,” writes historian Walter A. McDougall.<sup>53</sup> Son of Scottish immigrants, himself arriving in York, Pennsylvania, at age five, Brackenridge attended the College of New Jersey—later Princeton—with Philip Freneau and James Madison. He and Freneau there composed the satirical “Father Bombo’s Pilgrimage to Mecca in Arabia,” often designated the first American short story, a satire based on a feud between rival clubs—Whigs and Tories—at Princeton. They also wrote “The Rising Glory of America,” a prophetic and patriotic poem of a united nation that would rule the land between the Atlantic and Pacific. Brackenridge recited the work at the College of New Jersey’s commencement of 1771.

The solid and feisty Scot remained another year at the college to study divinity, and in 1772, with Freneau by his side, he became headmaster of an academy in Maryland. Thereafter, Brackenridge returned to the College of New Jersey for a Master’s degree, and then served in as a chaplain in George Washington’s army. In 1778 Brackenridge tried his hand at publishing with the *United States Magazine* in Philadelphia. There he published poems by Freneau, but sluggish subscriptions convinced him to change his profession. He took a law degree, and was admitted to the bar in 1780; but Philadelphia, like for Freneau, was ultimately not for Brackenridge, for “I saw no chance for being anything in that city, there were such great men before me.” Four months later, in 1781, he headed, momentarily, 300 miles west, over the Appalachian Mountains to Pittsburgh, then a village of four hundred inhabitants. His aim, he famously wrote, in “offering myself to the place” was “to advance the country and thereby myself.”

In Pittsburgh, Brackenridge—alternately through his political phases a Whig, Federalist, and Republican—helped establish the first western newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, in 1786, the same year he was elected to the Pennsylvania state assembly. There he fought for the adoption of the Constitution, as well as obtained state funds for the establishment of the Pittsburgh Academy in 1787, later the University of Pittsburgh. He also played a role in the Westsylvania dispute, siding with the state of Pennsylvania that the western lands should *not* become a fourteenth state, and he nearly lost his life

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<sup>53</sup> Walter A. McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History, 1585-1828*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 377.

attempting to mediate the Whiskey Rebellion. In December 1799 he was appointed a justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

What is relevant here to the topic of irony in America are not the details of Brackenridge's impressive life, but his satirical novel *Modern Chivalry*, a rambling satirical novel that jabbed at the pretentiousness of the east and the backwardness of the west in Pennsylvania, essentially embodying the tensions of the fragile union in its formative years. The first two volumes of the book were published in 1792 and the third in 1793, in Pittsburgh—the first book ever published west of the Allegheny mountains. The book made him famous. Widely considered the first important fictional work about the details, duties, and drudgeries along the American frontier, *Modern Chivalry* has been dubbed a work that is “to the west what *Don Quixote* was to Europe.” Henry Adams called it “a more thoroughly American book than any written before 1833.”

Brackenridge's first draft of *Modern Chivalry* was the *Modern Chevalier*, composed as a long poem just thirty pages long. Dissatisfied with the composition in verse form, he then revised it in prose based on the voice of Swift and other Anglo-wits like Addison, Tillotson, and Bolingbroke. Brackenridge wrote that he formed the voice and composition of *Modern Chivalry* “on the model of Xenophon, and Swift's *Tale of a Tub* and *Gulliver's Travels*. It is simple, natural, various, and forcible.”<sup>54</sup> In using such force, Brackenridge composed a work, then, that essentially pits an elite against the people, a analogous relationship to the environment in United States in the Federalist/anti-Federalist debates.

Captain Farrago, the well-read farmer and militia officer of western Pennsylvania—Brackenridge's alter ego—is set against the fall-guy character of Teague O'Regan, an illiterate Irish servant encouraged that in America even simpletons can get rich in America. He is the true butt of Brackenridge's satirical shots, though the author himself stood somewhere in the middle. The author disliked the arrogance of the Federalism of Hamilton, but also despised the homegrown, unreflecting acquisitiveness of the hardscrabble west. As Brackenridge unironically opined,

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<sup>54</sup> Hugh Henry Brackenridge from preface of 1792 edition of *Modern Chivalry* quoted in Claude Milton Newlin, *The Life and Writings of Hugh Henry Brackenridge*. (Mamoroneck, New York: Paul P. Appel, Publisher 1971), p. 114-115.

There are but two characters that can be respectable as representatives of the people. A plain man of good sense, whether farmer, mechanic, or merchant; or a man of education and literary talents. The intermediate characters, who have neither just natural reflection, nor the advantage of reading, are unnatural, and can derive no happiness to themselves from the appointment; nor can they be of use to the commonwealth.<sup>55</sup>

The narrative of *Modern Chivalry*, then, America's first travelogue, sees Farrago and O'Regan move from the wilderness of the western frontier eastward to Philadelphia, illustrating throughout that this new land of "the people" also contained a lot of stupidity and ignorance. One incident sees Farrago and O'Regan arriving in a village that was holding state legislative elections, a direct parallel to the national stage. The candidates, a weaver and a "man of education," are giving public speeches of their merits and plans. And the educated candidate states,

Fellow citizens, I pretend not to any great abilities; but conscious to myself that I have the best good will to serve you. But it is very astonishing to me, that this weaver should conceive himself qualified for the trust....It will be more honourable for himself, to remain at his loom and knot threads, than to come forward in a legislative capacity: because, in the one case, he is in the sphere where God and nature has placed him; in the other, he is like a fish out of water, and must struggle for breath in a new element.<sup>56</sup>

Farrago has overheard the plea by the candidate and himself then addresses the crowd:

I have no prejudice against a weaver more than another man....But to rise from the cellar to the senate house would be an unnatural hoist. To come from counting threads, and adjusting them to the splits of a reed, to regulate the finances of a government would be preposterous; there being no congruity in the case. There is no analogy between knotting threads and framing laws.<sup>57</sup>

Yet while Farrago is haranguing the crowd about the pros and cons of each candidate, O'Regan realizes that he, too, may run for a legislative seat. Farrago turns more biting:

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<sup>55</sup> Brackenridge quoted in historian Richard R. Gideon's "The Distinguished Life of Hugh Henry Brackenridge" at [www.oldsaintlukes.org/Brackenridge.htm](http://www.oldsaintlukes.org/Brackenridge.htm)

<sup>56</sup> Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*, vol. I, p. 25; Newlin, p. 117.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

This is making the matter still worse, gentlemen: this servant of mine is but a bog-trotter; who can scarcely speak the dialect in which your laws ought to be written; but certainly he has never read a single treatise on any political subject; for the truth is, he cannot read at all.... Though doubtless, in such a government, the lowest citizen may become the chief magistrate; yet it is sufficient to possess the right; not absolutely necessary to exercise it.<sup>58</sup>

Of course, the anti-authoritarian Americans at this rally insist now on their right to elect, as is their newly gained prerogative, O'Regan to the legislature. Luckily Farrago convinces him to withdraw his candidacy.

Nonetheless, the narrative continues in this vein of pitting the educated against the uneducated in a political democracy; Brackenridge uses the novel form to work out his own confusions and questions about this burgeoning form of the republic, all the while lampooning those advocating radicalism on both sides. He had it in particularly for figures he saw as attempting to solidify some kind of aristocratic governance, such as those vying for Federalist causes: "I would not mean to suggest that legislators are to be selected from the more wealthy of the citizens," Farrago says, "There is so much pride and arrogance with those who consider themselves the first in a government, that it deserves to be checked by the populace; and the evil most usually commences on this side."<sup>59</sup> This was a very thinly masked jab at Alexander Hamilton and James Fenno.

Neither respectable political culture nor the church was spared in Brackenridge's ironic polemics. When O'Regan barely escapes being proselytized, Brackenridge hilariously opines,

I feel myself disposed to agree with those who reject human learning in religious matters altogether. More especially as science is really not the fashion at the present time. For as has been before seen, even in the very province of science itself, it is dispensed with.... In state affairs, ignorance does very well, and why not in church? I am for having all things of a piece: ignorant statesmen, ignorant philosopher, and ignorant ecclesiastics.<sup>60</sup>

Not only are institutions and people being satirized, but all sorts of contemporary cultural practices, too: the duel, the Indian treaties, the aristocratic leanings of the Order of

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<sup>58</sup> Brackenridge, pp. 30-31; Newlin, pp. 117-118.

<sup>59</sup> Brackenridge, pp. 42-43; Newlin, p. 119.

<sup>60</sup> Brackenridge, pp. 79-81; Newlin, p. 120.



Cincinnati. By now the literary journey has taken us to Philadelphia, where Brackenridge opens fire directly on the Federalists. When Farrago searches for the vanished O'Regan among the office seekers in the urban setting, Brackenridge narrates that

The candidates were all remarkably pot-bellied; and waddled in their gait. The captain inquiring what were the pretensions of these men to be elected; he was told, that they had al stock in the funds, and lived in brick buildings; and some of them entertained fifty people at a time, and ate an drank abundantly; and living an easy life, and pampering their appetites, they had swollen to this size.<sup>61</sup>

As the captain continues his search for O'Regan, eventually discovering him acting in a theater, Brackenridge's narrative scours through a university, Congress, and the American Philosophical Society, which the author despised. Dejected at his theatrical prospects, O'Regan finally tries his hand at law, is convinced out of it by Farrago, and is recommended for a post in the Federal Government, where all half-wits are employed. Naturally, the Irish servant succeeds, finding home and laurels in the Republican Court, eventually deemed "Major O'Regan." Brackenridge's survey of American idiocy and bizarre institutions has run its course.

As noted, Brackenridge was fully engaged in the Whiskey Rebellion of 1791, as the attorney to some of the producers fighting the excise tax. Moreover, his subsequent writings on the Indian War and the situation of the western frontier were not satirical but deadly earnest, critical, and philosophical, even if witty. As such, the examples here given of Brackenridge's humor stand as a beautiful example of the satire and irony deployed in service of social criticism, yet oddly, as historian Walter A. McDougall writes, "his serrating satire had no echo in American letters until Artemus Ward and A. B. Longstreet....Perhaps Brackenridge as too American for people still smitten by European tastes. Or perhaps Americans were not ready to peer into the mirror he held."<sup>62</sup> Brackenridge's voice was one of enlightened social criticism during a time when light was

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<sup>61</sup> Brackenridge, pp. 51-52; Newlin, p. 121.

<sup>62</sup> McDougall, p. 379. Of note: "Artemus Ward" is a character created by Charles Farrar Brown (1834-1867); Artemus Ward, the actual person, was a Revolutionary Commander in Massachusetts. Works by Augustus Baldwin Longstreet include *Patriotic Effusions*, by "Bob Short." (1819) [Attributed to Longstreet]; *Georgia Scenes, Characters, Incidents, etc., in the first Half Century of the Republic*. By a Native Georgian (1835); *Know Nothingism Unveiled* (1855). *Master William Mitten* (1864, 1889); *Stories with a Moral, Humorous and Descriptive of Southern Life a Century ago* (1902).

being shone into the darkness of tyranny and Parliamentary overreach. This light—as countless subsequent events and treatises have attested—contained already seeds of darkness that were to become its undoing.

### *1.2 European Romanticism Ushers in New Meanings of Irony*

Self-reflectivity is an appropriate segue to the topic of the modernity of which Freneau and Brackenridge were a part, as it characterizes a new way of perceiving the present. Entirely new, more overarching meanings of irony that escaped the confines of unreflecting, if effective, usage were ushered in with the waning of Enlightenment hopes in Europe, continuing religious conflicts and persecution, and the faint sounds of European Romanticism, a broad movement in activity from 1780 to 1830.

Generally accepted as having perceptible cultural beginnings around the year 1780, Romanticism was motivated in part by the subtle belief in the indeterminacy of *all* language, as well as by language's specific inability to capture the complexity and mystery of the inner self, particularly as opposed to the growing scientific comprehension of the natural world. To be sure, Romanticism itself is, of course, a broad cultural description clearly rife with complication and lack of consensus about its meaning.<sup>63</sup> Yet there is

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<sup>63</sup> For a helpful discussion of Romanticism's complications and contradictions, see, among others, Barzun, pp. 4-26. See also Erich Heller's *The Artist's Journey into the Interior and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1965), and Paul Johnson's influential *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815-1830* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), Harold Bloom, *Romanticism and Consciousness* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990). Indeed, the influence of Romanticism spans into twentieth-century political life; where some contend that it was the inspiration behind movements such as National Socialism and Fascism, others—because of irony's liberating quality—hold that it was the only way to fight against it. Romanticism is sometimes seen as the valuation of individuality, sometimes as the obliteration of it within the universal. Nonetheless, Romanticism will always be linked to the French Revolution insofar as it argued for the liberation and recognition of the individual: his sensibilities, his affections, his freedom of conscience circumscribed in the very makeup of the state, the rights he has to stand against that state. Yet like other terms that claim an entire worldview under its definition, Romanticism's divergent meanings vary, naturally, according to the age that defines them. I utilize the definition that leans towards the primary valuation of the individual's subjective experience. It is that image of the Romantic individual soul that stands against the wider social world. As Romanticism holds the fundamental conviction that the world is ineffable, especially for those whose scientific or technological attempt to claim the opposite, it is a worldview fundamental to modern versions of mysticism and back-to-naturalists. For one

consensus that as an originally European phenomenon, this new perception of human affairs remained a dominant mode of aesthetic consciousness both in Europe and the United States until about 1850.<sup>64</sup>

Essential to this new Romantic view was that the mind, hitherto conceived as able to access reality through scientific and logical means, (the Cartesian psychologistic model that had been the necessary engine of the Enlightenment generally: mind and reality were structured similarly and so could understand one another) did not have direct access to reality, whether through God's revelation, moral insight, or scientific inquiry.<sup>65</sup> Rather, Romantics, indeed influenced by the powerful and far-reaching Idealist philosophy of Immanuel Kant, particularly that of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), assumed that learning about "reality" said more about the mind and how it structures the raw material of reality and nature than it did about nature itself.

As such, Romanticism—an extenuated and expressive form of Idealist philosophy insofar as the mind was conceived of as cut adrift, isolated—assumed the absolute enormity of nature and reality, and the feebleness of the human mind to capture and represent it, no matter the power of logic and human motivation. There is an insurmountable gulf between the mind and the world; we can never know if we've traversed that gulf. Thus the mind could not *know* nature. This gulf between the two was not for the Romantic mind merely a projection, but an accurate account of the relationship between mind and world. Romanticism represents in this sense an epistemological crisis.

Romanticism therefore initiates the break with the Enlightenment insofar as it

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imaginative and additional definition of who today's Romantics are, see Walter Truett Anderson, *The Truth About The Truth*. (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1995), pp. 110-116, who describes them as the most nostalgic of today's social types, looking to the past, nature, or New Age spirituality to define and complete personal identity. For Anderson, the "romantic-back to nature" type of worldview is not the same as the "postmodernist-ironist"; they are even set at odds with one another insofar as, in Rortian fashion, the "romantic-back to nature" mindset does not see itself as historicized or relativized, but rather as a natural type with—to quote Emerson—an original relation to the universe.

<sup>64</sup> Jacques Barzun, *Romanticism and the Modern Ego*. (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1943), p. 137.

<sup>65</sup> For an account of how this major narrative—the psychologistic account of the mind being a reflection of nature—plays out in the history of modern philosophy, see the groundbreaking volume by Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

articulates the epistemological re-conception of *understanding*. Where the Enlightenment, under figures such as Locke, had posited the ultimate possibility of knowledge through the use of rational inquiry and the means of scientific reasoning (that is, active penetration *into* objects and phenomena) the Romantic understanding was a *receptacle* for the impressions of the world. In this passivity it sought, ultimately, a communion with the totality of nature, the inflow of a sense of the divine and pulsating dynamism of the lifeworld. Ultimately this sort of reverence for nature and the unknown was a curative attempt, for the Romantic also felt that there was something about the present that was in need of repair. For the Romantic mind, then, there was something ineffably alien about the world.

Thus the Romantic subject sought wholeness in the future or nostalgic longings for the past because perfectibility was possible and the present was lost, corrupted. So much was the conception of infinite perfectibility on the Romantic mind that, as Behler attests,

infinite perfectibility and the experience of modernism were at that time combined with a feeling of loss, with melancholy, irony, and regret, with an attitude of “in spite of,” that is, with sentiments contradicting the confident expectations of the Enlightenment but forming an integral part of the romantic mentality.<sup>66</sup>

This yearning for perfection and attunement to nature, and the deeply held belief in the possibility of the future, by turns, however, and paradoxically, helped to forward the essentially *alienated character* of the Romantic mind, as well as encourage the possibility of self-knowledge over natural knowledge among “sensitive souls.” Both metaphysical isolation and social alienation therefore permeated the Romantic’s consciousness, and he saw it his task to symbolize and “assert the Self as the source of order, meaning, value, and identity.”<sup>67</sup>

The mind, while not doing “violence” to nature to uncover her with rationality, thus *imposed* on nature its meanings through artistic and, primarily, poetic creation rather than scientific understanding. Self-reflexively—a primary characteristic of modernity itself—the Romantic mind also imposed (or shed) order and roles on/from the individual

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<sup>66</sup> Behler, p. 51.

<sup>67</sup> Morse Peckham, *Romanticism: The Culture of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: George Braziller), p. 19.

self. It was free to construct identity. Thus individual personality for the Romantic continued to consist of two aspects: the true self and the role. Yet now, valuation of the true self came by going around the role, that is, society—conceived of as inauthentic and performative—and connecting “pure” nature to the self (Emerson’s primary call in American Romanticism), thus restoring a particular kind of experiential mode, that is, subjective *feeling*, as a source of value and assurance.

For Romanticism, to be sure, the self was conceived of something that was wholly inward and unique. This conception made it difficult to communicate the profundity of that self in any direct way. And thus irony as a technique of communication became an important means for the self’s presentation—how the invisible is made visible by pointing to other than itself. Yet, paradoxically, self-expression of one’s inner life was seen as essential to an individual sense of freedom. Irony becomes valued as a method of social communication because it dissolved the disjunction between self-hidden-ness and self-expression.<sup>68</sup> In doing so, irony allows the perceived authenticity of the inner self to be expressed indirectly. As that which was interior was authentic and what was exterior was inauthentic or corrupted, irony became a device that allowed for the separation of the public self from the private self. This technique allowed for the preservation and protection of the authentic inner self, the revealing of that inner self by other than direct means; the mystical inwardness of individuality could remain hidden from view, guarded. It also permitted the safe *creation* of social roles—life as theater, a person as wearing a public mask.

So the Romantic individual in society was surrounded by social roles seen as not experiencing reality the way that he did, as imposing an inauthentic role upon him. And this was felt by the Romantic mind as a sort of violation, a restriction of the self’s inherent freedom and creativity. Having inherited the valuation of sincerity from the Protestant ethos, the Romantic mind was, to many Catholic observers, a secularized Protestantism, for more than anything else it sought authenticity, sincerity, commitment, self-realization, and honesty to one’s inner self.

Simultaneously, however, this new worldview ushered in by the critique of

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<sup>68</sup> This point about irony’s activity is eloquently argued in Harvie Ferguson, *Melancholy and the Critique of Modernity: Soren Kierkegaard’s Religious Psychology*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), Chapter 1, part 2.

Enlightenment epistemology and *Weltanschauung* privileged an ironic or aesthetic distancing from the social world at the same time it re-validated interiority, a creation or perception of a gulf between self and world. The “ironologist” D. C. Muecke explains the spreading out of the ironic mentality during the Romantic era:

We have seen the concept of irony enlarged in this Romantic period beyond Instrumental Irony (someone being ironical) to include what shall call Observable Irony (things seen or presented as ironic). These Observable Ironies—whether ironies or events, of character (self-ignorance, self-betrayal), of situation, or of ideas (for example, the unseen inner contradictions of a philosophical system such as Marxism)—could be seen as local or universal. They were all major developments, not least in the development of the concept of *Welt-Ironie*, Cosmic Irony, or General Irony, the irony of the universe with man or the individual as the victim.<sup>69</sup>

So Romantic modernism ushers in the view of an ironic universe, a situation to be apprehended, particularly as it involves the universe conspiring against human victims who cannot express their victimization. Speaking to this, Hayden White writes in *Metahistory* (1973), “Irony thus represents a stage of consciousness in which the problematical nature of language itself has become recognized. It points to the potential foolishness of all linguistic characterizations of reality as much as to the absurdities of the beliefs it parodies.”<sup>70</sup> This was particularly poignant as a revolt against several brands of Enlightenment thought (particularly English and French) that emphasized the ultimate intelligibility of the world and all it contained.

As such, irony as a means of navigating the distance between word and world, as a way of keeping meaning, which originated in the recesses of subjectivity, indeterminate and mysterious, was a malleable and elusive—and quintessentially human—method of playing in that space of ambiguity and ambivalence. The seeds of this view are contained in the push behind the adoption of Romantic irony as a worldview for individuals—and it may be fairly argued, then, that this view contains within it a stable fundamental perception inherited from, and indeed made possible by, the Reformation, whose operating logic emphasizes and institutionalizes the dichotomy between the world of

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<sup>69</sup> D. C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*. [Critical Idiom Series.] (London: Methuen and Company, 1982), p. 22-23.

<sup>70</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 37.

technical rationality and that of emotion, intuition, and inwardness, the continued Christian distinction between earthly authority and the realm of spirit seated within each individual.

This true inner self had an incorruptible bond with nature, conceived of as a given entity untouched by human influence of capitalistic aspirations or the false value of the role. This distinction between the social-technical-rational and the emotional-natural was essential for defining the realm of *individual* human freedom. The burgeoning concept of the individual as an entity with entitlements, rights, and the specific recognition of the state now had a relationship to society that was for the Romantics of fundamental importance because it circumscribed the realm of aesthetic and spiritual value as *internal* to artists, as part of the now-deified *imagination*—which made artists and other creators God-like—rather than as tied to the objective standards by which artists had been judged. Furthermore, the assumption of this tacit apprehension of the universe extended beyond the natural world and into the manmade world of symbols, such that, as literary historian Earl Wasserman has written,

Until the end of the eighteenth century there was sufficient intellectual homogeneity for men to share certain assumptions....Man accepted the Christian interpretation of history, the sacramentalism of nature, the Great Chain of Being, and analogy of the various planes of creation, the conception of man as microcosm....These were cosmic syntaxes in the public domain....By the early nineteenth century these world pictures have passed from consciousness.<sup>71</sup>

This sort of change threw into doubt notions of objectivity and agreed-upon standards for aesthetics and moral behavior, which bothered philosophers such as Friedrich Schlegel at the end of the eighteenth century, because it meant that the basis of aesthetic criticism—particularly for a proponent of then-waning neoclassicism—was lost to the vagaries of subjective preference.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, this loss of a center for aesthetic criticism

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<sup>71</sup> Earl Wasserman, *The Subtler Language*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), p. 10-11.

<sup>72</sup> Political scientist John Seery writes, “But after 1796, Schlegel abandoned neoclassicism, now asking himself the question: How does criticism operate if there are no rules of taste? In brief, he responded with his theory of irony...Irony was a choice to proceed in the absence of rules and standards.” *Political Returns: Irony in Politics and Theory from Plato to the Antinuclear Movement*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), p. 233.

was particularly worrisome with regards to the realm of the moral. In this sense, the Romantic mind asserted its own independence by insisting that the only valid judgment of what it produced was a standard of its own making. It pulled back from the world of sociality, it reasserted itself as the standard of judgment with a resolute subjectivity. It proceeded by a methodology of irony, that is, by perceiving the tension of opposites. Thus Ann K. Mellor, author of the influential *English Romantic Irony* (1980), gives a general description of the Romantic ironist as someone who

perceives the universe as an infinitely abundant chaos; who sees his own consciousness as simultaneously limited and involved in a process of growing or becoming; who therefore enthusiastically engages in the difficult but exhilarating balancing between self-creation and self-destruction; and who then articulates this experience in a form that simultaneously creates and de-creates itself.<sup>73</sup>

In all aspects of life in the Romantic mind, then, irony as an attitude charged events with a potential hyperbolic freedom; nothing could be taken at face value, because every individual perspective became valid. Irony introduced a sort of suspicion that one's interlocutor might be meaning something other than what was said. This was the linguistic methodology of the modern era; the stable world of objects and symbols gave way in contemporary life to freely associated signs and disconnected referents. This represented for the Romantics a new world of imaginative power and creative freedom, as well as the melancholic realization of the destruction of the old world order. Additionally, wit, humor, satire, and buffoonery were useful for Romantic irony because they upset normal logic and sense—but as forms they were entirely different than the larger sensibility of *Ironie*, about which Schlegel wrote, “irony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos.”

Making a clear distinction between the true and the false self, Romantic modernism—traceable in this vein to sentiments hinted at in Rousseau's *Confessions* and *Social Contract*—prefers emotion and inwardness over the crassness of rules, regulations, and social mores. From Rousseau and the confessional form (stemming from the spiritual autobiographies inspired by the Reformation's accentuation of inward experience) comes the idea that by tuning in to the inner voice, the seat of right and moral conduct, the self

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<sup>73</sup> Mellor, p. 27.



can be moral without social instruction. And this mysterious self can only speak its truths outside the realms of social life (albeit through a shared language), as social life was conceived as inauthentic and artificial, everyday speech is use-oriented and ambiguous, and direct communication of inner truth impossible to convey through ossified pedestrian forms. The true expression of inner authenticity could only be done *indirectly*; that is to say, inner authenticity could only be revealed *ironically*, for irony does not lend its meaning directly. Romantic irony's fundamental function was therefore "the indirect communication of the hidden truth of inwardness."<sup>74</sup>

In so doing, the reader of Romantic works of poetry and literature was also sharing in the belief that there was only an indirect communication of inner truth by reading the works of Romantic writers. Both reader and writer were living amongst others who were detached from the reality of their own sincere feelings and sensibilities. Romantics were enjoined in a hermetically-bound world built upon shared symbols and values set in opposition to the crude, use-oriented system beyond—a world where the old order of things had become a refuge of nostalgic longing. The melancholic poet is the symbol of this era that we have inherited. Irony, using the symbols of common language to talk about things that weren't themselves, accordingly undercut and resisted the validity and solidity of everyday life because it showed the clichés and formulas, the untruthfulness with which it communicated. In doing so, the ironic worldview called into doubt the everyday attitudes that claimed to be solid and necessary for society to sustain itself; it cast the modern world into contingency and surfaces. In this way, too, the ironic worldview was reflecting a social world increasingly affected by a growth in industry and commerce—a broader social world that was itself becoming more contingent, uncertain, and competitive.

Hemming oneself off from the corrupting influences of the outside allowed a feeling of spiritual purity (and pride at resistance), which, when trespassed, was felt as violation. Indeed, as literary historian Michael Hoffman has written, "the feeling of being violated by an inimical society . . . lies at the root of Romantic alienation," because they possessed

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<sup>74</sup> Ferguson, *Melancholy*, p. 38.

a “consciousness of the void *beneath* the conventional structures of reality.”<sup>75</sup> For the Romantic imagination, then, there was a brave and authentic self or a deeper reality that recedes *behind* the artistic work or the social role, a self that is free by virtue of that fact that it cannot be fully represented; it is something that merely hints at its location, often in negative terms. This “inability to be spoken” is the rationale behind the use of irony—a method by which that which is said only shows the way to what is not said. Irony arises out of the perception of this doubleness. And the German Romantics saw irony, as remarked upon by the literary historian Steven E. Alford, as “neither a technical rhetorical trope nor as a stylistic device, but as a metaphysical term which best embodied their epistemology, for some...irony was of cosmological significance.”<sup>76</sup>

The relation of individual to society in Romanticism was of fundamental importance because it set limits to what was internal, private, and sacred—the realm of spiritual and aesthetic activity—and what was base and exterior to the self: the world of business, law, technology, and creeping social modernization. It is this bifurcation of a pure interiority existing in a social space, the latter conceived of as less valuable and somehow corrupted, that forms an assumption upon which irony operates. So much so that at this time Romantic irony is regarded as something like an objective human predicament. It is, as the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* defines, a

notion of irony as an attitude or ethos that calls everything into doubt, from utterer’s intentions to our knowledge of the world as given (supposedly) through sensory acquaintance or the concepts and categories of reason. Such ‘infinite’ irony—as distinct from ‘stable’ or unproblematic varieties—aroused great interest among poet-philosophers in the late eighteenth century, notably Novalis, Hölderlin, and Friedrich Schlegel....Such thinking was attacked by Hegel and Kierkegaard on account of its skeptical or nihilist implications.<sup>77</sup>

Again, this was due to a new relationship being conceived between the mind and the world, and a new metaphysical picture yet uncreated—an image of the self as a sacred

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<sup>75</sup> Michael J. Hoffman, *The Subversive Vision: American Romanticism in Literature*. (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1972), p. 46. Italics mine.

<sup>76</sup> Steven E. Alford, *Irony and the Logic of the Romantic Imagination* [American University Studies, series III, Comparative Literature]. (New York: Peter Lang, 1984.), p. 5.

<sup>77</sup> Christopher Norris in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 417-418.

entity that stood against the secular world. The ironic worldview would be borne of a gulf between man's alienated consciousness and a now-unknowable reality.

### 1.3 German Romantic Irony

Germany was particularly adept at theorizing the term. As political scientist John Seery writes in *Political Returns*, "The German theorists of irony made it possible to think of irony as something unintentional, as occurring in nature with no discernible author."<sup>78</sup> D. C. Muecke likewise holds that "with minor exceptions....the theory of irony has been in the hands of the Germans or of those with a German education, like Kierkegaard and the Swiss Amiel in the nineteenth century and Vladimir Jankelevitch in the twentieth century."<sup>79</sup> Freed from the restraints of authorship and intentionality, irony became something like a situation to apprehend, rather than something meant or injected into the world. Irony was interpreted as an objectified condition.

And the fundamental characteristics of this German Romantic irony were a combination of intellectual ferment, a heightened self-awareness, self-consciousness, recognition of epistemological problematics, and an acknowledgement, for Muecke, of the "acceptance of the complexity and contradictoriness of the world and of the obligation to come to terms with such a world." Implicit in all of these conditions and descriptions was for the German Romantic ironist the "irony of the world against man (the ironic predicament he is in) and the irony of man against the world (the *solution available to him through irony*)."<sup>80</sup> Likewise, the historian Norman Knox has written of the relation of German Romanticism to the modern mind:

The German theorists of the new irony, however, found themselves in a situation that has become familiar to the modern mind. On the one hand, there seemed to be considerable evidence that human values are only subjective and sharply opposed to an external world that is chaotic, inhumanly mechanistic, or ultimately unknowable, as in the Kantian epistemology that pervaded Schlegel's Germany. On the other hand, they

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<sup>78</sup> Seery, p. 165.

<sup>79</sup> Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, p. 9.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

could not relinquish their faith that the values of the human spirit must be substantiated somewhere.<sup>81</sup>

As a new subjectivism acquired lived corroboration, Romantic irony in Germany was seen foremost by Friedrich von Schlegel, chief progenitor of ironic theory, as, among other things, self-parody that enables one to regard jest as earnestness and earnestness as jest. This was achieved by a sort of self-distancing from the rest of one's fellows and was more than an isolated case for Schlegel, for "the need to raise oneself above humanity is humanity's prime characteristic."<sup>82</sup> Ironic distancing from the world, the subsuming of the world as an object of thought was what made humanity fully itself. Ironic disengagement from the world, however, was primarily the purview of the aesthete, of the fields of art and philosophy; these activities allowed for a feeling of freedom from the confines of the everyday.

This may be in part because in Germany, France, and the United States the developing relationship between the individual and society was on the minds of many philosophers and politically oriented intellectuals at the end of the eighteenth century. Madison and Hamilton's *Federalist* (1787-88) particularly the *Federalist Ten*, addresses the issue squarely of how to balance the forces of liberty with the need for political order, how to keep "factions" in check against the legitimacy of authority. Speaking more broadly, revolutionary feeling (in France and the United States), and conservative backlash to those revolutionary sentiments, dominated educated Western minds and tore apart old allegiances. As comprised of aesthetes and philosophers, German Romantic thought was caught in between these polarized sentiments. Literary historian Frederick C. Beiser articulates that the overall tone of political considerations of early German Romantic thought

struggled to avoid the extremes of liberalism and conservatism: an insistence on individual liberty that destroyed all social bonds on the one

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<sup>81</sup> Norman D Knox, "Irony," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), Vol. II, pp. 626-634.

<sup>82</sup> Schlegel quoted in Claire Colebrook, "Romantic Irony," at <http://www.englit.ad.ac.uk>. See also Colebrook's very engaging *Irony in the Work of Philosophy*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

hand, and an emphasis on community that suppressed all individual liberty on the other hand. It accepted the communitarian elements of conservatism, but rejected its paternalism, its identification of the community with the old social and political hierarchy. It endorsed the defense of individual liberty of liberalism, but criticized its free-for-all of self-interested agents.<sup>83</sup>

In general, therefore, German Romantic irony—derived from Schlegel’s use of the German noun *Roman*, “novel,” to speak about how literature is the “Socratic dialogue of our time”—was a means by which the individual could navigate the vague interstices between support for political change and a new kind of person it triumphed and the conservative (that is to say, historically entrenched) institutions, and structures that allowed them to voice such sentiments. As a suggestive way of being, then, irony in German Romanticism shifts its meaning from that of a rhetorical strategy to that of a *strategy of being*, such that irony became the only true and, most importantly, *authentic*, style of existence. To be ironic was, paradoxically, to be sincere. And to be sincere was to be moral, authentic, trustworthy—characteristics that many Romantics from throughout Europe and America saw as threatened by the encroachment of industrialization and science upon the mystery of human being. As such, the ironic perspective as a total worldview has in common with a religious sensibility its totalizing aspect, its subsuming of the subject into a coherent vision. Indeed, as the Scottish sociologist Harvie Ferguson has written, “irony is essentially and inherently a spiritual phenomenon.”<sup>84</sup> All of life is subsumed under its gaze.

While seemingly out of step with a consideration of irony in America, I address this era, and specifically the Germanic case, most indubitably because its writers and philosophers found irony to be a crucial outlook of the modern mind, but additionally because it was a time caught between a cultural longing for the simplicity of the past via nostalgic projections (among conservative thinkers) and the enticements of a politically brighter future (loudly cheered by progressives). Generally German Romantics nourished the ideal of democratic republic advocated by the French revolutionists. As Beiser contends, “They believed that the true community will come into existence only through

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<sup>83</sup> Fredrick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790-1800*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 223.

<sup>84</sup> Ferguson, *Melancholy*, p. 48.

the liberty, equality, and fraternity of a republic....[They] hoped that, eventually, through increasing enlightenment and education, the need for the state itself would disappear.”<sup>85</sup> German Romanticism in general did not support violent political upheaval, particularly not in their own fractured political environment. And they remained skeptical of the violence espoused by the French Revolutionaries. In its place they supported, *vis a vis* Schiller and German *Aufklärung*, the role of culture, art, poetry, and philosophy as *Bildung*: as an education for people to become the future citizens of the ideal republic.

It is a hilarious understatement to say that much has occurred between the time of German Romanticism and today’s American Universe. Yet there are broad similarities shared by both the German Romantic Ironist and the ironist that has been described as dominating the contemporary American social and cultural landscape: someone who recognizes the contingency of vocabularies and the inability of everyday language to capture experience fully, the teeming ineffability and ambivalence of the universe, dubiousness towards claims of moral authority, a lack of clear moral standards, doubt towards objective notions of truth, and the valuation of, above all else, personal authenticity of identity and culture. Each arms himself with ironic detachment in a guarding against the outside. The ironist of Romanticism and of the contemporary West each stands internally afar from the world around him yet longs for the immediacy and primacy of experience that would dissolve his self-consciousness and alienation. It is the worldview that echoes deeply into the present.

This picture of the self as something barraged by the outside world and its various machinations required, of course, specific philosophical motivations. And early notions of this Romantic ego—as something defined in negative terms and that is characterized by striving towards inward freedom through the mechanism of irony—have, at least in part, explicit philosophical roots in the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814).

In worldly terms, Fichte was fascinated with power and its legitimacy. A follower of the Machiavellian outlook, he saw history fundamentally as a struggle for dominance among nations, and the tools for this dominance surpassed any personal moral code, such

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<sup>85</sup> Beiser, p. 223.

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there is neither law nor justice, only the law of strength. This relationship places the divine, sovereign rights of fate and of world rule in the prince's hands, and it raises him above the commandment of personal morals and into a higher moral order whose essence is contained in the words, *Salus et decus populi suprema lex esto.*<sup>86</sup>

Subject to and fomenting of burgeoning nationalist sentiment, Fichte, Germany's most influential academic philosopher at the time, helped to further legitimate—primarily through his *Addresses to the German Nation* (1807)—the desire for German unity and the dominance of the state in world affairs through his connection of state policy and the “higher” world order. This was, of course, set in opposition to the violent (and conceived by Fichte as illegitimate) Napoleonic incursions into the left bank of the Rhine, and into the cities of Hanover, Bremen, Hamburg, Lauenburg, and Lübeck.

A Kantian idealist, Fichte began his epistemological ruminations—postulating what counts as knowledge and how one gets it—from the Cartesian “I think,” which Kant had equally proclaimed must accompany all representations, mental or sensory. More clearly, in his supremely influential *Wissenschaftslehre* (*Science of Knowledge*), Fichte was more concerned with the “I” that was doing the apprehending than the mental states or categories that Kant argued must exist internal to the mind (*a priori*) for experience to occur at all. In doing so, Fichte heightened the attention to the self as an apprehending entity; but importantly for him, it was not so much a “thing” as a process. The self in Fichte is the very *activity* of positing itself, it “exists” only by virtue of the fact that it is aware that it does. In Fichte, like in later psychoanalytic models, the “I” derives this self awareness from things that are “not-I,” or the antithesis of the self—objects in the world.

In *The Way to the Blessed Life or the Doctrine of Religion* (1806), Fichte goes further in the idealist direction by connecting this identity philosophy to a deistic view. The impulse of the “I” to project itself into consciousness (and thus creating self-consciousness) is no longer a self-sustaining and self-propelled activity, but something that emanates from “absolute being,” that is, from God—the Transcendental Ego. The activity of consciousness is an infinite activity in which man takes part by imitating God. The

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<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern*, p. 811; “The welfare and glory of the people is the supreme law.” (author trans.)

conclusion in Fichte that leads to the “blessed life” is that contemplation of this God—which Fichte thought of as the moral order of the universe, not as a person, a position that got him into a heap of trouble—is superior to the completion of moral works.<sup>87</sup>

The sum of Fichte’s influence is impossible to quantify, but the impact on the young Hegel—who held the chair of philosophy at the University of Berlin after Fichte and was subsequently buried next to him there—was immense. Fichte’s philosophy had the total effect of stressing—as Luther had done over two centuries prior—the freedom of inward subjectivity, and as such was one of the biggest influences on the incipient Romantic mode. Yet he also held that *total* freedom was practically impossible to achieve because the ego was always a relation of self to a non-self; and as such, it was always bound in relation, which produced only a negative freedom, a point that Hegel would later emphasize as the defining limitation of irony. Influenced by Fichte’s conception of the self, Romantic irony took the subjectivity that is a “concentration of the ego into itself, for which all bonds are snapped and which can live only in the bliss of self-enjoyment.”<sup>88</sup> Irony became a sort of purifying inwardness. It was most aptly characterized as spiritual.

After moving to Berlin, Fichte found himself involved in the burgeoning Romantic circle, which included the brothers Friedrich and August Schlegel, with whom he both agreed and quarreled, and, indeed, heavily influenced. Friedrich Schlegel is widely considered to be the most remarkable of the two for his breadth of interest and fundamental philosophical capability. Furthermore, he was the most important for the theorization of irony as a sensibility.

At various times Friedrich Schlegel was in his working life a “philosopher, a poet, a novelist, a Sanskrit linguist, an essayist, an amateur scientist, a philosophy tutor to

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<sup>87</sup> Fichte became employed as a professor of philosophy at the University of Jena in 1793, after his publisher revealed his name as the author of the anonymously published *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, which many believed to have been penned by Kant. Six years later, in 1799, Fichte was stripped of his professorship owing to his belief that God was not, in fact, a person, but rather the moral force of the universe—a position that had him branded with the contemporaneously unfortunate title of *atheist*. His position on this deistic conception was uncompromising, but what added to the dismay of his colleagues and those in the academic administration was Fichte’s ardent support of the French Revolution a decade prior. Unable to secure a post nearby, he moved north, where he became the chair of philosophy at the University of Berlin.

<sup>88</sup> Frederick Neuhauser, *Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 43.



Madame de Staël, a periodicals editor, a journalist, a diplomat in Frankfurt, a royal secretary in Vienna, a public lecturer, a classicist, and an aide to Metternich.”<sup>89</sup> His interest in Greek aesthetic antiquity provided, in part, the basis for a revival in Greek scholarship in Germany, as well as a stress upon the modes of literary output of that time, including tragedy and irony. Additionally and importantly, Schlegel was also inspired to study the intricacies of expression in Shakespeare, in whom he perceived a “doubleness” of *interestedness* and *objectivity* that Schlegel now believed was a metaphor for an attitude towards all life—at once engaged and distanced. This attitude has come to be known as Romantic irony, though only very sparingly did Schlegel use these terms in conjunction.<sup>90</sup>

Irony was first discussed as a component of the present in Schlegel in 1797, when he wrote in a fragment, “Philosophy is the homeland of irony, which one would like to describe as logical beauty.”<sup>91</sup> And in another early fragment, “Internally [irony is] the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above its own art, virtue, or genius; externally, in its execution: the mimic style of a moderately gifted Italian *buffo*.”<sup>92</sup> Irony was revealed in a perpetual “tension of opposites,” such as in satiric and comic irony (in literature) when the apparent meaning begins to reveal the actual meaning. Schlegel homed in on the phenomenon of the gradual slippage of avowal and content as the location of this important phenomenon.

Before the actual meaning is revealed there is a moment when both meanings are present to the subject in an uncertain balance. Such irony, Schlegel contended, had always resolved in favor of the real meaning. But Schlegel himself did not wish to resolve the tension as such, because in the concrete world in which the modern subject found himself, certainty was an illusion, all was relative to particularity. So irony became “an incessant ... alternation of two contradictory thoughts.” More particularly, the contradiction usually began in an ideal human value as given by tradition and history,

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<sup>89</sup> Alford, p. 7.

<sup>90</sup> See Raymond Immerwahr, “The Subjectivity or Objectivity of Friedrich Schlegel’s Poetic Irony,” *Germanic Review* 26 (October, 1951), p. 190, and Alfred E. Lussky, “Friedrich Schlegel’s Theory of Romantic Irony,” *Tieck’s Romantic Irony*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932), pp. 2-4. Muecke contends that Schlegel used the term “romantische Ironie” only in the *Notebooks*; see *Compass of Irony*, p. 182.

<sup>91</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), fragment 42, p. 148.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

and that of assent to a less ideal reality. In other words, the “subjective” agent versus the “objective” ideal. The predicament of the modern person was to hover in between these two spaces. Irony as a reaction to this modern worldview finds itself, as described by the literary historian Alan Wilde, “confronted with a randomized world, [so] it enacts *suspensiveness*, which implies tolerance of fundamental uncertainty about the meanings and relations of things in the world and in the universe.”<sup>93</sup>

At times Schlegel conceived this existential tension, this suspensiveness of being, as itself something stable; more often he described it as a movement (a dialectic) from one thought to another, as in dramatic irony, where contextual tensions give way to another interpretive option. The ironic author for Schlegel appears initially to engage himself fully with one meaning; he then appears to destroy that initial meaning by revealing and attaching himself to a contradictory meaning. But the author does not settle on this destruction, this violence to meaning. He destroys this as well, either by returning to the first or progressing onto another meaning; this process, theoretically, can be indefinitely repeated. Paradoxical irony is thus “self-creating alternation,” “self-criticism surmounted.” It was a methodology by which expectations were undercut and then surpassed, wherein new meanings were created, hitherto unexpected. As such, irony does lend credence to appearances that are partially real, so Schlegel associated irony with allegory, as well as with a way of being in the world, as a human predicament. And irony on all accounts was something serious, something permanently engaged. As such, “No things are more unlike than satire, polemic, and irony. Irony in the *new sense* is self-criticism surmounted; it is never-ending satire.”<sup>94</sup>

Importantly, Schlegel’s motivations for adopting this sort of stance were partly religious. As the son of a Protestant minister, he held that—in defense of his own stance against impending movements of English empiricism and materialism that were crass—“from the point of view of the consistent empiricist, everything divine, dignified, sacred, great, sublime, etc. is nonsense. All this is really mystical.”<sup>95</sup> Like other incipient

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<sup>93</sup> Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*. (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1987), p. 132.

<sup>94</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Literary Notebooks, 1797-1801*, ed. Hans Eichner. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), pp. 114, 62. Quoted in Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, p. 183.

<sup>95</sup> Hans Eichner, *Friedrich Schlegel*. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), p. 76.

Romantics, Schlegel insisted upon the rejection of utilitarianism and scientific reasoning made dominant during the Enlightenment's push to total knowledge. Mysticism for the early Schlegel, beyond maintaining a concept and value of the sacred, also involved the arbitrary positing of the Absolute, though for him there was no objective measurement of what this Absolute was, nor telling if it was true.

And so, ultimately, Schlegel's image of truth was rather confounding—or for us quite commonplace. In his influential essay “Über die Unverständlichkeit” (“On Incomprehensibility”), he contends that “1) all truth is relative; 2) everything is self-contradictory; 3) the essential quality of actuality is eternal becoming; and 4) everything ought, therefore, to be organic.”<sup>96</sup> Consequently it is nearly impossible to piece together a consistent philosophy from Schlegel's many fragments and interests. From these four axioms, however, it is clear that Schlegel held the equivalent of some postmodern, postcolonial notions that remain present with us today as commonly accepted (though philosophically debated) assumptions: truth as relative, nature and reality are always changing, reality is contradictory and complex—incomprehensible, un-totalizable—aptly, fragmentary. These four premises underlie Schlegel's understanding of understanding; they illustrate concisely his view of Romantic and Enlightenment conceptions of how man can and does relate to the world.<sup>97</sup>

Politically, Schlegel was an early proponent of the French Revolution. But when the earnestness of military campaign overwhelmed the sensitive thinker during the War of 1806 (anti-irony tends to rear its head in times of crisis), when Napoleon came marching into Jena—the most important city for Romantic ironic theory—Schlegel intimated an end to jest and irony in favor of sincere engagement and, more significantly, commitment to high-minded political cause. Yet prior to this revelation, Schlegel had already isolated the ironic as the aesthetic hallmark of his day. Hegel, as we'll see, was equally influenced by Napoleon's ride into Jena and thought that irony was, though morally bankrupt, the defining characteristic of the modern age.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Alford, p. 10.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Hegel wrote to a friend, “I saw the Emperor, that world-soul, riding through the city reconnoiter. It is in truth a strange feeling to see an individual before one, who here, from one point, as he rides on his horse, is reaching over the world, and remolding it.” Quoted in J.

Schlegel scholars therefore note the difference between the early version and the later. The latter, conservative Schlegel seems to have gotten “beyond” irony, alluding, as many of today’s pundits do, that irony has an essentially temporary character. As a manner of being that implies maintenance of the German Enlightenment’s skepticism, irony is equated with a sustained mistrust towards positive knowledge. This is clear in Schlegel’s *Athenaeum* (though irony is only mentioned a dozen times in seven hundred entries) where, in fragment 95, he writes that “as a temporary condition, skepticism is logical insurrection; as a system it is anarchy. Skeptical method would therefore more or less resemble insurgent government.”<sup>99</sup> This fragment predicates what is to come in Schlegel’s later years, about which John Seery writes that irony was no longer an area of interest and that Schlegel was someone who was “increasingly *unironical*,” advocating and old pre-Revolution multinational state, under the control of an emperor and the Pope. With consistency, Schlegel converted to Catholicism with his Jewish wife, Dorothea Veit, one of the gifted daughters of Moses Mendelssohn—and seven years Schlegel’s senior—in 1808. It is significant that after this date, as Muecke writes, “his work shows [none] of the brilliance and imaginative penetration of the *Fragments* and the early essays.”<sup>100</sup> It is also significant that his conversion to Catholicism coincides with the erasure of his promotion of irony.

The early Schlegel, however, made none angrier in his support and publicizing of irony than G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), who maintained that irony was most clearly defined by its negative character, specifically so in his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (pieced together by his students posthumously and published in 1835) and in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). In a phrase, irony was for Hegel “infinite absolute negativity,” as well as, more condemningly, in his *Philosophy of Law* (1821), “not only the evil, that is, the entirely general evil in itself, but also [it] adds the form of evil, subjectivity, vanity, by proclaiming to know itself as the vanity of all content, and to know itself in this knowledge as the

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Bronowski and Bruce Mazlish, *The Western Intellectual Tradition*. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), pp. 480-481.

<sup>99</sup> Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, fragment 95. Additionally, it is worth noting that Rorty’s view of irony is essentially the same: though an acute perception of reality and way of being, the truth of ironic contingency, if publicized, would open up all good and worthy social goals to easy destruction, to being untenable.

<sup>100</sup> Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, p. 182.

absolute.”<sup>101</sup> Thus in the unfolding of self-consciousness in the world, irony represented for Hegel—particularly in response to irony as conceived by Schlegel, against which he repeated vehemence, the self-consciousness of self-consciousness—a world historical moment in the dialectic of Spirit. As such, the ironic attitude represented a human effort at retaining freedom in the world—freedom of the inward spirit. Irony, ultimately, however, was an *immature* mode of radical subjectivity, tinged with vanity and knowingness. It was immature because it was not for Hegel a religious kind of subjectivity, where true human freedom and its connection to the divine is found, where the inner-directness of consciousness transcends itself into the Absolute. As such, subjective irony was an adolescent mode that provided only the illusion of freedom at the expense of realizing the truth of objective Spirit. It is perhaps Hegel’s conception of irony as something temporary, as well as something that contains an arrogant knowingness, that sticks in our current conceptions and assumptions.

For Hegel the true religion of Christianity was the place where complete inward satisfaction could be isolated and observed, lived. Irony was merely a playful game of the world-spirit with human finitude. Hegel thus criticized the ironists of Romanticism, such as Schlegel, because they lived under the illusion that freedom was the ego’s projection of itself over the world, that the ego could provide its own escape and salvation. They had it backwards; and as Lee M. Capel writes in the introduction to Kierkegaard’s *Concept of Irony*,

For Hegel, irony is treated as a single moment in the development of the subjective or moral aspect of the ethical concept, all morality being regarded as the negation or further elaboration of a natural concrete ethic induced by the advent of reflection, a development wherein subjectivity ultimately seeks to isolate itself and hence degenerates into what Hegel terms “the moral forms of evil” with irony (romantic) assigned its place as the final phase in such an aberration, the furthest reach of subjectivity.<sup>102</sup>

If irony is negative and incomplete freedom, it can only negate that which already exists; it cannot create of its own. Negativity is thus irony’s fundamental characteristic for Hegel, for “irony knows itself to be master of every possible content; it is serious about nothing,

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<sup>101</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Law*. Quoted in Behler, p. 88.

<sup>102</sup> Capel in Preface to Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, p. 35.

but plays with all forms...it is...infinite absolute negativity.”<sup>103</sup> This negativity expressed in irony for Hegel enters the dialectic of Spirit because it represents the distancing of consciousness from the world and itself; it is self-alienated. By adopting this stance, the modern Romantic spirit becomes totally withdrawn into itself, a situation that Hegel characterizes as evil (*das Insichgehen des Bösen*); irony *moves away from* the Absolute, denies the Absolute. This activity of consciousness seeks to preserve its freedom and extend its potentiality, though never fully engaging, never using its potentiality except in the actions of negation. The cultivation of the subjective ironic mode therefore also constitutes a flight from the universal because it accentuates self-consciousness turned in on itself over the consciousness of the Absolute Spirit. But against the dominant religious landscape, irony, with its uncommitted relativism and Hegel’s characterization of the attitude as evil, complicated the issue of being a Christian—earnest, forthright, sincere, exactly how Aristotle characterized the proper mode of citizenship. This complication was one of the deepest concerns and most persistent problems for irony’s lead nineteenth-century interrogator, Søren Kierkegaard.

#### 1.4 Kierkegaard

Irony for Kierkegaard begins as the general solution to melancholy—that is, a heavy sadness without cause, which had plagued the Danish philosopher since his youth. Irony relieved him of this by permitting a temporary feeling of freedom and lightness. Influenced by Fichte, Romanticism, and Hegel, Kierkegaard’s *Concept of Irony* (1841) would eventually target them all, as well as take aim at the entire contemporary world. Kierkegaard interpreted the theory of irony as discussed by Friedrich Schlegel, Karl Solger, Ludwig Tieck, Hegel, and others to be an attempt to talk about the fundamental problem of literal communication and the relation of individual spirit to society in the modern age. Irony was the recognition of multiple, mutually valid worldviews. It abandoned the single perspective of events; it threw singular-perspective historicism into doubt. This at once created a grand freedom and a suspicion in all other life relations. Nothing could be taken at face value, for there was no single reference to which all

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<sup>103</sup> Hegel in Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, p. 507.

language now referred. And Kierkegaard took this aspect to be the defining feature of modern life. Indeed his opinion would become a default widespread understanding.

As early as 1835, six years before his dissertation on irony was completed, Kierkegaard noted in a journal entry that irony was “an irksome traveling companion that one must be free of to acquire repose and meaning.”<sup>104</sup> In youth, though, one should cultivate the ironic perspective, for, as biographer Alistaire Hannay has written, “Irony distances you from the world at the same time it allows the world to reappear more vivid but also more elusive and...more disturbing guises than it does for a person preoccupied with the everyday.”<sup>105</sup> This idea would continue to germinate in Kierkegaard’s mature thought and play a role in his overall view of irony as symptomatic of youthful mind not yet fully awake to existence. One “survived” the stage of irony in a “self-conquest” to rid oneself of it. For Kierkegaard, one aspect of irony was that it presented itself as both a personal struggle and a moment in the movement of self-consciousness in the world.

Kierkegaard, like Hegel, whose Berlin lectures he attended, was upset with Romanticism and how it disengaged the cosmopolitan subject from the world; both thinkers believed this attitude led to a spiritual poverty and distracted the individual from developing a fully spiritual life, from receiving the gift of the world. Romantic irony is attacked early in Kierkegaard’s writings, years prior to his *Magister*, because it lacked any sort of “dialectical potential”; that is, there was no inner tension that would allow some positive creation to emerge from the stance. As mentioned, for Hegel and for Kierkegaard, irony was purely negative, it could only exist because of the existence of something else; nothing came from irony *ex nihilo*.

Because irony so dominated the German Romantic worldview, Kierkegaard, in the *Concept of Irony*, constantly associated irony with Romanticism such as when he pronounces that

when I use the expressions: *irony* and the *ironist*...I could just as easily say: *romanticism* and the *romanticist*. Both expressions designate the same thing. The one suggests more the name with which the movement christened itself, the other the name with which Hegel christened it.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Kierkegaard quoted in Alistaire Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.139.

<sup>105</sup> Hannay, p. 140.

<sup>106</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, p. 292.

Kierkegaard's association of the ironist with the Romantic attests to the observation that irony is inseparable from the rise of modernity. This is a crucial association—definition, even—for it makes explicit the understanding that irony shares with Romanticism a total worldview of the contingency of vocabularies, the skepticism towards moral authority, social and epistemological skepticism, the perceived inauthenticity of society and roles, the romance of nature, and the apotheosis of subjective experience. Irony and Romanticism are historically linked as a way of being-in-the-world, and this association makes more comprehensible the point of view of those who want to grill irony for its unwillingness to join in the “spirit of community,” such as Hegel as well as some of today's detractors.

But ultimately Kierkegaard, though fascinated with irony, became frustrated with the Romantic version because though it raised the individual above the world and distanced him from its everydayness; it did not, like Socratic irony, have an ethical principle in mind. Where Socratic irony was ultimately serious about its lack of seriousness, earnest about its ignorance, employing irony to no certain end but discovery of the “gift of the world,” Romantic irony had no such ethical impulse to discover a truth that would be mutually beneficial. The playfulness inherent in Socratic questioning assumed that, at the end of the day, all would be fine; one needed only to shed one's ignorance and hubris, and the vitality of existence and Truth would fill subjectivity.

Again, this is ultimately the problem that Kierkegaard found with Romantic irony: though it is an extension of some of the *forms* of Socratic irony, it did not share its ethical impulse. Where does it progress from its feeling of freedom? What is it *for*? By affording the ironical subject with a distance and scorn for the world, Romantic irony for Kierkegaard became fascinated and focused on cultivating experience. Stemming from a Fichtean view of the Idealist, isolated ego, Romantic irony was hermetic and caused a feeling of unreality in the subject who did not “outgrow” it. Carried to its conclusion, then, the stance of Romantic irony caused a breakdown of the subject's relationship to the world, where, for Kierkegaard, “the whole of existence becomes alien to the ironic subject, and the ironic subject in turn alien to existence....As actuality has lost its validity



for the ironic subject, he himself has to a certain degree become unactual.”<sup>107</sup> As such, Romantic irony only attempted to “feel free”; it was merely an illusion: “Irony, on the other hand, has no purpose, its purpose is immanent in itself, a metaphysical purpose. The purpose is none other than irony itself.”<sup>108</sup> For the Romantic ironist nothing can have weight or earnestness. Because he lends no weight to the world, his total tendency is toward egoism. This ironic ego is such that

its relation to the world is never at any moment to be in relation to the world, its relation is such that at the moment this about to commence, it draws back with a skeptical closedness. But this reserve is the reflex of personality into itself that is clearly abstract and void of content. The ironical personality is therefore merely the outline of a personality.<sup>109</sup>

Kierkegaard, seeing the ironic personality as devoid of some crucial components of authentic spirituality, developed this further in later works, such as *Either/Or* (1843), calling this sort of Romantic irony an “aesthetic” mode of life. The aesthete is left having to create his own reality because by being intransigently ironical and skeptical towards everyday realities, he has negated all that was given. Such an attitude of constant rejection leads to despair and alienation. Romantic irony—the worldview of the aesthete, now a generalized character trait—fails to perform that last of skepticisms: the negation of itself. As Kierkegaard explains of this view’s near total arch over existence, that irony is “infinite absolute negativity,” as it was presented in Hegel:

[It] is negativity because it negates; it is infinite, because it does negate this-or-that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not. The irony establishes nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it.<sup>110</sup>

Ultimately, this sort of irony—again, distinct from the Socratic form—is conceived as a “crisis of the higher life of the spirit” because, ultimately, it is *for* nothing—a rebel without a cause. It is no mistake that James Dean remains cool.

Importantly and to the point, it is thus because of its endless negation, its reaching

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

out into the moral sphere of the world, that Romantic irony was thus condemned as anti-civic by Kierkegaard, as it was for his contemporary across the North Sea, Thomas Carlyle. By rejecting everyday commitments and the universe of social meanings in which he found himself, the ironist (the aesthete, the self-distancing subject), becomes the anti-citizen; he will not enter into the precious balance of his individuality with the identity of the social whole. Society and its requirements have no weight for him. He does not take his role, his social obligation, “seriously.” He does not join in shared history and the maintenance of public life. And, as such, as literary historian Gary Handwerk writes of Kierkegaard’s ultimate rejection of this attitude:

This detachment and negation of history and culture is essentially anti-civic, so that the Athenian state is seen as justified in its condemnation of Socrates, having recognized the absolute incongruity between their values. Socratic irony can finally be justified only by its momentary character. As a response to Sophistic egoism it has its necessary role, but its reappearance in a Romantic guise is unhesitatingly condemned by Kierkegaard.<sup>111</sup>

Where Socratic irony for Kierkegaard was imbued with value because of its ethical impulse set against sophistry, its earnest desire for knowledge by means of ironic methodologies, Romantic irony negates the very value of the civic sense that Socratic irony attempts to *uncover* or *reveal* (recall that Socrates died rather than injure civic duty by escaping from prison). It is the destruction of the ethical impulse. Kierkegaard consequently finds himself confronted with the need for a muscular Christianity that embraces existence and transcendence, that allows for both the individual conscience and the trust of community to coexist. While the attuned individual searched for this sort of commitment, he adopted the ersatz freedom of detachment and irony as a placeholder. There was eventually no middle ground; the choice was either/or.

### *1.5 Emerson, Germany, and American Romanticism*

At the same time Kierkegaard was composing and finishing his thesis on irony, across the ocean a figure was feeling the effects of German Romanticism, constructing his

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<sup>111</sup> Gary J. Handwerk. *Irony and Ethics in Narrative*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 8.

own ideology of transcendence, and rethinking the religious experience in America. Indeed, it is in Emerson, that fiery genius, wherein a Puritan, American urge toward collective salvation and the individual's antisocial needs of the Romantic worldview are at once morally married and incongruous, such that, as the historian David Shi writes,

The moral philosophy that Emerson formulated in Concord was based on the same duality of man and hierarchy of values developed by the Greeks and later modified by the Puritans and Quakers. Like Aristotle, Winthrop, and Woolman, he believed that there were two selves—inner and outer, spiritual and material, imaginative and physical. Each is an essential aspect of human experience, but Emerson insisted that the inner self was ultimately superior.<sup>112</sup>

Emerson is that key figure wherein the American Romantic impulse toward transcendence and escape mingles with the conception of the inward self and its snares as the place of ultimate refuge so deliberated in the Calvinism of his immediate forefathers. In the sense that Emerson attempts to universalize the feeling of acceptance of this bigger self, Transcendentalism represents the continuing democratization of religion; The esteemed Americanist Merle Curti observes,

The endless seeking, the glorification of the individual, and the social sympathies that characterized the thought of most of the Transcendentalists corresponded to the democratic doctrine that all men possess a sacred, irrevocable right to govern themselves and to reach for the stars. As Emerson put it, democracy has its roots “in the sacred truth that every man hath in him the divine Reason.” The plain corollary was that every man is capable of making this “divine reason” his guide in life.<sup>113</sup>

In 1832, tired of the Unitarianism he was preaching, calling it “corpse-cold,” Emerson looked to the German Idealism of Kant and others to escape the dominant Lockean view that all that could be known must be sensed. The idealists provided for Emerson and escape from the confines of sense perception, positing that the mind already knows things

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<sup>112</sup> David Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), p. 131.

<sup>113</sup> Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), p. 297.

that it did not learn from the sense organs.<sup>114</sup> And this view formed the basis of Emerson's conviction that there was an inward Over-Soul, though not experienced, was individually sensed and found through intuition. Such a perception could only be found individually, leading Emerson into a lifelong campaign for confident individualism and comprising one element of American Romanticism. "On the surface," writes literary historian Jennifer Hurley,

American Romanticism's most prominent writers—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman—appear to be more dissimilar than alike....For example, if Romanticism is defined as idealism, Hawthorne and Melville, who were more pessimistic, do not fit in....Furthermore, the writers of this period do not adhere to any one form.<sup>115</sup>

For all of its conflicted contributors and variety of styles, however, there is broad consensus American Romanticism *was* unified—whether in literature, philosophy, or painting—by “a concern with the internal world—the world of the mind.”<sup>116</sup> The American Romantics, to be sure, were less interested in how people related to each other in a sociological sense than they were interested in the recesses and potentialities of the individual.

In “Self-Reliance,” for example, published as part of his *Essays: First Series* in 1841 (the exact year Kierkegaard had published *The Concept of Irony*) Emerson extolled the virtues of this triumphant individualism, of the inward self's ability to be willingly nonconformist with regards to social rules and behaviors. For Emerson, like his Puritan ancestry, the moral urgency of his command took on a spiritual, “universalist” dimension. As he famously penned,

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered in the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself and you shall have the suffrage of the

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<sup>114</sup> For an intriguing and careful discussion of Emerson's oversimplification of Kantian philosophy and its hoary details, see Lawrence Buell, *Emerson*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 199-206.

<sup>115</sup> Jennifer Hurley, *American Romanticism*. (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000), p. 12.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

world....What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions if I live wholly from within?<sup>117</sup>

Of course, this kind of radically dissenting tradition in America—of the individual’s self-determined right to oppose all authority—is directly inherited from Puritanism. The intellectual foundations of that Protestant progeny are found in a sort of primitivism, anti-institutionalism, anti-authoritarianism, separatism, the legalism of the covenant theology, and biblical exegesis as a personalized cultural practice. The pious act of interpretation, of forming opinions about what one has read, indeed resonate in the language of resistance to authoritarian rule.

And in Emerson, this resistance is crucial to the soul’s health—that is, by Emersonian implication, every person’s soul’s health—and it depended, paradoxically, on social defiance, on a willful antagonism between the world of one’s peers and one’s own perceived interiority, deemed the seat of virtuous action. Integrity of one’s own mind, the self’s relation to itself, was of supreme value. The end of this self-concentration for Emerson was a fusion with the Divine, an overcoming of small, egoistic concerns for self-presentation and social mores. In the view of the relation between society and the individual that Emerson maintained, the locus of authentic man is clear, for, with Romantic conviction, “everywhere society conspires” against him. In contrast, in the Puritan view it was not society that set man astray from the way to the Divine, but the individual man himself and the ineluctable fact of the biblical fall.

For Emerson, part-inheritor of German Romanticism through Goethe and Schiller, because the self was already part of a divinity within, one need not to be reformed entirely but merely to discover this truth. Indeed for Emerson, the influence of German Romanticism was as widespread as it was now international:

The Genius of the German nation, spreading from the poetic into the scientific, religious and philosophical domains, has made theirs now at last the paramount intellectual influence on the world, reacting with great energy on England and America.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Essays and Lectures*. (New York: Library of America, 1983). p. 261.

<sup>118</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson quoted in Perry Miller, *Nature’s Nation* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 191.

Emerson proclaims that even to look for the German “genius” in the wake of American Romanticism in 1848, was to relocate it at home:

How impossible to find Germany! Our young men went to the Rhine to find the genius which had charmed them, and it was not there. They hunted it in Heidelberg, in Göttingen, in Halle, in Berlin; no one knew where it was; from Vienna to the frontier, it was not found, and they very slowly and mournfully learned, that in the speaking it had escaped, and as it had charmed them in Boston, they must return to look for it there.<sup>119</sup>

What began in the lecture halls of Jena and Berlin, for Emerson, had since spread throughout the world, arrived on the very shores of Massachusetts. The genius of the sensibility that so impressed Emerson had come home to roost.

Indeed Emerson was not alone in his admiration for things German at the time; in a sense he was absorbing the importation of German thought, predominantly that of Idealism, Romanticism and their effects, that had been growing in the United States slowly for several preceding decades, namely as part of increased trade relations with Hamburg and the Baltic ports.<sup>120</sup> In the years following the War of 1812, when interest in British culture not only declined but was looked upon scornfully, fascination with (and, importantly, translation of) German thinkers such as Fichte, Goethe, Schiller, Kant, Schelling, and Jacobi found a pleasant home in educated households and university settings.

In 1814 Madame de Staël’s *De l’Allemagne* (for which Friedrich Schlegel was an advisor) was full of enthusiastic praise for German originality in thought and culture and was published to great fanfare in New York. Additionally, as Merle Curti notes in his magnum *The Growth of American Thought*, the first line of young Americans began traveling abroad to study at German universities; Edward Everett, George Ticknor, George Bancroft, and Joseph Cogswell all headed off to German universities and came back full of enthusiasm for its educational system and intellectual culture, going so far as to model several schools after the German gymnasium, particularly those in Emerson’s general neighborhood.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, as is clear by now, “Transcendentalism was...part of the

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Curti, p. 234.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. Of school structure in Emerson’s neck of the woods, here Curti notes that Edward Everett, after studying in Göttingen, tried to affect change in the Harvard curriculum to reflect a

larger Romantic movement,” Curti writes, “[and it was] derived partly from Coleridge...and partly from Kant, Schelling, Fichte, Jacobi, and other German philosophical idealists....Northern Germany [in the 1830s and 1840s] played so important a role in American philosophy and education.”<sup>122</sup> Moreover, American periodicals had begun to find a place for German letters, philosophy, and scholarship; Goethe had even handed over a full set of his works to Harvard University in 1819.

### 1.6 *Modernism Redux*

Seen in this light, philosophically speaking, the Romantic mode—in both its German and American emanations—is part of a larger modernism that was prompted by a sort of anxiety to rediscover its lost “wholeness” and which created a social character that was involved in this sort of recovery: longing, wistful, melancholic, searching, self-conscious, without home. And this is why Romanticism is frequently cited as a good jumping off point for modernity, messy as it may be, because it integrated self-reflexivity and self-criticality into its very cultural forms; along with this came the inescapable notion of progress. As the philosopher Ernst Behler has noted of this association:

It therefore appears plausible to draw the historical demarcation line for a fully developed sense of modernism at that period in Western history when, at the beginning of the romantic age and toward the end of the eighteenth century, poetry, literature, and the arts were for the first time in human history seen in a process of constant progression. This appears to be the most...impressive manifestation of the modern consciousness.<sup>123</sup>

Modernity ingested deeply the forward moving sense provided by Hegel’s popularization of the notion of unfolding.<sup>124</sup> As modernity becomes conscious of this sense of world

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more German structure but was unsuccessful. Not so with George Bancroft and Joseph Cogswell, who managed to revivify the famed Round Hill school in Northampton, Massachusetts, into something resembling the wide-reaching liberal education of a *Gymnasium*.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296, 235.

<sup>123</sup> Behler, p. 39.

<sup>124</sup> An aside about becoming/unfolding: the second generation Carolingian scholar Johannes Scotus Erigena revived the Greek notion of a *theophanic* universe, wherein “Beauty is the Invisible becoming visible, the process of Incomprehension becoming intelligible, the Unknowable revealing itself” (cited in Edgar De Bruyne, *The Esthetics of the Middle Ages*, trans. Eileen B.

movement, individuals, too, sense that their lives go somewhere into the future; they are situated in the unfolding time of the world. Such a state gives entire eras, fields, and societies the idea of progress and acts as guidance into an imagined future.

In an attempt at comprehending and bringing-into-conception the chaotic whole of the world, Romanticism, through art, also aims at the creation of an internal order. Irony as a response to social modernity and rationalization is not so much as deliberate attempt to *undo* modernity as it was a paradoxical response to a changing and uncertain world; for Schlegel, for example, the tactic of irony as the quintessentially modern philosophical response to the world was an “involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation.”<sup>125</sup> Social modernity attempts order in the world, but with an attempt to anchor the modern self to the world through deliberate *rational* control. This was a reflection of the image of the ordered inward self. Thus in modernity, Alan Wilde reasons:

Order indeed is nothing less than the age’s talisman, its heroic response to the incertitude of the void and, less metaphysically, to the inadequacies of human relationships and the frustration of human hopes. But for what they will into being—those heterocosms of the imagination in which fragmentation is overcome, discontinuity transcended—the modernists demonstrably pay a price, namely, the need to suffer the distance and detachment that are the inevitable corollary of an overly exigent sense of control and the special stigmata of modernist irony; or, to put it differently, to endure unwillingly the estrangement of the self from the world it seeks to urgently shape and endow with meaning.<sup>126</sup>

Modernity also yearns to overcome the estrangement that it helped to create; this dialectic is its motivating force. The aesthetic or ironic view of life generated throughout modernity was countered by a longing on the part of artists, writers, and the spiritually attuned to bridge the gap between the “hovering” self and the now-distant world. At times it attempts to overcome the irony it fostered with recourse to hyper-sincerity. The

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Hennessy (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishers, 1987), p. 71-72. Such a notion, now solidly equated with Hegel, was brought heavily back into play by Erigena during a reinvigoration of Aristotelian poetics during the early middle ages. His doing so introduced the very modern idea of aesthetic disinterestedness that would come to be the beginnings of the philosophy of subjective aesthetic taste so investigated and promoted Baumgarten and Kant.

<sup>125</sup> Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, p. 155.

<sup>126</sup> Wilde, p. 128.



tension between the self-conscious outsider and the enrapt participant supplies modernity with its continual, obsessive fascination.<sup>127</sup>

As an Augustinian-Protestant concept inherited from antiquity, to be discussed, this notion of radical inwardness that characterizes Romantic irony and obsesses Kierkegaard brought with it the implication that the inner life contained the “space” of infinite freedom. The human being became a self-contained unit, a self-determining individual. And as God was imagined to hide himself in the infinite universe and the infinite interior space of a person, the act of introspection led to—as it had for the Calvinist Reformers—endless self-preoccupation with the state of one’s imagined interiority, an inward journey through the soul. Going on this journey (what the American Catholic existentialist Walker Percy would famously call “the search”) was also indicative of authenticity, for the person who found such an act worthwhile the search had recognized, however difficult, the truth of inwardness.

This inward turn, however, as well as providing the feeling of inner space, simultaneously created the detachment that gives rise to both irony and melancholy in modernity.<sup>128</sup> In this sense, the character of Romantic irony is the character of modernity itself: it seeks wholeness and unity; it is skeptical of the rational appropriation of the world; it views social reality as violent and imposing upon the sacred self; it views nature as spiritual salvation, as diametrically opposed to the social; innocence as the circumvention of reason; it sees life as chaotic and random; it holds art and the imagination supreme for the comprehension of the cosmos and reality.

Irony, then, though alternately promoted and scorned herein, survived German Romanticism and Kierkegaard with a few battle scars of moral condemnation. Specifically it represented a form of relativism because it was uncommitted to one moral stance, as promoted by Schlegel. And because it was characterized as inwardly focused and uncommitted to an ethical impulse, it was also narcissistic and hollow, as Kierkegaard intimated. Because it fled from the Absolute, it was tinged with the scourge

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<sup>127</sup> This seems to be the operating logic of practically all documentary work, whereby the alienated, privileged “artist” attempts to bridge his social distance from everyday life through connection with “regular” people. Mostly this sort of operation ends in even worse umbrage to regular people and profoundly blind narcissism on the part of the “documentary worker.”

<sup>128</sup> Harvie Ferguson, *The End of Happiness: Religious Transformation in Western Society*. (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 133.

of atheism and moral evil, per Hegel; and because it attempted to soar above the everyday to see from afar, it was vain and elitist, as intimated by all. Yet irony was also interpreted as both the practice of freedom and a way to recognize the truth of the changing world. It was a means to retain authentic feeling and human connectedness in a world that increasingly valued commercialism and utilitarian thinking. Irony in Romanticism, it may be said, was like a rose: beauty with thorns. And in each instance, snares and all, irony provided, at the least, the momentary feeling of freedom.

## Chapter Two: Contemporary Irony

- Irony is a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words.* – Dr. Johnson (1755)
- Irony is clear consciousness of eternal agility, of the infinitely full chaos.* – Friedrich Schlegel (1797)
- Irony is infinite absolute negativity.* – G. W. F. Hegel (1807)
- Irony is a determination of subjectivity.* – Søren Kierkegaard (1841)
- Irony is a double-layered or two-storey phenomenon.* – D. C. Muecke (1969)
- Irony is an intricate intellectual dance.* – Wayne C. Booth (1974)
- Irony is the mode of language which cannot be mastered.* – J. Hillis Miller (1987)
- Irony is decidedly edgy.* – Linda Hutcheon (1995)
- Don't you think that's ironic?*  
-- *I think you're ironic!* – G. W. Bush response to journalist (2006)
- Every assertion ever made about irony (unless what is meant is simply the figure of speech or the conversational pleasantry which goes by that name) is such that anyone might legitimately reply, "Ah, but that is not irony!"*
- Erich Heller, *The Ironic German: A Study of Thomas Mann* (1958)<sup>129</sup>

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Even after this brief overview of irony's early history and attempts to isolate and define it, it is clear that the concept/sensibility has a dense history and is rife with philosophic implication, that the term has not been limited to its use as a rhetorical tool. Yet throughout the *contemporary* debate about irony and civic trust, however, it has become a point of contention and refusal when some social critics employ the term as a factor in social malaise or as an attitude in public life. They claim that some commentators are misusing the word, that irony has a special meaning reserved solely for literary terminology—as in the above formal examples—and that it is often simply conflated with cynicism, sarcasm, anomie, and plain old wit. Though this is often the case, what is interesting for the current investigation is why it has been

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<sup>129</sup> Erich Heller, *The Ironic German: A Study of Thomas Mann*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), p. 235.

conflated with these other terms.

### 2.1 *Some Present Conflations of the Use of “Irony”*

As mentioned earlier, on the one hand, ironic disengagement signals an individual strategy for maintenance of the self’s integrity in the face of disintegrating elements of a cultural or social situation—the attacks on and challenges to the maintenance of personal integrity. Likewise, when irony as a form enters into cultural production through various means (advertising, television, high-art, film, literature) it can be both an active *social* strategy for the critique of those elements, as well as, though less often, a force for maintenance of the power relations of the present.<sup>130</sup> Because, as a form, irony is empty, it can only do something “political” in the hands of its users. And most often it does much when aimed as critique at those in positions of power and influence.

More broadly, however, irony as a mode of critical thought in recent philosophical commentary has been conceived as a lived strategy for an entrenched and persistent critique of the present, particularly of the elements in social life that are perceived to threaten the integrity and sacredness of the self. For the philosopher Ernst Behler, in his compact and discerning volume *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (1990), ironic strategy, as a phenomenon appearing with modernity itself, is phrased in a

performative self-referential contradiction necessarily implied in any totalized critique of reason and philosophy: one cannot criticize reason and philosophy in an absolute manner without pulling away the basis from underneath this critique, without disavowing this critique, which is itself an expression of reason and rationality. As one easily realizes, this reproach is directed not only against the deconstructive manner of criticizing reason and metaphysics but against the entire skeptical-ironical discourse of modernity as well. Characteristically enough, the ironic discourse itself, because of its highly self-reflective character, practices critical, deprecating observations of a self-referential nature as a constantly recurring technique.<sup>131</sup>

Far more than a willful choice, as Behler purports, irony is a social strategy and

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<sup>130</sup> The political scientist William Chaloupka has written that “strategy intervenes everywhere in the social world, disrupting the connection between style and intention.” Personal letter from Chaloupka to the author, January 17, 2005.

<sup>131</sup> Behler, p. 112.

intervention in the process of rationality is a generalized critique of reason that is characteristic of cultural modernity, as well as a trait of the postmodern mind. This sort of critique, as will be discussed in the pages to follow, is onset for Behler by the Romantic era, as a “self-critical awareness of our linguistic embeddedness has been a characteristic mark of modernity since the romantic age and reached a new intensity in Nietzsche.”<sup>132</sup> Frequently cited “postmodern” characteristics or elements—such as media influence on one’s sense of individual authenticity, commodification of human relations, loss of a credible and broadly shared moral vision, and the exteriorization of identity and threats to subjectivity—if *not* disengaged from or looked upon in askance by individual social actors would threaten the sacredness of the self and gnaw at the foundations of religious and national identity, both of which remain valuable, indeed necessary, for a stable sense of personal identity, too.

Seeing the ironic mode in a less positive critical light, the American historian and social critic Christopher Lasch—undoubtedly an early figure on the horizon in the larger debate about civic responsibility—has called ironic detachment an “everyday survival strategy.” While I agree with that assessment of irony as attempting to protect the psyche from the “warfare” of everyday life—concentrated primarily and experientially in the urban environment—I will be positing that it retains more *hope* than Lasch.

In *The Minimal Self* (1984), an extension of his concerns with the effects of modern American life (media, advertising, bureaucracy, marketing, governmental expansion) on the psychology of citizens, Lasch writes convincingly that in America, “everyday life begins to take on some of the more undesirable and ominous characteristics of behavior in extreme situations: restriction of perspective to the immediate demands of survival; *ironic self-observation*; protean selfhood; emotional anesthesia.”<sup>133</sup> Drawing from literature of

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), pp. 94-96. With the onslaught of wildly popular reality television shows involving survivalist and extreme scenarios, such an interpretation of the character of everyday life and the apotheosis of the “survivor” makes the connection entirely simple and convincing. Yet this is its allure. What is the need to dig further for a meaning that exposes base, self-interested motivations and the relating of contemporary life to that of extreme survival, when the base meaning is already showing? Nakedness (both metaphorical and literal, which is often the case on the reality shows) reifies the situation that all is already “unmasked,” and the motivation to dig beyond the image one sees, to get to the “reality behind” the spectacle, is now itself the illusion to get beyond.

survival in extreme situations Lasch includes ironic detachment as mode of psychic survival in troubled times specifically because

[the] feeling of being acted on by uncontrollable external forces prompts another mode of moral armament, a withdrawal from the beleaguered self into the person of a detached, bemused, ironic observer. The sense that it isn't happening to *me* helps to protect me against pain and also to control expressions of outrage or rebellion.<sup>134</sup>

And this defensive tactic against external forces is no individual phenomenon, nor is it confined to the United States, nor is it at all new. “The question of survival,” the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk writes in the powerful *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1987), “of self-preservation and self-assertion, to which all cynicisms provide answers, touches on the central problem of holding the fort and planning for the future in modern nation-states.”<sup>135</sup> The idea of survival of externalities and faltering metaphysics, dealt with by a recourse to subjective irony, of bemused detachment from the world, has become for some commentators—usually from the realms of philosophy and the other humanities—the talisman of the “postmodern” age; and for the critics of the liberal, secular mind, a social corrosive. As literary historian Alan Wilde precipitously wrote in 1981,

Irony...is this century's response to the problematics of an increasingly recessive and dissolving self and an increasingly randomized world. [It] strives, by constantly reconstituting itself, to achieve the simultaneous acceptance and creation of a world that is both indeterminate and, at the same time, available to consciousness.<sup>136</sup>

Irony for Wilde, in other words, is a means by which the subject attempts to cohere a lived experience, a lived morality (or entire lack thereof) that is not externally coherent, that assails the self with contradiction and a feeling of invasion. Ironic distance is a way to fend off that which is felt to be invading the self; it is a way to cohere the tumult of the

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What use is “investigative” journalism, for example, if power is nakedly presenting itself to the understanding? When the wizard is out from behind the curtain, what is the impetus to uncover?

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>135</sup> Sloterdijk, p. 8.

<sup>136</sup> Wilde, p. 16.

modern experience, to ground the increasing dislocations of time and space. It is, in short, one of chief defenses of the modern, secular, agnostic mind. “Irony in its own right,” writes David Worcester in his engaging history of satire, “has expanded from a minute verbal phenomenon to a philosophy, a way of facing the cosmos.”<sup>137</sup>

But some critics don’t want to see the ironic position as a “way of facing the cosmos,” as entering into the current debate about *moral* values; they wish to keep it out of the realm of the ethical and limit it squarely to the aesthetic. For example, a review of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) by Dave Eggers, from *The Nation* by Elise Harris in March 2000, asked, “What is this dread ‘irony’ that everyone loves to hate? Nothing that corresponds to the dictionary definition of the rhetorical trope. They don’t mean the deadpan statement of the opposite of your literal meaning, or the way an event turns out the opposite of expectations.”<sup>138</sup> Harris points to the fact that although there is much talk about irony in public discourse, there has been no set definition or mode in which people are using the term.

And in an article in *The New Republic* about the heated irony debate in 1999—to be discussed shortly—writer Benjamin Anastas posed a penetrating question that made clear the distinction and confusion over irony as both a literary trope and an attitude towards the world. The title of his article asks, “How Did A Literary Device Become A Public Enemy?” This at once makes clear the distinction and questions how it occurred. Anastas is confused (or, more aptly: Socratically feigns confusion) about irony being an *attitude* towards public life, stating that irony is “nothing more than a literary device.”<sup>139</sup> He wonders how something as trite as a literary trope could become such a deplorable public nuisance, and he says that some people are using a fallacious definition of “irony” that conflates “cynicism, sometimes parody, sometimes sarcasm, and sometimes plain old vice.”<sup>140</sup>

These are fair accusations. The word has come to encircle cynicism, parody, sarcasm, and vice. Indeed the word *irony* has come to delimit an entire type of social character in the 1990s; and the social criticism of the time, as we’ll see, bears this out. But

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<sup>137</sup> David Worcester, *The Art of Satire*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969), p. 75.

<sup>138</sup> Elise Harris, “Infinite Jest,” *The Nation*, week of March 2, 2000.

<sup>139</sup> Benjamin Anastas, “Irony Scare: How Did A Literary Device Become A Public Enemy?” *The New Republic Online*, May 18, 1999. <http://www.tnr.com/online/anastas051801.html>.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

still, a single definition of irony, even prior to this most recent conflation, especially after Romanticism's theorization of the term, is difficult to grasp, let alone possible to isolate as a phenomenon that plays itself out in the public sphere. The great irony-researcher—or, “ironologist,” as he would have preferred—D. C. Muecke, author of the handbook of irony's anatomy, *The Compass of Irony* (1969), said it best and most lastingly:

Getting to grips with irony seems to have something in common with gathering mist; there is plenty to take hold of if only one could. To attempt a taxonomy of a phenomenon so nebulous that it disappears as one approaches it is an even more desperate adventure....Its forms and functions are so diverse as to seem scarcely amenable to a single definition.<sup>141</sup>

The Modern Language Association's *Bibliography* in 2004 lists hundreds of entries under “irony,” and those are just from the field of literary studies. Academic disciplines ranging from sociology to religious history, from psychology to museology have all grappled with the subject.<sup>142</sup> Indeed, the thirst for a succinct definition is just not something that can be satisfied. For as Joseph Dane, author of *The Critical Mythology of Irony* (1991), has declaratively written, “There is no correct understanding of the word irony, no historically valid reading of irony.”<sup>143</sup>

In terms of a single summation, maybe so. Yet, as we've just seen, if we step back from wanting the single definition and look to the broader tradition of writing that has used the term rather coherently to describe a social attitude, we find some very common denominators: the subject has a persistently wry distance from the world, he is a social figure with an aesthetic remove from politics and everyday “mass” culture; he is someone

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<sup>141</sup> Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, p. 3.

<sup>142</sup> Just a small sample of recent volumes; from anthropology: James W. Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber, eds. *Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice, and the Moral Imagination*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); from communications: Andrew King, “A Critical Look at the Postmodern Future,” in *Postmodern Political Communication*, Andrew King, ed. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1993); from history: G. Calvin MacKenzie, *The Irony of Reform: Roots of American Political Disenchantment*. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996); from literary studies: Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000); from art history and criticism: Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); and from psychoanalysis: Frank Stringfellow, Jr., *The Meaning of Irony: A Psychoanalytic Investigation*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

<sup>143</sup> Joseph Dane, *The Critical Mythology of Irony*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), p. 12.



for whom the world is so morally complex that he judgmentally does not judge it; he sees the world aesthetically or performatively; he is conscious of the contingency of perspectives and is dubious of claims to moral authority (which denies the plurality of valid perspectives), quietly believing that such a stance of authority always “hides” some hypocritical or self-serving behavior. The ironist senses that nearly all things are derivative, especially the notion that individuals are “special” or even individual; (importantly, this attitude helps him to retain his own sense of individuality, though he’ll never speak it.) The ironist is a figure who, though socially witty and adept, is secretly melancholic and disdainful of everyday culture and nostalgic for clear and shared moral vision. He retains a desire to be an authentic person—his deepest wish—though he finds himself an unwilling participant in constant social performance; he thus aims at times, as Oscar Wilde has recommended, for sincerity through artifice.

This sort of sensibility, as noted at the outset, can and often does result in ironic speech but is certainly not limited to its use. This attitude is often set against the model of earnestly engaged citizenship, where the actor is enthusiastically and unreservedly committed to the betterment of his or her neighbors, is generous, un-self-regarding, and engaged in the community more so than in self-absorption. Like Aristotle’s ideal citizen, he speaks directly and forthrightly; he does not undervalue his accomplishments or boast about his decent character. As Chaloupka writes of the similar social creature, the cynic, “Every good citizen scolds the cynics, telling them that they should believe—should acknowledge the traditions, the necessities, and *the reasons for* various values and moral commitments.”<sup>144</sup>

Having begun as a technique for dissembling literal meaning, for saying something without speaking it, then transforming into a methodology for social interrogation, and then evolving into a generalized antagonistic stance, irony is no easy prey, and it indeed retains all prior definitions within it. Whereas Plato cast Socrates as the ironist interrogator, and Cicero the ironic figure of speech as tool of oratory, people such as Shaftesbury and the German Romantics such as Schlegel and Schiller saw the ironic worldview as a strategy of being essential to attaining authenticity in the modern world, Kierkegaard saw it as a necessary phase in man’s spiritual life, but one to be shed once

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<sup>144</sup> Chaloupka, p. 6.

traversed. One moved *through* irony as a “stage along life’s way.” But still, to try to get at it directly is to set one up for disaster and mirth at one’s expense. As the very entertaining D. J. Enright wrote in his book on irony, *The Alluring Problem* (1986):

There is a faint sense of unease about recent books on irony (and most books on irony, it appears, are recent)... This unease must stem from the thought that to talk seriously about irony is to lay one’s head on the block....The critic’s stance is all wrong; the more earnest he is, the more likely to slip on a succession of banana peels.<sup>145</sup>

Yet we still go at it, for there is the element of mystery is involved in the search; and in mystery there is the temptation and attraction of the unknown. “The problem of irony,” as one of its masters, Thomas Mann, observed, “beyond compare, [is] the most profound and alluring in the world.”<sup>146</sup>

So just what is this ironic attitude we’ve inherited and that so many from concerned circles have been talking about? It can’t just be something willfully chosen by a whole lot of people at the same time coincidentally. I would like to consider here a bit more the attitude of irony understood as a general sensibility—what D. C. Muecke called General Irony, what Romantic irony implied as a totalized vision of the universe—as a worldview with religious implications and undertones.

This kind of irony, as opposed to its strict deployment as a literary trope, to reiterate, is a strategy of interpretation that both undergirds the entire sense of one’s life and forms an internalized and entrenched social antagonism. The ironic worldview of frequent present lament, I would like argue in continuation of the Romantic mode, is not merely an individual, *selective* way of *willfully* interpreting reality, but the result of a conflation of shared attitudes stemming from the intricacies of modern notions of the self, a view of the relationship between God and man, and normative ethical relations with other beings.

This understanding of irony as an attitude or sensibility is, of course, not limited to German and Danish writers from the past. Indeed, they bequeathed a clear formulation

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<sup>145</sup> D. J. Enright, *The Alluring Problem: An Essay on Irony*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 3.

<sup>146</sup> Thomas Mann, *Bemühungen*, (Berlin: Fischer Verlag, 1925). Translation by D. J. Enright.

of this to those present-day writers curious about irony. The political scientist John Seery, for example, in his book about irony in politics and theory, *Political Returns* (1990), uses the term as “primarily an outlook, a worldview, a mode of consciousness, a way of thinking. Indeed, one could argue that ‘irony’ is not even a thing but is a complex, interactive process and that the term in noun form belies its elusive nature, that it invites reification and reductionism.”<sup>147</sup> Investigating the detached cosmopolitan attitude in Victorian England, Amanda Anderson’s *The Powers of Distance* (2001), approaches the era with an eye for the various ways in which writers and scientists both attempted to escape everyday life through social attitudes of irony, objectivism, and aestheticism, claiming that the nineteenth century laid the groundwork for contemporary detachment of theory.<sup>148</sup> She alludes that the moral valuation of the various strands of detachment—played off of each other in Victorian literature and philosophy—have migrated into the present, too, insofar as “contemporary thinkers elevate certain practices of critique over others, seeking to dissociate their own cultivation of distance from traditional (and tainted) forms of reason, objectivity, and disinterestedness.”<sup>149</sup>

Linda Hutcheon’s *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1995) addresses the subject much the same, as a process of interpretation that has underneath it a host of emotional drives, depending on the situation. Irony is not *in* the subject or *in* the object, it is something that “happens,” or, more aptly, you “make it happen;” irony is a hermeneutic process dependent on the subject’s attitude. Among irony’s many motivations Hutcheon lists defensiveness, arrogance, humor, evasiveness, duplicity, hypocrisy, subversiveness, transgression, exclusion, and aggression. She maintains that irony is employed by various social communities and speakers and is always contingent on a specific locus of power. In this way, she investigates irony as a verbal tool that stems from a worldview borne of the structure of power relations. However, her study does not treat “irony as keystone of poetics, a paradigm of criticism, a mode of consciousness or existence that raises questions about the self and the nature of knowledge, a philosophical

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<sup>147</sup> Seery, p. 169.

<sup>148</sup> Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

stance vis-à-vis the universe, an informing principle of personality, or a way of life.”<sup>150</sup>

Oppositely, irony as an attitude in the twentieth century was clarified by Samuel Hynes, who contended insightfully in 1961 that contemporary irony was “a view of life which recognized that experience is open to multiple interpretations, of which no one is simply right, and that the coexistence of incongruities is part of the structure of existence.”<sup>151</sup> In this sense, Hynes is reporting an Anglicized version of French existentialism of figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, both heirs of Hegel and Kierkegaard, and a philosophical worldview that can accurately be said to continue to dominate contemporary life, especially as a driving force behind postmodernity, postcolonialism, as well as their political implications.

An international example might help: *The Economist* ran a lengthy article on irony in December 1999, shortly after and in response to the publication of several books on irony in the United States. The author of the article notes that irony as a means of social engagement is the only way to appropriately deal with the world in a postcolonial era. When there is recognition of all types of value systems, one cannot but take one’s own value system as just another one among them. The attitude this entails—and which the author wholeheartedly recommends—is that of irony. Commenting on an article in *Prospect* by Robert Cooper, Britain’s head of the Asia Department of the Foreign Office, the *Economist* correspondent writes,

Perhaps this is one reason why irony is a particular favourite among British diplomats. It allows them to tease foreigners, without the foreigners realising they are being teased. All the diplomatic proprieties can be observed—but the Brits can still feel quietly superior. In days of yore British superiority was proven by force of arms. Now the point is made with a joke, and a quiet, knowing smile. For as Mr Cooper points out, irony is a distinctly post-imperial quality. While irony aimed at foreigners may seem unpleasantly supercilious, much of the British sense of irony is directed at themselves. Irony is particularly good at puncturing pretension, and at exposing the gap between appearance and reality.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Hutcheon, p. 3.

<sup>151</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Pattern of Hardy’s Poetry*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), pp. 41-42. Quoted in D. C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*. [The Critical Idiom Series No. 13]. (London: Methuen and Company, 1969), p. 31. Reference from Seery, p. 206, n. 21.

<sup>152</sup> “A Quiet Joke at Your Expense,” *The Economist*, December 16, 1999.

Where it is gauche to reveal a sense of superiority, irony communicates without having to show itself outwardly. It reveals itself as a secret wrapped within acceptable expression. This is where it obtains the charge of offending what is “public,” the place where all social groups come together.

More abstractly, many theorists and historians, lightly treading the trail of Hegel and Kierkegaard, have held that the ironic mentality is *the* defining characteristic of the late modern age and the postmodern mind. From Georg Simmel’s early twentieth-century observation that the stance of ironic/aesthetic detachment (“the blasé attitude”) was the principal characteristics of modern urban existence,<sup>153</sup> to Hayden White’s framing of irony as a trope of historiographic representation in the nineteenth century, to Peter Sloterdijk’s brilliant analysis of the cynical mentality in the Weimar Republic and in contemporary social life; Slavoj Žižek’s conviction that cynicism has become the new dominant ideology; Ernst Behler’s conviction that “postmodernity reveals itself as an ironic notion communicating indirectly, by way of circumlocution, configuration, and bafflement”;<sup>154</sup> Andrew Delbanco posited the notion that irony is the mode that arises in America where a sense of evil has vanished; Walter Truett Anderson’s conception of the postmodern-ironist as the leading mentality of the educated West, seen in figures such as Richard Rorty and Thomas Kuhn, both neopragmatists arguing for their audiences to see the social contingency of what had hitherto been accepted as absolute epistemological correspondence. In all of these examples irony becomes a model of interpreting the world or a form of cognition. It can offer an alternative to existing circumstances and patterns of thought, and gain a critical, subversive potential.

For example, to bring the topic back to the mundane, when listening to a speech of this-or-that politician claiming to have the answers to a growing social concern, listeners from Manhattan to Omaha may utter, “Yeah, I’m sure they’ll do that right away.” These utterances are not mere tools of facile sarcastic disagreement, but an entrenched view of political and social life, especially as a view that is concerned with the world outside one’s immediate purview. While lending evidence of this inner rebelliousness towards authority

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<sup>153</sup> See “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” trans. Edward A. Shils in David Levine, ed., *On Individuality and Social Forms*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

<sup>154</sup> Behler, pp. 4-5.

or claims to noble ideals, irony's linguistic, intellectual, and artistic application can provide humor and a confident challenge to the dominant culture, morals, politics, and religion of an age. In short, this worldview can, when fully exercised, challenge established structures of power and existing hierarchies assumed to be given or natural. Most importantly for the upcoming discussion, the ironic mentality is rooted in a belief that *individuals* have the *legitimacy* to challenge those structures of power.

Yet it is here important to recall that while it does lend itself more readily to the progressive minded, irony is empty, tautological, algorithmic; it can go either way. It has no built-in politics. All that is needed for irony to function in a public environment is some kind of social fuel, a moral situation, a charged existential moment. Contrary to the example above, one can equally imagine words from a caricatured magnate in a smoky backroom layer saying that he will “immediately donate fifty percent of his profits to a local charity,” while smirking and chewing on a cigar. Irony in this sense is amoral, even cynical. Either side of a power relationship can engage the ironic/cynical methodology as regards social life.

## 2.2 *Irony & Cynicism*

Given the flexibility of these two terms in some of the above examples and their close relationship as similar outlooks, it is important here to discuss briefly the relationship between the cynic and the ironist, how they overlap, how they differ. This allows us to move forward with a bit more conceptual clarity. It will also create the image of the ironist as a social character as we move into the discussion of his relationship to civic trust.

The ironist performs his social role while internally disagreeing with that role, while knowing that the role is neither authentic nor sincere. Since he resents the fact that he has to do it, he makes caveats that point to his own awareness of the socially constructed nature of his current performance. He senses clearly the distinction between the bourgeois ego in himself (his private self) and the social identity he performs (his role); but, because of the degradation of public life, the latter he does not see as fitting or necessary. As sociologists Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor, in *Escape Attempts* (1992), have written of suburban couples who bask in the superficiality of their social roles:

When the door is shut at night, and the two children are safely in bed, husband and wife turn to each other and laugh. They are subscribers to the new self-consciousness, apostles of awareness. Cynically they deride those who share bourgeois arrangements with them, but who do not see the joke...of their apparent suburbanity.<sup>155</sup>

Roles for the ironist are “fake,” or, to use the Salingerism, “phony.” They represent to the ironist an outmoded way of being in the social world. The real way of being, of “being oneself,” is a way that is divested of the self as something that has a social identity (a mask), but rather, as someone who reveals his or her true self, that is, one’s “deep-seated” self-interest and vulnerability. There are no real heroes for the ironist, for every image of heroism or perfection is “hiding” some flaw or insecurity.

The contemporary ironist senses that his own words and performances are insufficient to express the totality of his experience, which, at varying times, he feels compelled to express or withhold. He senses somewhere in himself that all things are now derivative. Because of the *intellectual* validation of his view that all other views are equally useful, that none is closer to a metaphysical truth, his life at times seems to him merely a copy of another life; irony helps him to distance himself from this sense. He expresses this very personal awareness of derivativeness through strings of disclaimers, deprecations, and self-observations—all caveats that attempt to tell the people he talks to that his consciousness is always able to get behind itself, to see as contingent that which was presented as absolute, which is a cardinal sin for the (culturally astute, cosmopolitan, most usually educated) ironist. To believe what one says in “large” terms of moral values or truth claims is to be taken as evidence of one’s naïve understanding on the multifaceted world of as many “valid” perspectives as there are sets of human eyes.

These caveats are supposed to short-circuit or head-off the interpretation of his comments or behaviors by others insofar as he attempts to control both sides of communicative situation. In doing so, the ironist, while self-consciously aware of the absence or metaphysical impossibility of a “correct” interpretation—and his knowledge of the knowledge that there is none—still yearns to control the totality of the communicative situation. That is, he longs for the rest of the metaphysical certainty of there being “no

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<sup>155</sup> Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor, *Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life*. (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 47-48.

metaphysical certainty.” As such, he lives the predicament of the post-metaphysical individual, aware of the constructedness of social (and other) realities, which by extension, includes his own identity. Importantly, the consciousness of his derivativeness is simultaneously an effort to express sincerity, a mode of being which still holds value for him because it is an alignment of his inner life with outer expression and is thus a marker of integrity, of wholeness. He attempts to get around the confines of language. While discrediting belief and attempts by others at faith, he holds very deeply the belief that he can come home to himself, that he can arrive at a stopping point. He desperately wishes to arrive at a place where he need not pull the rug out from under himself due to intellectual protocol (“political” or “postmodern” correctness), an unceasing recognition of the contingency of everything. It is this respite for which he secretly strives, for he is, at heart, a person of religious feeling who wishes to be delivered home.

The cynic, on the other hand, has given up entirely on performing a social role and on hope in general. Where the ironist remarks, the cynic disregards. In this sense, because he says what he feels and thinks and is not confined by the whisperings of the superego, the cynic is perceived as more *honest* than the ironist. His honesty is nearly always painful because his assumptions about the operating principles of the social world are brutish. He likewise conceives of himself as the most authentic kind of person because he expresses truths that others are either too unaware to know or are too timid to reveal. Whereas the ironist retains some sort of secret hope for the future, the cynic lives in a retired state of hopelessness—things will never get better; he sees things “realistically.” The Slovenian social theorist Slavoj Žižek, like Sloterdijk, holds that cynicism represents the commodification of a critical strategy once useful for opposing a dominant ideology. Cynicism, now being the dominant ideology, is equivalent to the Marxist version of “false consciousness.”<sup>156</sup>

In contrast, then, there is a performative aspect to the ironist in social situations, for he still faintly believes in the public. Where the cynic is perceptibly finished with trying to be coy, witty, or insightful in public, the ironist has interiorized his disgust (introjected it on himself, which results in melancholy) and re-presented it with a smile; he frequently gets off the best joke of the party. The ironist realizes the necessity of roles, though he is

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<sup>156</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. (London: Verso, 1989).



pained by their contingency. Oppositely, the cynic avoids playing a social role, and he avoids the party equally as much as he avoids introspection about “serious matters,” because the world’s just not worth it, and those at the party, he believes, are all somehow guided by illusions, particularly that being among others can provide some measure of happiness. He is alienated from politics because he does not see any alternative to fill the social space left empty by failed political hopes, by failed promises of Enlightenment progress.

Cynicism is therefore not as secretly morose as the ironic stance, because it has fully abandoned a belief in the Enlightenment’s promise of increasing returns on broad social investments, such as public education, the alleviation of poverty, or the redistribution of wealth, and public charity. He therefore has nothing to lament. The Nietzschean “death of God” was a welcomed event for the cynic, because it finally revealed things as they are: a Hobbesian nightmare of competition and survival concealed by “manners” and mores, blood-soaked lessons cloaked in the garb of morality. There never was a God, claims the cynic; it was always just a ruse by the powerful scheming to keep their power. There are no more illusions. Defined briefly, modern cynicism, according to the political scientist William Chaloupka, is the “condition of lost belief.”<sup>157</sup> It is defined by Sloterdijk as “enlightened false consciousness. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain.”<sup>158</sup> Sloterdijk’s brilliant analysis here deserves further mention.

Some of the motivations behind the appearance of cynicism and irony on the postmodern stage, according to Sloterdijk (and the other analysts of the postmodern: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Jameson, Habermas), are a widespread mistrust of politicians and a broad loss of faith in the political institutions they engender, a persistent suspicion towards Enlightenment discourses about rationality and progress on the grounds of their dehumanizing and totalizing effects, the resurgence of interest in mystical accounts of the world, and a nostalgic reinvention of lost innocence. These broad characteristics of the

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<sup>157</sup> Chaloupka, p. xiv.

<sup>158</sup> Sloterdijk, p. 5. The term “unhappy consciousness,” notes the *Critique’s* translator, Michael Eldred, refers to an important subchapter of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). In Hegel, the unhappy consciousness is “the consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being.” (Introduction, B. Self-Consciousness, IV., B., p. 126.)

postmodern age, as an age conscious of the nondeliverance of social promises, gave rise to the everyday cynical personality. And he is, according to Sloterdijk, today's mass figure who is disillusioned, who sees clearly—with Nietzsche and the plethora of business management manuals or political advisors—the Machiavellian workings of power. The ends justify the means, at all costs.

The cynical mentality is one “of strategy and tactics, suspicion and disinhibition, pragmatics and instrumentalism—all this in the hands of a political ego that thinks first and foremost about itself, an ego that is inwardly adroit and outwardly armored.”<sup>159</sup> The metaphysical illusions of God, Universe, Theory, Object, Subject, History, Spirit, Nothingness are for the cynic “nouns for young people,”<sup>160</sup> not the way the world works, fictions that have lost all credibility because of an Enlightenment that, after erecting them, also inspired their destruction. So the subject shifts from a belief in the general goodness of others, from a faith in intersubjective communicative rationality (Habermas) to a individually oriented, survivalist mode of existence.

“Psychologically,” writes Sloterdijk, “present-day cynics can be understood as borderline melancholics, who can keep their symptoms of depression under control and can remain more or less able to work.” He continues that

indeed, this is the essential point in modern cynicism: the ability of its bearers to work—in spite of anything that may happen, and especially, after anything might happen....A certain chic bitterness provides an undertone to its activity....For cynics are not dumb, and every now and then they see the nothingness to which everything leads.<sup>161</sup>

In this sense the cynic is the progeny of a modernity that, having lost belief in an afterlife

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<sup>159</sup> Sloterdijk, p. xxix. If television advertisements have anything to say about the *Zeitgeist*, then a recent Nike commercial says it all. Flashing to different sports stars in a black room lit by a stark overhead light, each player, in slow motion, goes from helmetless to helmeted, unmasked to masked, each version of which is increasingly and violently defensive: spikes, barbs, some in the shapes intimating armor or monsters. Indeed, this is defense of the head, of the seat of the self, against the violence perceived to be done against it. Importantly, there is not one other sports object—a ball or otherwise, save a baseball bat—in the advertisement to say that the Nike accouterments should actually be used for “play.” No, this is serious business. Sports metaphors have always been with American culture, but in recent years, as American life (in foreign and domestic policy, too) increasingly resembles an extreme game of survival, they are all the more ubiquitous—and apt.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

and a religious view of the world and his own life, faces the abyss and must go on nonetheless. This description, “chic bitterness,” is perhaps the best way to describe the attitude of those who “get it,” or do not. Though young people are far from dead, it is oddly a gallows’ humor we share.

For the social critic and law student Jedediah Purdy, author of *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (1999)—to be discussed at length in Chapter Three—the ironist is a somewhat lighter, more effete character. Purdy’s ironist is at ease in banter, capable of work and success, but “for all its ready laughter, the ironic [person is] secretly sad.”<sup>162</sup> He is more bubbly than morose, more skittish than weighty. Yet Kierkegaard defined the ironist, derived from his own personal traits as a young man, as containing a secret melancholy about the world hidden behind a facade of joviality and sarcasm. Given the varied accounts of the ironist and the cynic, it is only slightly easier to see a difference, even after trying to train out distinctions, between these two declensions of a post-metaphysical character.

The most useful distinction I have made, however, because it has the most effect, because it casts the two modes into higher relief, is that the ironist *does* retain some sort of social hope and harbors desires for trust and a “return” to something better than what is. Irony is the ironist’s public method of retaining hope. Sloterdijk lends a nod in this direction such that “in the new cynicism a detached negativity comes through that scarcely allows itself any hope, *at most a little irony and pity.*”<sup>163</sup> Though not made explicit, there is a hint here in Sloterdijk’s mention of irony that would intimate its inclination toward hopefulness, perhaps because of its philosophical association with freedom, which always strives into the future to realize itself.

In retaining some measure of optimism, then, the ironist is oriented towards the future, which is why any current incivility he displays is justified to him by the ends of a more honest society. Protecting the vision of a better society and culture within himself, he utilizes irony and sarcasm in order to cajole honesty out of what he perceives to be a repressed or dishonest bourgeois mentality, a forest of masks, an implicit and eternal hypocrisy of values. In this sense, irony holds “a conviction so deep...an emotion so

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<sup>162</sup> Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*. (New York: Knopf, 1999), p. 19.

<sup>163</sup> Sloterdijk, p. 6. Emphasis mine.

strong, as to be able to command itself, and to suppress its natural tone, in order to vent itself with greater force.”<sup>164</sup> Though he often avoids speaking directly what he means, the ironist is a sworn enemy of hypocrisy—of speaking the opposite of what one does.

Chaloupka, too, lends implicit credence to cynicism’s internal functioning to irony’s, such that “the cynic acquires an inverse knowledge. Cynics know what words mean, but they also know that these meanings may be manipulated.”<sup>165</sup> Further, behind his mask of “selfishness and diffidence,” writes Andrew Delbanco, “[the ironist] reveals himself to be an incorruptible moralist.”<sup>166</sup>

While the ironist persistently creates social distance in his relations, he simultaneously fetishizes “closeness” and “intimacy.” Because they are fetishized, intimate relations take on a quality of emotional reservation (“fear of intimacy”), where the opposite is true of public interactions, such that, as Richard Sennett has astutely observed about the slow erasure of public roles of the twentieth century, “social relationships of all kinds are real, believable, and authentic the closer they approach the inner psychological concerns of each person.”<sup>167</sup> And this desire to “develop one’s personality through experiences of closeness with others”<sup>168</sup> makes the ironist more self-conscious than the cynic, who is pathologically resigned.

Thus the ironist’s psychological and social resonances of maintaining this distant hope play out in the character formation and life choices he makes. The cynic, who has given up, and for whom self-reflection or social reflection is hardly worth the effort, has abandoned all that is “unrealistic,” like believing that things will ever change for the better—for society or for himself as a hermetic unit of that society. He sits on the sidelines and mocks those who even remotely believe in any kind of “progress” or change. Life for the cynic is a pseudo-Nietzschean eternal return—nothing changes, hope is foolish, and history always smashes down human striving, itself characterized by vanity, stupidity, and wrong-headedness. The only way to win is to play by the unspoken or cloaked

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<sup>164</sup> C. Thirwall, “On the irony of Sophocles,” *The Philological Museum 1832-3*, ed. Christopher Stray (London: Thoemmes Press, 2005), p. 434.

<sup>165</sup> Chaloupka, p. 11.

<sup>166</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), p. 217. Delbanco is here referring to the ironist specifically through the model of Humphrey Bogart’s public persona.

<sup>167</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 260.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

Machiavellian rules, which, depending on the relative power of the cynic, he will either bail out, perform in politics, or critique in culture—each with equal vindictiveness, each with a smile to those who don't know; each with a coy smirk to those who do. We are too familiar already with prominent politicians who do this.

An additional note on the distinction between these two related modes of social being: where American and British social psychologists and political scientists use the term *cynicism* to talk about the public's attitude toward politics and civic engagement, it is fair, even given this place-holder distinction, to interpret their uses of cynicism as irony for the following reason: when they talk about these attitudes, they utilize standardized assessments, such as the General Social Survey, to ask if the state of the country's moral situation, its civic health, is on the "right track" or not. Commonly referred to as the "right track/wrong track" poll, and recognized as a crucial political indicator, this line of questioning assumes—on both the part of the questioner and responder—that there is a feasible way to get back on to the right track by some means. There is implicit hope and belief in the corrective possibility by dint of human effort and, importantly, commitment to change. Such responders are thus more aptly described as both retaining hope and exhibiting disappointment or sadness at the current state of affairs should they hold that the country—and thus, to some measure, their own identity—is on the wrong track.

As such, this is less a hard-edged cynicism, which lacks the progressive belief of modern American liberalism, than it is an ironic detachment or skepticism toward current public life; it displays moral and psychological ambivalence. Therefore, when I refer in the coming pages to political science surveys and commentary by academics and politicians about voter cynicism, I will be interpreting that to mean ironic disengagement, for as the social theorist Timothy Bewes has observed, "in the cultural climate of the 1990s, [the] cynical stance appears under the sign of 'postmodern irony.'"<sup>169</sup>

### 2.3 *The Ironist as A Social Character*

As a social character, then, the ironist seems, firstly, to be borne of a strange elixir of both shared idealism and simultaneous infantilism. For the ironist of today there is

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<sup>169</sup> Bewes, p. 37.

something about the outside world—mainly taken to mean bourgeois, middle-class American culture and its political leaders—that is corrupt, stupid, tasteless, and kitschy; and in politics: hypocritical, untruthful. The ironist distances himself from these things via verbal and psychological aloofness or disengagement, making quippy remarks that bolster his sense of superiority—intellectual, moral, or aesthetic—and, in general, remains interior and self-conscious in his social dealings. He reads all social cues for behavioral adjustments—rank, race, intelligence, like-sensibility.<sup>170</sup> He is on constant alert of the difference between his interior life and the world around him, which makes him oppressively self-aware. When he listens, he is suspicious that there is always “something else” going on, usually some sort of an ulterior motive or judgement. The corollary to this, of course, is that often when the ironist speaks, there usually is something else going on. His perception exists within a kind of “skeptical closedness,” a “holding” of himself back. Purdy’s quintessential ironist was seen in the television character of “Jerry Seinfeld”—the wisecracking, emotionally detached, sarcastic, invulnerable, urbane, and affable yet frequently disgusted bachelor living in New York City.<sup>171</sup> As Elise Harris wrote of the general character type,

“the ironist” is a stock character in contemporary culture: the smartass, the snarky guy (or gal) who goes beyond funny to bilious and bitter, arrogant, sarcastic, making fun of people who aren’t in the club. Someone who found in high school that intelligence couldn’t bring popularity. Someone who thinks pointing out stupidity constitutes humor.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Apologies for yet another *Simpsons* reference, but the example is perfectly illustrative of this point. In an episode where nerdish eight-year-old Lisa Simpson meets some new kids at a beach resort, the small group is portrayed as laid back and very cool. They begin to talk with Lisa and comment on her clothing; “nice hat,” the girl in the group says. Lisa’s internal voice immediately starts in with an analysis of the tone a inflection of the comment. As if Lisa turned on a computer-virus prevention system, her internal voice says, “Scanning for sarcasm ... and ... wait ... (gasp) ... none found!” At this point, knowing she is safe from a barrage of esteem-destroying criticism, Lisa answers the girl and begins talking to the group.

<sup>171</sup> *Seinfeld* was arguably the most popular sitcom in American television history, undoubtedly so in the 1990s, before it ended on May 14, 1998. Re-runs of the show remain immensely popular, and the DVD set of all seasons was recently released for the holiday season in 2004 to great media fanfare.

<sup>172</sup> Harris, “Infinite Jest.” The sort of characterization of the ironist as someone who is getting back at the in-groups is an interesting observation. The spate of irony-laden movies about high school in recent years by Hollywood producers and New York writers eerily confirms the resentment Harris identifies. *American Pie*, *American Pie 2*, *Mean Girls*, *Bring It On*, and a host of others revisit high-school years in a triumphant spirit where the nerds and geeks and outcasts take their revenge on the popular cliques of students. The gist of these films is that if you stick to you

The ironist judges and disdains because the world does not measure up to his ideas about how it should be; it does not measure up to the standards he has set both for himself and the society in which he lives. He is in the world but wishes not to be of it. He holds certain views about society that are different than its normative demands, yet he is indistinguishable from other members of society. The ironist is camouflaged. He is in it, but not of it, critical yet involved. “Impersonal, but friendly.”

Additionally, he takes his cues for certain behaviors, likes, dislikes, and preferences from the world that he often denounces. Yet the ironist also makes little attempt to better the social world because he lacks belief in a credible and shared moral vision. He does, however, have this sort of unified moral vision as a desire; it is from this stance by which he judges the imperfection of the present environment. So, though he remains secretly idealistic, he is also infantile; he wants the world to conform to the inner standards which he has for it. He “holds” himself in composure at all times, hoping to be the example that he wishes to see realized. This can at times evidence as a sort of rigidity of personality and an occasionally stern disposition. It is more often projected, however, as lighthearted disagreement, especially among those he does not know, among those whose cues he has not yet read—those who remain opaque to him.

*Enthusiastic* dreams and liberal visions of a better future for the ironist seem like silly ramblings and impossible achievements, because they would require compromise of his inner measures. Compromise makes sense to him only as an intellectual necessity for personalities in a democracy; he does not want to actually make them, for, as an ironist, “irony is the intellectual’s only sentiment.”<sup>173</sup> Those who speak these hopes, who are activists for these hopes, the ironist sees as misled, for they don’t see the way the world “really works,” they misplace and misunderstand *political* enthusiasm, having reserved it themselves for the trivial. It is in this political mode that the ironist most closely comes to being a cynic. He doubts the possibility of the dreams’ realization in the world by dint of human effort alone. Yet he cannot help being inspired by public historical figures who have changed the world by their own deep wells of persistence and moral tenacity. This

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inner conscience and ignore the teasing and unpopularity, everything works out for the best, and your enemies will learn something from you that will turn out to be a valuable life lesson.

<sup>173</sup> C. Newman, *The Post-Modern Aura*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985), p. 43.

creates an inward tension between belief and suspicion that is with him at all times; his view of human nature is ambivalent.

The ironist finds himself, therefore, harboring a vague feeling that he is waiting for something big and objective to happen—a catastrophe or disaster—something that would jar him from his composure and allow him to momentarily lose his self-consciousness, to resolve this ambivalence and allow him the peace of resolution.<sup>174</sup> In the meantime, until such an event occurs, he finds himself distracted by the dramas played out in his immediate circle of friends and in the passing of time with entertainment, often viewed with an ironic eye, or “anthropologically.” As the novelist David Foster Wallace has written, television is an agent of “great despair and stasis in U.S. culture....[so we] try to disinfect [our]selves...by watching TV with weary irony.”<sup>175</sup> In the short-term, however, survivalist scenarios (indicatively, “reality” television), or dark comedic situations confirm the ironist’s beliefs in the near fruitlessness of all endeavor and the ruthlessness of everyday life, whether in a remote jungle or, importantly, in the urban environment, where the ideas for these types of programming emerge, and mostly where the ironist lives.<sup>176</sup> But the ironist is too smart for reality television; he knows it is all constructed, and this is perhaps what is most real to him—the truth of that construction rather than the

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<sup>174</sup> The end-of-the-world movies that appear from time to time in American culture, such as the box-office smash *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), about a quickly onsetting ice age, filled at first with floods and hurricanes, followed by a polar freeze, could be read as a mass release from this sort of self-holding; and, similarly, a joining of varied individuals under the shared experience of weather. *The Day After Tomorrow* can thus be seen as the filmic equivalent—and hyperbolic extension—of the neighborly over-the-fence “horrible weather we’re having, isn’t it?” Such anticipation can also be seen in the Christian apocalyptic tradition—and the millenarian mind—which has buzzing in the background an eager awaiting of the final showdown between good and evil and the return of Christ to reign for one thousand years. *Apocalypse* comes from the Greek, meaning to “uncover” or “disclose.” Given the statistical evidence of the number of Americans that find credible explanations of the world that include an Apocalypse and a literal God and Devil, this kind of expectation is perhaps more palpable than in places without it, like most of Europe.

<sup>175</sup> David Foster Wallace from the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* quoted in Robert Fulford’s “Column About Irony” in the Canadian *Globe and Mail*, September 18, 1999.

<sup>176</sup> The wildly popular program *The Apprentice*, featuring millionaire real-estate mogul and 1980s poster boy, Donald Trump, reveals the rules and personality traits “necessary” to succeed in a hyper-competitive business environment. Television programs such as *Temptation Island*, *Survivor*, *Average Joe*, *Joe Millionaire*, *The Mole*, and *The Swan*, as well, do their part to lay bare the personalities required of one to construct to “survive” the “reality” of any given situation. Mostly the values and behaviors adopted are Machiavellian in nature; the programs highlight the aspects of lying, plotting, strategy, and sneaky one-upmanship as the determining factors for survival in any of the given environments, be they urban or island.



truth of survival scenarios. It is certainly the perception of which makes him feel as though he “sees through” the illusion. He sees these programs from afar, as survivalist American middlebrow, though he is “guiltily” drawn in. Alternatively, some entertainment attempts to offer moments of hope or beauty that—if they emotionally effect him—are immediately dismissed by the ironist (who is primarily an aesthete) as kitschy, Hollywood, or schlock. He is embarrassed by being moved because he conceives of his own sensibility as more refined; to be moved is to have relaxed composure.

In daily life, when he is not among friends, the ironist hides much of his disdain and sadness for this world of competition, brute utility, and widely shared loss of credible political or moral belief. Somehow, though he knows that he’s seen it happen in movies and in books, in his own national history, he feels relatively powerless to change social and political reality. Tellingly, Mark Edmundson, English professor at the University of Virginia, observed in a *Harper’s Magazine* article in September 1997 that his students’ *Weltbild*—having not yet fully formed the outer crust of ironic sociability—was “a despondent place, whose sad denizens drift from coffee bar to Prozac dispensary, unfired by ideals and the glowing image of what one might become.”<sup>177</sup>

In this sense there is a disconnect here between inner reality and surface—that is, social—functioning. This recapitulates the structure of rhetorical irony itself: the surface (words) belies the meaning of the sentence or phrase containing the words. On the surface the ironist is witty and adept; yet a constant melancholy follows just behind him. For the young Kierkegaard, the pre-Christian ironist, this combination took the form of an active social life that temporarily distracted him from his melancholy. He writes in his *Journals*, “I have just returned from a party of which I was the life and soul; wit poured from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me—but I went away—and the dash should be as long as the earth’s orbit-----  
----- and wanted to shoot myself.”<sup>178</sup>

Compare this to Purdy’s description of the Seinfeldian personality who “goes to the party and, while refusing to be quite of it, gets off the best line of the evening.”<sup>179</sup> More than a

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<sup>177</sup> Mark Edmundson, “The Uses of A Liberal Arts Education: Advice for Bored College Students,” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 1997, p. 48.

<sup>178</sup> Kierkegaard, *Journals*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>179</sup> Purdy, p. 10.

century and a half separate these two observations. For all of its radical contingency, there is something tremendously stable about the personality traits of the ironist, who for his own skepticism over a stable world remains “committed” (though never deliberately or consciously) to his worldview. Furthermore, for Kierkegaard the ironist’s personality as a whole is such that

its relation to the world is never at any moment to be in relation to the world, its relation is such that at the moment this about to commence, it draws back with a skeptical closedness. But this reserve is the reflex of personality into itself that is clearly abstract and void of content. The ironical personality is therefore merely the outline of a personality.<sup>180</sup>

The ironist is reduced in his personality to a mask, to sheer role. The directionality of consciousness in Kierkegaard’s conception of the ironist is turned inward, forever trying to catch itself. In doing so, the ironist’s bonds with the “outside” world transform its contents into caricatures; the meaning of events, persons, and objects fades into a shadowy landscape of which he does not feel a part. He is a spectator.

Through his detachment and distancing, the ironist hopes for both a feeling of control and for freedom. Distancing allows him to gain partial perspective on an otherwise overwhelming social world and also permits a totalizing view in order to attempt control of that world, a feeling of freedom from the complexity and aggression within it. This leads to a radical simplification and conceptual leveling of complex situations, which transforms the world into simplified forms and types. And in this way, to broaden the terms, the ironist is an unwitting agent in the process of *rationalization*—increasing intellectual control over unknown aspects of the world through intellect alone, technology, and rational planning, as opposed to religious or mystical experience, subjective understanding, which he reserves for internal experience.

While he participates in the outward process of absorbing the world through the function of thought alone, he does so unwittingly, and he loathes that rationalization takes place, for that which is not yet rationalized (the mystical, sublime, unexpected, the aesthetic experience) is exactly what permits him escape from weighty self-consciousness and from feelings of social oppression, derivativeness, repetition, and inauthenticity from

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<sup>180</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 242.

being controlled from the outside. Because he normally feels thrown around by social forces and decisions that he has not autonomously made, his inward turn is an attempt at an escape to inward freedom, to the locus of control. It is in these sorts of situations where, as Kierkegaard notes, “the subject emancipates himself from the constraint imposed on him by the continuity of life, whence it must be said of the ironist that he ‘cuts loose.’”<sup>181</sup> That is, he cuts loose of the externals of his situations and willfully leans towards what he perceives as an inner freedom, what he has experienced as both loneliness and freedom simultaneously.

But when that feeling of inner freedom is expressed outwardly, when this essentially spiritual attempt enters the secular environment, it becomes something other than disengagement and inwardness; it makes its appearance in a costume that is widely understood. When Kierkegaard uses the phrase “cuts loose,” he was undoubtedly portending the American actor Kevin Bacon, whose ability to “cut loose” in the 1984 movie *Footloose* was aided by the soundtrack title-song by Kenny Loggins, which contains the lyrics “Now I gotta cut loose/foot loose/ kick off your Sunday shoes,” and so on.<sup>182</sup> Though a superficially ridiculous, linguistic-only relationship (and clearly referenced here because it is such), the two terms are internally related. I promise that this will become less ridiculous than it initially sounds.

In *Footloose*, the main character, Ren, is a Chicago-born, cityslicking outsider whose parents move him to a small Midwestern community where dancing is outlawed. But because he will not quell his passion for dancing and being rambunctious, Ren is seen as an outsider. By remaining on the outside, set aside from the “square” bourgeois culture of the adults around him, the character, though passionate and enthusiastic, quickly obtains and maintains a “cool” aura. That is, he both *creates* a desire in others—some for dancing like him and some for him sexually—and simultaneously *deflects* that desire by remaining autonomous and aloof. As he lures others into the ecstasy of dancing and being rebellious (always against the wishes of the austere adult community, often with professions such as the preacher, lawyer, or banker), the character wins over the other teens, while he himself

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., pp. 272-3.

<sup>182</sup> The reader who hit pre-teenhood in the 1980s will recognize this reference as horribly out of place, but oddly welcome. They will also now try to remember the rest of the lyrics. They will not remember anything but the chorus.

“softens,” and allows others to “get to know him.” That is, others get to see what is on the “inside” come outside in a way that is less performative, less cool. They get to view his authenticity, to see beneath cool.

There is an interesting contrast here, however bizarre the reference and segue: the distancing enacted that permits a sort of “cool” remove, which balances a feeling of individuation with the possibility of its discontinuance, also creates an eventual feeling of unbearable social alienation. If not overcome, this feeling leads to anger at the broader social world for not attempting to bring the subject back into the fold; he resents them for rejecting him. So, the cool outsider attempts to reenter the social fold by luring others out of the iron cage—often through some Dionysian situation involving sexuality, violence/fighting, dancing, or some other activity that allows the “uncool” person to see how their lives are trapped by the confines of bourgeois living, how they are devoid of a feeling for life and passion.<sup>183</sup> By both creating desire and deflecting that desire, the cool agent guarantees that his distance retains some stasis. This constant tension—the ability to be distant and create the want of closeness—is the achievement of the cool self. It can hardly be disputed that cool is one of the most marketable and desired items in America.

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<sup>183</sup> A cultural emanation of such a desire to “get in touch” with the more primal regions of feeling is the movie *Fight Club* (1999) which sees a clandestine group of young men—professional and skilled laborers—who meet in secret locations to beat each other to a pulp because it makes them feel more alive. Slavoj Žižek writes of the film and its culminating moment: “In our alienated society only physical violence can bring us into direct contact with each other....The ultimate scene for me is around the middle of the film, when Edward Norton goes to his boss and beats himself up. It’s a terrible scene. But the way I see it...it’s the necessary first step towards liberation....The hypothesis of the film is right in the sense that you can’t come directly to genuine political awareness. You need—to use a piece of terminology—those ‘vanishing mediators,’ that interim stage of uncontrolled violence, that perhaps, though also perhaps not, will help your transformation to political awareness....I think it’s the first Hollywood film to show the dark side of liberation.” Quoted in “MP>TV,” *Spectator Magazine*, June 2002, pp. 68-69. It is interesting to note that the main character, a businessman who one believes is led into the fight club culture by a rough outsider-type played by Brad Pitt, is in fact schizophrenic; he led himself into the culture of fighting and out of the stultifying life of his previous existence.

## 2.4 Cool

Cool somehow comes off most convincingly in America—and it is where cool and ironic disengagement as a mentality are internally related. And looking at the emanations and behavior of cool allows us not to move too far into the ethereal and treat “ironic detachment” as some invisible element that comes out only at night to wreak havoc on our social fabric. As the art historian and critic Robert Storr has said about the American painter Alex Katz, whose flat images of beach goers and Hampton parties exude a blasé, stylish distance:

Cool is an essentially American characteristic....In matters of style, the United States is truly the land of opportunity. You don't have to be rich, pedigreed, or exquisitely dandified to be cool. Quite the opposite, too obvious a display of class isn't classy at all; the aristocracy of cool is wholly self-made. Cool is an impeccable street-smart formality in a country where, but for spontaneous etiquette, you might bump into anybody.<sup>184</sup>

That is, you might go from being a stranger to not being one quite unexpectedly, might shift from private to public in an instant. As an attitude, cool is the resolute ability to maintain a certain cosmopolitan detachment, to be unruffled, unmoved; to be cool is to be poised. It is to keep hold of oneself and to have the ego introjected as a monitoring tool that at once keeps tabs on one's responses and disassembles exteriorities.

In this way, cool is a sort of well-rehearsed civility, a hard-won accomplishment, though it wishes to be seen as natural. From James Dean to Snoop Dog, the personality of cool is immediately detectable by its unflappability and entrenched antagonism towards authority and social rules. It flirts with illegality, but not in a way that would make it passionately rebellious, for too much emotion and commitment to a goal are patently *not* cool. As such, cool is a managed appearance, a social performance, a strategy of social being, a role that is projecting a non-role. It is distance from the sorts of concerns held by most others in “square” society. It attempts through nonchalance or disdain or wry commentary to rise above these concerns, and it mostly always succeeds.

This is what cool displays, but arguably not what it actually experiences or feels.

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<sup>184</sup> Robert Storr, “The Rules of the Game,” in *Alex Katz: American Landscape*. (Baden-Baden: Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden, 1995), p. 27.

Some have argued of the typically cool ironist that “[they] only appear cool and restrained on the surface as a way to mask actual hostility and emotional involvement.”<sup>185</sup> It is this disjunction, this necessity of maintaining the private sphere and the social mask, that places it squarely in the modern era—it enacts a mask precisely so it can attempt to project that it is not a mask. For cool as a social attitude has the near-algorithmic function of expressing the opposite of what it feels or experiences—hence its ironic character. Most often this takes the form of nonchalance or dispassion when a subject is being internally humiliated and offended; such a response disarms and defuses aggressors because they do not expect this degree of disengagement from immediate stimuli. In this way, again, cool is both a defense and projection.

A recent investigation of linguistic irony by communication theorists L. Anolli, R. Ciceri, and M.G. Infantino illustrates this function of cool (as a mode utilizing ironic interactions) such that

irony emerges with the function of mask, as a social declination of the self, of the context (considered from a linguistic perspective as indexicality), and of interaction management. Ironic strategy is considered as an agreed pretence (evading the censure in a socially correct way), as a guarantee of reserve (safeguarding the interpersonal space), and as a relational ambiguity (re-negotiating the meaning).<sup>186</sup>

Irony in all of these senses is a method of social distancing. It thus defends to short-circuit expectations of response, and it projects slight disdain, evident in a Bogart-like upturn of the lip or a smirk. “Wipe that smirk off your face,” says the parent or authority to the young adult beginning his journey into cool—an simultaneously into “himself.” To journey into cool is simultaneously to awaken to the freedom of subjective internal space.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Satterfield, L., p. 160; C. H. Holman and W. Harmon, *A Handbook of Literature*, Fifth Edition. (New York: Macmillan), p.264. Quoted in Hutcheon, p. 41.

<sup>186</sup> L. Anolli, R. Ciceri, M.G. Infantino, “Behind the ‘Dark Glasses’: Irony As A Strategy for Implicit Communication,” *Theory and Psychology* (Calgary, Canada), in press as of January 2005.

<sup>187</sup> It is no mistake that as adolescents notoriously begin to become “distant” from their parents during their teenage years, that they are simultaneously learning how to be “cool.” In a culture obsessed with this sort of social distance, influences from televised instances of cool—of the afterimages of Romantic remove seen in so many famous faces and scenarios of social antagonism, rebellion—permeate the consciousness and form models of social character. They

Cool's primary objective in all of this, importantly, is not necessarily to *provoke* anger or social rejection, but to feel free internally, to feel self-possessed, to relieve itself of having to respond to interpersonal expectation. The goal of cool is to create an impenetrable core, total autonomy, and freedom from need. As Kierkegaard writes, "When an ironist exhibits himself as other than he actually is, it might seem that his purpose were to induce others to believe this. His actual purpose, however, is merely to feel free, and this he is through irony. Irony, therefore, has no external purpose but is self-purposive."<sup>188</sup> From this self-regarding characterization, irony gleams a self-absorbed, narcissistic quality.

I would like to discuss this attitude further as it relates to the worldview of ironic disengagement, specifically with reference to the eminently readable *Cool Rules: Anatomy of An Attitude*, by two British non-academics, Dick Pountain and David Robins.<sup>189</sup> While the authors did not directly contribute to the political discussion of irony and civic trust in the American mind (i.e. the text did not enter the public discussion of ironic disengagement and the American social health), they nonetheless focused on American culture as the spawning grounds for the now-ubiquitous social strategy of cool. Because of their insights into the political implications of cool, I have included their comments and observations relevant to this topic. I will do the same with the sociologists Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, whose study on the "cool pose" observes survival strategies in the African-American urban emotional environment, as well as those of Peter N. Stearns, the eminent historian that indeed lends great insight into the origins of emotion-management of the early twentieth century, which helped, in part, to create the desirability of cool.

For Pountain and Robins, cool is ironic detachment and way to fend off humiliation. They claim that the multi-pronged cultural genesis of this attitude comes

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are nearly impossible to resist not solely because they are so alluring, but often because they are necessary to adorn. They stir the self's desire for autonomy from all exterior determinations, for ironic remove from the mundane. The anthropologists James Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber remark that irony, as it had for Kierkegaard, signals an "awakening of subjectivity, that is an awakening of the conception of oneself as a subject, something separate from, and undetermined by, a certain immediately given historical entity," *Irony in Action*, p. 4.

<sup>188</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 273.

<sup>189</sup> Dick Pountain and David Robins. *Cool Rules: The Anatomy of an Attitude*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

from the African-American slave trade, the *sprezzurata* of Italian courtiers, and the famous reserve of the English aristocracy and Romantic poets of the nineteenth century. Though a difficult task to prove in the first instance, the authors claim that when enslaved Africans were faced with unbelievable cruelty on American side of the Atlantic, and they would often remain non-responsive to verbal abuse; reacting harshly would only earn them more corporal and verbal cruelty. This response, though removed and internally free, was perceived by white owners as submission. Such a stance was “handed down” as a defensive mechanism, Pountain and Robins claim, through the generations. Famously, it was Norman Mailer who had a similar take on the precursor to cool, the 1950s attitude of Hip, a stance he believed originated with African Americans under extreme situations, because politically “the negro has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries.”<sup>190</sup>

The important logic here is less the historical validity of the theory than that Pountain and Robins see cool, like Lasch, whom they discuss, as having a protective psychological component, as being an adaptive response to a harsh environment, as a “permanent state of private rebellion.”<sup>191</sup> The origins of cool, they claim, lie in “the experience of oppression,” and cool was originally part of a

‘survival mentality,’ a defense mechanism invented to cope with continuous exploitation, discrimination, and disadvantage: it deployed ironic detachment and emotional impassivity to enable its bearer to withstand the domineering orders, abuse, and insults of the overseer without succumbing to depression or rage.<sup>192</sup>

This stance can be seen playing out early on in life among urban youth today confronted with grave economic and social disadvantage, as a means of maintaining integrity. The investigations in *Cool Pose* (1993), by sociologists Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, look at the ways in which the psychological function of cool helped to protect the psyches of young black urban males in the 1990s. Majors and Billson found that the

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<sup>190</sup> Norman Mailer, “The White Negro,” *Advertisements for Myself* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992 [originally published in 1957]), p. 340.

<sup>191</sup> Pountain and Robins, p. 19.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.



cool pose represents a fundamental structuring of the psyche—the cool mask belies the rage held in check beneath the surface. For others it is the adoption of a uniquely creative style that serves as a sign of belonging and stature. Black males have learned to use posing and posturing to communicate power, toughness, detachment, and style-self. They have adopted a ‘third eye’ that reads interpersonal situations with a special acuity. They have cultivated a keen sense of what to say, and how and when to say it, in order to avoid punishment and pain, and to embellish their life chances.<sup>193</sup>

Majors and Billson observed games like “The Dozens,” where children taunt each other with increasingly harsh insults. This, they claim, is training for the maintenance of composure in an offensive and abusive situation, particularly if it involves the vitriol and subtle ubiquity of racism. The game teaches children to hide their innermost feelings, to display an exteriority of strength and Stoic resolve. They are taught not to “crack,” that is, not to let what is inside come out. The inside is fragile and must be protected. And indeed the attitude has moved from an original experience through the medium of culture —music, film—so as to be a desirable way of being throughout the United States, regardless now of locale and of actual social conditions.

A protective response to an insult to one’s abilities or character is therefore to display the opposite of what one feels. It is, in effect, to perform an internal ironic reversal of meaning. Ironic detachment is here, as mentioned at the beginning, a *psycho-strategy* for hiding one’s feelings by suggesting their opposite—pretending to be bored in the face of grave danger or being amused in the face of insult. It permits one to be unruffled while one is actually deeply offended or hurt. Like the irony used as a rhetorical device that sees words stating the opposite, or near opposite, of what one means, the attitude of cool frequently projects the opposite of—or serves as a counterbalance to—what one feels. The subject reverses or disguises the “sincere” feelings her or she has in order to do something more immediately socially useful.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson. *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*. (New York: Lexington Books, 1992), p. 8.

<sup>194</sup> From the linguistic study of irony, cited above, (L. Anolli, R. Ciceri, M.G. Infantino, “Behind the ‘Dark Glasses’: Irony As A Strategy for Implicit Communication”), as regards changes in gesture, tone, and volume, the authors note that “from a communication psychology perspective, irony is a strategy to negotiate sense flexibility. The effect of the indexical variability on the vocal variables (energy, time) of irony is studied. Through the statistic analysis of the vocal variables of

For Peter N. Stearns, the Carnegie Mellon University scholar who made reputable and widespread the study of the history of the emotions, cool became a more omnipresent emotional style during the 1960s. Yet, interestingly, unlike the political critics above who locate the decade as a repository for social blame, Stearns maintains that it took thirty to forty years for this emotional style to manifest, having its inception in American culture of the 1920s to the early 1940s, during what he sees as the decline of Victorian-era values.

The emotional culture of the Victorian era, Stearns argues in *American Cool* (1994), was coming to a close during the years following the first world war, and in its place came new norms of emotional expression and valuation, norms which lead to, paradoxically, more restraint on the emotional life of citizens:

Victorians valued emotions as motivators, as the sources of energy in work and politics and as a crucial cement for family life. The twentieth-century emotional style tolerated certain emotional interests as part of leisure life and personal identity, but urged overall restraint as part of the need to present a pleasing, unobtrusive front to others. Emotions were recognized as inevitable but were seen as more risky than useful.<sup>195</sup>

To simplify significantly what is a very thoroughgoing study: Stearns argues that the attitude of cool has enabled the self-management of emotional life; cool negotiates a dual concentration: on the outside is the need to be sociable and relate to others, and on the inside is the need to maintain control over one's emotions so that they conform to the new standards of expression. For example, some of the emotions now kept under wraps—jealousy, guilt, anger—according to Stearns, once found acceptable outlets within

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standard phrases in a context of conflict and co-operation, interpreted by fifty naïve subjects, there emerges an *ironic dominant style*: high and changeable pitch, loud energy, and slow rate of articulation, though differences referring to the two contexts emerge. Through a subject-by-subject analysis, four ironic styles come out: a) context of co-operation: a1) rather high and changeable pitch and loud energy ('bantering' joy, full and loose voice), a2) low and monotonic pitch and loud energy (emphatic mark of tenderness, ample and loose voice); b) context of conflict: b1) very high and changeable pitch, loud energy and slow rate of articulation ('accented banter,' contracted and full voice), b2) low and not very changeable pitch, slow rate of articulation and steadily soft energy (like scorn and cold anger, contracted and tense voice). The choice of a style depends on the degree of empathic involvement and the intention of mitigating or stressing the weight of the implicit." (Emphasis mine.) What is interesting about a study like this is the attempt by positivistic knowledge to locate irony by means of mapping and indices. Still elusive, the functionality of irony will not submit.

<sup>195</sup> Peter N. Stearns. *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style*. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 300.

everyday social life; now they must be managed, creating an individual that is “impersonal, but friendly.”

Emotions for American Victorians, Stearns notes, were evidence of strong motivation and conviction. For the contemporary cosmopolitan, emotions in public are seen as a loss of control, as losing one’s polish, as a faltering of composure.<sup>196</sup> Essentially, showing strong emotion or enthusiasm is now interpreted as a sign of a weakness in keeping cool. Causes for this shift in emotional culture, Stearns holds, range from the rise in corporate management and consumerism—and their increasing domination of social and personal life—as well as new anxieties over emotional and bodily health and self-image, a new intensity of self-consciousness. Cool results from trying to develop a way to keep one’s outward expression in conformity with the accepted standards, while retaining the knowledge that the standards are not a match to the energy created by emotional discharge.

This cool strategy has other components. It both hides itself from the world, but simultaneously it cannot tolerate this hiding in others. “The cool personality loathes secrecy and concealment,” write Pountain and Robbins, and

it fosters a world-knowingness. At its core, the cool personality knows that it engages in a self-construction, but it also has honed its detection of this self-construction in others. It amounts to creating a cool psychic mask that hides inner disturbance, from rage, anxiety, or urge for sexual conquest.<sup>197</sup>

Cool thus turns inward to deny reliance on anyone. It imagines itself as totally self-

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<sup>196</sup> One need only recall the “Dean Scream,” during the 2004 Presidential campaign, when democratic contender Gov. Howard Dean of Vermont becoming noticeably enthusiastic about his campaign doing well, his internet fundraising base increasing, and his desperately wanting to beat the Republicans. At a crowded Midwestern political rally Dean let out a thunderous yelp of excitement and was consequently—and relentlessly—excoriated in the media and by Republicans for being “crazy,” “out of control,” or “too much of a loose canon.” Emotion and enthusiasm in political contexts are no longer seen as passionate involvement or commitment to cause, but rather, as a loss of composure—and dangerous. Democrats were wild, Republicans reserved.

Yet emotional outbursts apparently do not choose sides. A similar incident in July 2005 was repeatedly played in the media when conservative columnist Robert Novak became so heatedly angry in a discussion with Democratic strategist James Carville that he tore off his microphone and walked off the set of CNN’s *Crossfire*. Novak was said, thereafter, to be “under a lot of stress.” (He had recently leaked the name of undercover CIA operative Valerie Plame in his newspaper column.)

<sup>197</sup> Pountain and Robbins, p. 155.

sufficient. This explains its anti-authority attitude, for it does not want to accept dependence on or adherence to anything but itself, but also can explain why cool is essential antisocial. Because much of the social world is composed of roles and a proper personal distance (civility), there is an element of ‘suspension of disbelief.’ As cool hates posing and secrets, and describes inauthenticity, it claims to be able to see beyond these roles, to “unmask” the “real” person behind the role.<sup>198</sup>

But cool detachment as a logic-in-itself would lead to total isolation, so it requires the need to socialize. As it is a negating operation, it requires and depends on the public or it would disappear. It therefore tends towards a dichotomy of insiderness and outsiderhood very swiftly. As Pountain and Rogers write, “[cool] involves sharing some secret knowledge that is denied to members of mainstream society.... The bigger, seldom verbalized, more abstract secret [is] the perceived hypocrisy of ‘straight’ society .... [whose] taboos have no moral force.”<sup>199</sup> Ironically, it is American *mainstream* celebrities—from the worlds of Hollywood, music, and sports—who have perfected this mask of cool, where repeated self-invention is a way of life, where attempts at penetration into the private lives of individuals is at its most extreme and invasive. As role models and people to be admired for their wealth and success, celebrities have an undeniable social influence on how individual behave.<sup>200</sup> For identity-vulnerable teenagers, to don a mask of cool is a way for them to be like celebrities, is a way for them to make themselves less prey to attack for their vulnerability. And it’s no easy thing to ignore when lifestyle advertisements—making impressionable teenagers and adults compare their lives to the impossible standards of celebrity living—are found everywhere.

But being cool in the face of these impossible standards can help. Learning how to be detached like celebrities can short-circuit further wishes to be like those celebrities. As British psychologist Oliver James has written in *Britain On the Couch* (1998) “maladaptive

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<sup>198</sup> The idea of unmasking—more broadly, as one of the primary philosophical impulses of cultural modernity—is brilliantly discussed in Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Part One, section three: “Eight Unmaskings: A Review of Critiques.” Therein, he includes the critiques of “Revelation,” “Religious Illusion,” “Metaphysical Illusion,” “Idealistic Superstructure,” “Moral Illusion,” “Transparency,” “Natural Illusion,” and the “Illusion of Privacy” (pp. 22-59).

<sup>199</sup> Pountain and Robbins, pp. 153-154

<sup>200</sup> For an engaging analysis of American fame and celebrity from a British perspective, see Nottingham Trent University cultural sociologist Chris Rojek’s *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

social comparison” holds that in conditions of affluence our aspirations always overshoot reality. One result of this has been the rise of clinical depression in people comparing themselves to celebrity-set norms to a destructive end.<sup>201</sup> Healthy people find a way to play up their own qualities and discount the advantages that celebrities possess. Being “cool,” James suggests, is one such way not to care about the comparisons and to thus avoid depression.

Social critics, academics, public intellectuals, the clergy, and journalist enclaves have been arguing for several decades about the “rise” of this brand of cynicism, cool, and irony and about the decline in American social trust and moral order. There are good reasons and measurable social metrics to come to such conclusions. However, an entire cottage industry is now devoted to publishing regularly for the last half century—perhaps beginning with Arthur Schlesinger’s *The Vital Center* (1949) and Bernard Cannon Bell’s *Crowd Culture* (1954)—on the state of America’s spiritual and moral health. The evidence of social and moral decline in recent critiques and for multitudinous reasons, stem from television to rap music to the Founding Fathers themselves.

Pitched as connected issues, moral life and civic health are hot-button issues in any political debate, for they reveal individual citizens’ views on the state of their fellow citizens, and, fundamentally, on their philosophical assumptions for what counts as a good society, how a person should behave in public life, and what kinds of moral qualities ordinary people should have within that society. With the onset of the debate over both civic health and civility, these issues come to the fore quite vehemently. And it seems to be the consensus from several political angles that over the past several decades America’s moral life has been going downhill. Cynicism and irony have trumped civic trust. Concerned Americans have been arguing for three decades on how exactly to get it back.

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<sup>201</sup> In an increasingly disturbing phenomenon, teenagers are having plastic surgery to look more like celebrities they admire, and without any consideration that it is disturbing. The cable channel MTV airs a show called *I Want A Famous Face*, which sees teenagers bringing photos of their favorite celebrities (as templates) to “aesthetic surgeons” for plastic surgery on their noses, cheekbones, breasts, calves, and, in general, for allover liposuction. Often the teens will explain that they are undergoing the surgery in order to gain self-esteem or self-confidence. The display of the body and approval by peers equals the attempt at securing identity inwardly. Yet this is exteriorization of identity willfully entered into, the radical reversal of Protestant inwardness, the triumph of fashion.

## Chapter Three: Irony and Civic Trust

*It will not tolerate a man to stand still and become immersed in himself; to walk slowly is already suspect, and how could one even think of such a thing in the animated moment in which we live? It despises isolation, and how could it possibly tolerate a human being getting the preposterous idea of going through life alone, an age which, hand in hand and arm in arm...lives for the Idea of community?*

- Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* (1841)

*While the idea of community, if limited to neighbors and friends, is an inadequate basis for meeting our current needs, we want to affirm community as a cultural theme that calls us to wider and wider circles of loyalty, ultimately embracing that universal community of all beings...*

- Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart* (1985)

*The men believe not in the women, nor the women in the men...and the aim of the litterateurs is to find something to make fun of....[because] genuine belief has left us.*

- Walt Whitman, 1866

*Irony tends to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions. In its apprehension of the essential folly or absurdity of the human condition, it tends to engender belief in the “madness” of civilization itself and to inspire a Mandarin-like disdain for those seeking to grasp the nature of social reality in either science or art.*

- Hayden White, *Metahistory* (1973)

*Oh heavens, irony! Guard yourself...from taking on this mental attitude. [It] makes for depravity, it becomes a drawback to civilization...a vice.*

- Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (1924)

*You have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you fail miserably.*

- Satirist Jon Stewart on *Crossfire* to Tucker Carlson, host, 2004

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Immediately after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the columnist Roger Rosenblatt famously declared the “death of irony” in *Time* magazine, in an article confidently titled “The Age of Irony Comes to An End”:

One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony. For some 30 years—roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright—the good folks in charge of America’s intellectual life have

insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real. With a giggle and a smirk, our chattering classes—our columnists and pop culture makers—declared that detachment and personal whimsy were the necessary tools for an oh-so-cool life.... The ironists, seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything. The consequence of thinking that nothing is real—apart from prancing around in an air of vain stupidity—is that one will not know the difference between a joke and a menace.<sup>202</sup>

Rosenblatt continues by unleashing a hefty amount of anger against “the vain stupidity of ironists” who try to see through everything; they won’t be around much longer. It is important at this early point to note that the ironists Rosenblatt identifies are “columnists” and “pop-culture makers,” “arrogant,” “sarcastic,” and “bilious” people who think that they’re “oh-so-cool.” In this “new and chastened time,” Rosenblatt was certain, there will be no room for them. For “in the age of irony, even the most serious things were not to be taken seriously....[it] suggested that death was not to be seen as real. If one doubted its reality before last week, that is unlikely to happen again.”<sup>203</sup>

In an interview with *The Los Angeles Times*, the esteemed Civil Rights historian Taylor Branch thought that the attacks on America had brought the nation to “a turning point against a generation of cynicism.” Gerry Howard, editorial director of Broadway Books in New York told *Entertainment Weekly*, “I think somebody should do a marker that says irony died on 9-11-01.” The *Atlanta Journal Constitution’s* Phil Kloer reported that September 11<sup>th</sup> spelled the demise of a popular culture “drenched in irony and cynicism,” that was “a playground for postmodern hipsters,” wherein the “appropriate response to anything is the jaded, all-purpose ‘whatever.’” James Pinkerton of *Newsday* went a triumphant step further and decreed a victory for “sincerity, patriotism, and earnestness” and, countering the Seinfeldian premise, announced that “there’s more to life than *nothing*, that some things really matter.”

Perhaps most famously and oft cited was Graydon Carter, editor of *Vanity Fair* and former editor of the now-defunct satirical *Spy* magazine, who predicted immediately after September 11<sup>th</sup> that “there’s going to be a seismic change. I think it’s the end of the age of irony.” His pronouncements went rippling out into newspaper opinion-pages across the

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<sup>202</sup> Roger Rosenblatt, “The Age of Irony Comes to An End: No Longer Will We Fail To Take Things Seriously,” *Time*, September 20, 2001.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

nation. “Things that were considered fringe and frivolous,” Carter claimed, “are going to disappear.” A Marx-like alchemy at work: all that was ironic melts into air. The literal dissolution of the Twin Towers heralded a new day, a dispersal of irony into the ether. Patriotism and earnest engagement would rise like so many phoenixes from the flame.

Earnestness regained. Even on television! In a wise move, the Fox Network, which controls perhaps one of the most enthusiastically and self-consciously “pro-American” cable news channels, pulled the movie *Independence Day*—the defining image of which was an exploding White House—from its Sunday, September 15 airdate. Likewise, the Family Channel yanked the movie *Earthquake in New York*, scheduled for September 18. Television comedians—late-night professional purveyors of irony and sarcasm—were faced with similar dilemmas. Hosts such as David Letterman and Jay Leno did not deliver their normal comedy routines. For a time it looked as if television—not to mention the broader culture—might be reduced to unrelenting mildness. Outted by the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>, ironists and the postmodern hipsters who populated advertising firms, magazine editorial offices, and sitcom writing rooms were being seen for the plague on the land that they were. In this “new and chastened time,” they would have to shape up or ship out. Somehow irony and terrorism became, in some more ethereal realms, conceptually interrelated, for both were against holding society together. Popular culture to the rescue: Mayor Rudolph Giuliani went on *Saturday Night Live* three weeks after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> to tell the country that it was OK to laugh again, and that New York City was “open for business.” The work of the nation could continue.

Long before September 11<sup>th</sup>, of course, the idea that American society has been in decline due to a remove of citizens’ private lives from the public sphere, to a lack of commitment to one’s public duties and responsibilities, has worried many interested in the health of the social body. Winthrop, the Mathers, Edwards, Crèvecoeur, and Tocqueville sounded observations of it early enough, and the threat of this remove has been a central narrative in the history of American social criticism and concern. Such declinist literature, as it’s sometimes acerbically been called in its modern form,<sup>204</sup> has its

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<sup>204</sup> Richard Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 281. Posner’s chapter on this subject is “The Jeremiah School,” which he wryly



roots in the form of the religious jeremiad—America’s first narrative genre—already present shortly after the arrival of Puritans on New England shores.<sup>205</sup> These jeremiads had in common a thread of optimism, a directedness towards the future of God’s plan for them. When the Pilgrims erred, God’s punishments were seen as correctives, not a means to destroy the offenders. Calamity was a sign of God’s will for redirection of individual souls towards the original plan of their errand; there was a larger universal project in which Americans played key role. All history, in John Winthrop’s momentous words, was converging upon “the cosmic climax of Boston’s founding.”

The notion that today’s American populace is erring, is somehow slipping from its original moorings—those lain by the Puritans, the Founders, Native Americans, Nature, God’s Laws, the British gentry, what have you—remains a strong narrative urge in American social criticism. Unlike the pulpit correctives of old, social criticism and political science now supply the necessary fodder for today’s jeremiads, which are still delivered from, of course, upon high. The ebbing of civic spirit and the growth of cancerous civic malaise, of disengagement and of anomie, has been a central anxiety (and family of metaphors) among many critics alarmed at the state of American society over the past three decades, and not without statistical warrant. “Between waves of patriotism and troughs of skepticism about government,” Chaloupka observes, “civic belief

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designates as “declinist literature,” of which he spells out the tradition and form. Charles Taylor has separated the camps of contemporary cultural criticism into “boosters,” and “knockers.”

<sup>205</sup> See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). Therein, Bercovitch, differing with the opinion of Perry Miller, offers that “Miller rightly called the New England jeremiad America’s first distinctive literary genre; its distinctiveness, however, lies not in the vehemence of its complaint but in precisely the reverse. The essence of the sermon form that the first native-born American Puritans inherited from their fathers, and then ‘developed, amplified, and standardized,’ is its unshakable optimism. In explicit opposition to the traditional mode, it inverts the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success, affirming the world, and despite the world, the inviolability of the colonial cause” (pp. 6-7). This is set in direct opposition to the European version of the jeremiad, which was “a lament over the ways of the world. It decried the sins of ‘the people’—a community, a nation, a civilization, mankind in general—and warned of God’s wrath to follow” (p. 7). See also, in the modern European vein, of course, Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*. Helmut Werner and Arthur Helps, eds.; Charles Francis Atkinson, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); John Lukacs, *The End of An Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life: 1500 to the Present*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2000). For a historiographic account of how nineteenth-century writers of history utilized specific narrative structures and tropes to compose “objective” accounts of history, see the prized and commanding account by Hayden White in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

somehow vanished as an overarching way of life. It ceased to be the only practical master strategy for life in democratic society.”<sup>206</sup> The causes intimated for this loss vary wildly, but the result always bears the same descriptions: decline, cynicism, cultural twilight. Correctives are needed. Solutions of what exactly these correctives are, what these modern-day jeremiads suggest we do to get back on track, frequently surface in contemporary debate over social and moral issues.

These contemporary issues, such as how irony negatively affects civic trust and signals cultural breakdown, are often reflections of deeply held beliefs that simultaneously imply normative pictures of cultural and social health. These deeply held beliefs are philosophical or religious in origin; that is, they are things that form a “deep” support structure for our “superficial” cultural and political concerns.<sup>207</sup> What often seem to be superficial issues—and I am not using the term derogatorily—are like the appearance of sandbars caused by deeply running currents; the objects considered are not isolated incidents, but part of something larger and more significant. This model is defined clearly in John Davidson Hunter’s thoroughgoing account of the historical and religious basis of the ongoing culture wars, of which the attack on irony remains an open front, in his 1991 book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Define America*:

The contemporary culture war is not just an expression of different ‘opinions’ or ‘attitudes’ on this or that issue, like abortion. If this were all there was to it, the conflict I refer to would be, as someone once suggested, the “politics of distraction”—a trivial pursuit that keeps Americans from settling more important matters. No, the conflict is deeper than mere ‘differences of opinion,’ and bigger than abortion, and in fact, bigger than the culmination of all the battles being waged....The culture wars emerges over fundamentally different conceptions of moral authority, over different ideas and beliefs about truth, the good, obligation to one another, the nature of community, and so on. It is, therefore, cultural conflict at its deepest level....Though the conflict derives from differences in assumptions that are philosophical in nature, the conflict does not end as a

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<sup>206</sup> Chaloupka, p. 16.

<sup>207</sup> I’d like to make my own caveat with regards to the use of these terms in reference to the debate over *surface* and *depth* and their metaphorical weight in modernity. I would like to replace the word *deeper* here with the phrases “more important” or “more meaningful.” Pragmatically reduced even further—looking to the results of what “deeper” might mean: the conflict over culture makes people more noticeably emotional, more passionate, than other debates.

philosophical dispute. This is a conflict about how we are to order our lives together.<sup>208</sup>

Hunter's larger thesis is that our differing opinions about public issues have less to do with those actual issues than with a fundamental split in the socio-historical makeup of American moral traditions. On the one hand are the religious conservatives, who hold, fundamentally, that moral behavior is "the commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority," and, on the other hand, cultural progressives, who believe in "the tendency to re-symbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life."<sup>209</sup>

These two fundamental differences in moral vision also characterize the differences in the debate about irony. For religious conservatives—literalists—irony represents a sort of moral relativism and hedonism that is corrosive to clear decision making and ethical behavior. For secularists—interpretations—irony is often seen as an appropriate reaction to a postmodern world filled with contradictions, threats to individualism, rampant skepticism, and dubious political speech and behavior; irony is a method by which individuals retain and protect their authenticity. The former camp do not like that their worldviews can be redescribed in other, worldly, terms, thereby debunking their claims to a higher authority. The latter often have tenure at universities for doing just that.

Like other broadly held social attitudes, irony, it is important to reiterate, is not a wholly chosen attitude towards the public, but rather, a default mechanism of a *lived* morality that stems from more deeply held beliefs. The sociologist Richard Stivers writes of this sort of assumed morality in *The Culture of Cynicism* (1994) that "lived morality... is not a free creation, the result of a contract, as some moral philosophers and social scientists would have us believe; rather it is a spontaneous, unconscious creation, reflecting the perception of necessity."<sup>210</sup> The perception of necessity affects us, then, as a survival technique for social living. At some level of awareness we adopt certain behaviors and attitudes less out of selective choice than out of social compulsion. So, what would

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<sup>208</sup> James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Define America*. (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 49.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>210</sup> Richard Stivers, *The Culture of Cynicism: Morality in Decline*. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), p. 6.

have to be happening for this sort of attitude to seem necessary to adorn? What kind of widely perceived cultural predicament would have to be apprehended such that protecting oneself, one's private interiority, seemed a smart thing to do in order to "survive"?

Debate about irony as an injurious social attitude in the United States and Britain has been a resurgent theme over the past decade or so, having begun in earnest in the early-1990s and culminating, fiercely, in the "end of irony" thesis following the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. That event's concrete authenticity, its piercing reality and moral weight, in total effect, its *seriousness*, was supposed to have spelled the end of ironic disengagement in America. Pundits argued that a whole generation of Americans, most notably so-called Generation X, having never felt truly threatened, would now have to shed their cynicism and take life seriously, as had their grandparents of the Greatest Generation. September 11<sup>th</sup> was supposed to have shed Americans of their moral relativism and perspicuity, reignited earnestness and civic union. It was supposed to have summoned another, sustained, Great Awakening.<sup>211</sup>

It did not do that. American popular culture now, and the sensibility necessary for the consumption and understanding of that popular culture, remains just as it did before September 11<sup>th</sup>. Though the political discourse has become more serious, very little in pop culture has changed; the youthful taste for the ironic, sarcastic, and biting—especially as utilized in the warranted critique of power—is perhaps even more widespread on cable television and in print publications than before that fateful moment in American

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<sup>211</sup> Times of unimaginable tragedy always call for deep, slate-cleaning renewal so that historical causalities of the present do not happen again. Thus, anecdotally: in a reaction to the French Revolution that could easily be transposed to the reaction to September 11<sup>th</sup>, Friedrich Schlegel wrote that it was "the most frightful grotesque of the age, where the most profound prejudices and their most brutal punishments are mixed up in a fearful chaos and woven as bizarrely as possible into a monstrous human tragicomedy.... There is no greater need of the age than the need for a spiritual counterweight to the Revolution and to the despotism which the Revolution exercises over people by means of its concentration on the most desirable worldly interests." Of relevancy is that, like the critics of irony immediately post 9/11, irony as an interest slowly faded from Schlegel's interest hereafter, and his politics turned increasingly conservative and religious. The same could be said of American poet-satirist Philip Freneau, whose writings turned deadly serious after his release from capture by the British in the Battle of Monmouth, New Jersey. Where his earlier works exhibited ascerbic play and frivolity, Freneau's verse becomes poisonous after he becomes fully engaged in the anti-British cause.

history.<sup>212</sup> But such a proclamation of radical alteration, of fundamental change in the

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<sup>212</sup> Television-news journalists and reporters were shocked in fall 2004 to learn that among 19,000 surveyed young adults in their twenties, 16% trusted Comedy Central's Jon Stewart, host of the satirical news-program *The Daily Show*, more than they trusted two of the three major network news anchors. The results of the survey, conducted by Global Strategy Group and Luntz Research, were: Tom Brokaw (NBC) 17%; Jon Stewart 16%; Peter Jennings (ABC) 15%; and Dan Rather (CBS) 10%. Each of the major network anchors has over two decades of reporting the news to their credit. Subsequent to this finding, an Annenberg Center study found that "Viewers of late-night comedy programs, especially *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central, are more likely to know the issue positions and backgrounds of presidential candidates than people who do not watch late-night comedy."

Stewart and the writers of *The Daily Show* deliver the news in spotlessly wry fashion, utilize irony, sarcasm, and general bubble-bursting to report on major events of the day from the perspective of the secretly-still-idealistic-but-presently-disappointed-in-everything observer. The show's following is enormous (over one-million each night), and Stewart's book, *America: The Book* (New York: Warner Books, 2004) was number one on the *New York Times* Bestseller list for several weeks, as well as the current biggest selling book in the world during the winter of 2005.

What is interesting about this phenomenon goes to the point, again, about the presence of romantic irony (irony as a generalized worldview) being healthy and dominant as a mode of interpretation in America. When Jon Stewart satirically reports the news, he is perceived as more honest and sincere in his reporting not because his *words* are more honest, that is, literal, or matching directly word for meaning—for they more often than not mean something other than what they say—but because his audience is interpreting the subject and sentiments that are *behind* those words: a melancholic yet searingly truthful account of how citizens feel about what is going on in the world they see reported to them on network news. Through satire *The Daily Show* shows the artifice of other "unbiased," or "objective" news networks by highlighting the clichés and mechanisms by which they function. Through irony, by often meaning the opposite of what is said (or some nearby variation), Stewart and his writing staff at *The Daily Show* are paradoxically communicating authenticity, sincerity, and honesty.

The interesting and important conflict between the ironist and the "serious" pundit was brought to a head a primetime televised spat between Jon Stewart and conservative talk-show host Tucker Carlson, along with co-host Paul Begala, on CNN's *Crossfire* in fall 2004. In the conversation, it is Stewart-the-ironist, the satirist, who tells the "serious" host that his program is not helpful to American culture, that *Crossfire* is not doing debate, it's doing theater. Stewart reaches a point of credible earnestness and authentic concern for the public good. Carlson seems like the pundit who is not actually concerned with the public good, but rather, his television show. So it is Stewart who, in the end, has the last word on civic responsibility. (Shortly thereafter, though not necessarily causally, Carlson was fired from *Crossfire*.) It is well worth including an excerpt from the official CNN transcript here:

*STEWART*: You know, the interesting thing I have is... You have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you fail miserably.

*CARLSON*: You need to get a job at a journalism school, I think.

*STEWART*: You need to go to one. The thing that I want to say is, when you have people on for just knee-jerk, reactionary talk...

*CARLSON*: Wait. I thought you were going to be funny. Come on, be funny.

*STEWART*: No. No. I'm not going to be your monkey.

(LAUGHTER)

*BEGALA*: Go ahead. Go ahead.

general social character from the “ironic” to the “serious”—made by political analysts, editors, and intellectuals—raises more abstract questions as to why those events *would* spell the complete end of a widely shared social attitude, what exactly that social attitude was, how it came to be, and why it was diametrically opposed to the gravity of that horrific day.

Conceived in various ways by both “serious-minded” social progressives and conservatives, irony as a cultural attitude has frequently been pitched as the equivalent of narcissism, relativism, social apathy, and general cultural decadence. Among literary and artistic types, the worlds of entertainment and advertising, however, irony, having forged its path in artistic and literary enclaves for decades prior, was the *modus operandi* of the entire 1990s.

And it continues to be the key indicator of the “new,” the insightful, young, and intellectually and culturally astute (recall Sloterdijk’s “chic bitterness”). It is how you tell if someone “gets it” or not. And “getting it” must be done with *immediacy*, for, as Adorno wrote, “irony cancels itself out the moment it adds a word of interpretation.”<sup>213</sup> Though this “adding a word of interpretation,” given a hyper-ironic sensibility, is no longer true (for adding interpretation to an ironic situation has now itself become ironizing of those who would).<sup>214</sup> This kind of “getting it” still often entails a default reaction to the

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STEWART: I watch your show every day. And it kills me.

CARLSON: I can tell you love it.

STEWART: It’s so—oh, it’s so painful to watch.

(LAUGHTER)

STEWART: You know, because we need what you do. This is such a great opportunity you have here to actually get politicians off of their marketing and strategy.

CARLSON: Is this really Jon Stewart? What is this, anyway?

STEWART: Yes, it’s someone who watches your show and cannot take it anymore.

(LAUGHTER)

STEWART: I just can’t.

CARLSON: What’s it like to have dinner with you? It must be excruciating. Do you, like, lecture people like this, or do you come over to their house and sit and lecture them? [Do you tell them] they’re not doing the right thing, that they’re missing their opportunities, evading their responsibilities?

STEWART: If I think they are.

<sup>213</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott. (London: Verso, 1984), p. 210.

<sup>214</sup> Ironic awareness always supercedes attempts to “read it,” even when a clear rule of “no interpretation of irony” is laid down. Among ironists today, an interpretation of an ironic remark

omnipresent middle-brow culture of the United States: it's hokey, false, uninspiring, uncreative, stupid, cheap, lazy, pandering, ubiquitous. There is an unspoken understanding within the ironic sensibility that middlebrow, mainstream American culture fundamentally perpetuates an *illusion* of suburban tranquility. Beneath the surface there is turmoil, misery, and despair.<sup>215</sup> For the ironist, the one assumption that goes without questioning is that the mass of "middle-America" lives with its own delusions of life, that it does not "get" what is going on in the world, that it is complacent.

The division over what counts as humor and how irony is divisive, particularly when it comes to large media events with corporate sponsors, was seen clearly in a debate over the song selection by the actor and comedian Robin Williams at the 2005 Oscars, when executives at ABC told the comedian to drop a song because of its tone and content. Playing on the dark underbelly of cartoons (ironically "unmasking" them), Williams was to recite lyrics such as "Pinocchio's had his nose done; Sleeping Beauty is popping pills; Fred Flintstone is dyslexic; Olive Oyl is anorexic," and so on. After being told to ditch the song, Robins, interviewed at the Independent Spirit Awards, said, "For a while you get mad, then you get over it. They're afraid of saying Olive Oyl is anorexic. It tells you about the state of humor....We thought that they got the irony of it. I guess not."<sup>216</sup>

This "getting it" can also imply a sense of cultural or aesthetic superiority for those not liking the imperialism of Starbucks coffee, Wal-Mart, and Celine Dion—this sense of superiority is both intellectual *and* aesthetic; it is to maintain a "worldliness and a fatigue with the self-righteous and the prissy and the prudish."<sup>217</sup> As *The Economist* recently wrote of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) by wunderkind Dave Eggers, founder of the magazines *Might* and *McSweeney's*, the welcomed harbingers of all things ironic in literary expression and pop-culture commentary beginning in the late 1990s, "It supposedly hailed a new narrator: the desultory, contemporary dilettante who uses irony

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or situation can be done ironically. The ironist plays the fool—only to a fellow ironist—who does not know that the original remark *was* ironic.

<sup>215</sup> This is the Cheever-esque basis of the incredibly popular television series *Desperate Housewives*, which began in Summer 2004.

<sup>216</sup> David M. Halbfinger, "ABC Tells Robin Williams: Drop Comic Song from Oscars," [*The New York Times* News Service reprinted in] *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sunday, February 27, 2005, p. A12.

<sup>217</sup> Delbanco, *Death of Satan*, pp. 216-17.

as a counterweight to cliché and anything earnest. Savvy, satirical, and fluent in pop culture, this voice also uses self-deprecation to inoculate against criticism.”<sup>218</sup> And as Elise Harris wrote of the book and the age it portended to define in *The Nation*,

*Might* documented the civil war between idealism and cynicism that occupies a generation....[And] the book arrives during a moment when the literary intellectual stage is rife with discord: In the pages of the *New York Review of Books* or on the web magazine *Slate*, A.O. Scott, David Foster Wallace, Jedediah Purdy, Michael Hirschorn and others have staked positions in the rival “irony” and “sincerity” rhetorical camps like so many Capulets and Montagues.<sup>219</sup>

It is clear that a conflict of sensibilities was raging, and the sort of stupid, loungey, feel-good, middlebrow American culture that your run-of-the-mill ironist wanted to jab included specific emanations, such as the movies *Titanic*, *Bridges of Madison County*, *Pretty Woman*, films that make New York City the backdrop for romantic comedy, especially when starring the theatrics of actors such as Meg Ryan or Tom Hanks; movies or television programs with an overt message of patriotism, positive thinking, Yes-I-Can-ism,

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<sup>218</sup> “McSweeney’s: Ironic Tendency,” *The Economist*, January 8<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>, 2005, p. 75. *McSweeney’s*, as a cultural presence that aimed in some sense to counter the onslaught of sentimentalized or earnest middlebrow cultural expression, has performed the considerable accomplishment of maintaining a surprising and idiosyncratic voice in the chorus of literary journals by steering from the tempting, hyper-ironic one-upmanship—though it undoubtedly popularized the tone initially—and cleverer-than-thou (and limiting) self-consciousness to which much young writing falls prey. Instead, *McSweeney’s* can unsuspectingly promote poignant satire and volumes dedicated solely to comic art. This, among other outlets throughout the culture of hip understanding fosters a consistent look of askance upon things middlebrow and parochial, mingled with a thoroughgoing knowledge—and ironic spicing—of both pop and high culture. The publication also has the ability to generate a sort of bizarre hostile jealousy in those not inside its covers; it ignites a high-school-like competition of hip insiderness. Commentator Ada Calhoun at [www.nerve.com](http://www.nerve.com), in an article about unrequited love with a *McSweeney’s* editor, writes that “*McSweeney’s* smugly epitomized a culture with its own language (too smart for pop culture), style (too smart for fashion), and social schematic (too smart for anything remotely overwrought). On all scores, in fact, *McSweeney’s* was underwrought, cold and pretentious (but affable about it)....[It is, a friend says] ‘Inside-jokey, Ivy-Leaguey, casually bantery, but referencing every writer of the past three hundred years.’ In order to participate, you have to have your eyebrow cocked twenty-four hours a day. Or, as another friend says, ‘It’s like they built a cool treehouse in the backyard but required everyone to invent their own cutesy conceit before they’d allow them up the ladder.’” Calhoun makes sure to let the reader know that she had recently been asked to submit a piece to *McSweeney’s*, which she did not do. Touché!

<sup>219</sup> Harris, “Infinite Jest.”



or of an uplifting spirit;<sup>220</sup> books like the *Celestine Prophecy*, or *Chicken Soup for the Soul*,<sup>221</sup> angel statues, overt religious symbolism (especially in cheap plastic objects, glow-in-the-dark devotional statues, rosaries, and holy cards), the invocation of Jesus in any conversations—or T-shirts asking what he would do—the music of Yanni (and Public Television’s surreal recent special, “Yanni: A Year of Excellence”), the Boston Pops, the singers Celine Dion, Andrea Bocelli, or John Tesh; compact disc collections of the “Greatest Composers” with images of a snow-covered house with candle-lit windows on the front, such as those mass-produced by the painter Thomas Kinkade (“Painter of Light®,”<sup>222</sup> the most highly sold artist in America), featuring pieces like “Pachabel’s Greatest Hit” (Canon in D); masterpieces of Western art reproduced on mugs, key chains, or dinner plates; sweatshirts with phrases like “So Many Books ... So Little Time,” or “My Other Car is a Ferrari”; channels dedicated to suburban home-decorating, the PAX network and its programming, especially ones such as “Miracle Pets”; the *Family Circus* cartoon or *Garfield* (bad as cartoon, worse as computer-enhance feature-length movie); restaurants that attempt historical or ethnic authenticity through mass-produced faux elements, such as “rustic” walls, waxed decorative breads, old bottles, posters of kittens or babies dressed as peapods, faded sepia tone photographs depicting “how things used to be,” “distressed” furniture, paintings of “old Italy” or “Olde Thyme” Ireland. These

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<sup>220</sup> Locating “cheesy” (somehow always intertwined with things overtly uplifting or pedantic) is always fun sport in popular American culture if you’re an ironist (or just British), particularly if it contain the characteristics listed. On December 6, 2004, Baker Warburtons in Great Britain—with typical “drye-mocke”—released the “top-ten” list of the cheesiest lines in American film as determined by British moviegoers. They are as follows: 1) *Titanic*: Leonardo DiCaprio’s “I’m the king of the world!” 2) *Dirty Dancing*: Patrick Swayze’s “Nobody puts Baby in the corner.” 3) *Four Weddings and A Funeral*: Andie McDowell’s “Is it still raining? I hadn’t noticed.” 4) *Ghost*: Demi Moore’s “Ditto” to Patrick Swayze’s “I love you.” 5) *Top Gun*: Val Kilmer to Tom Cruise: “You can be my wingman anytime.” 6) *Notting Hill*: Julia Roberts’ “I’m just a girl...standing in front of a boy... asking him to love her.” 7) *Independence Day*: Bill Pullman’s “Today we celebrate our Independence Day!” 8) *Braveheart*: Mel Gibson’s “They may take our lives, but they will not take our freedom!” 9) *Jerry Maguire*: Renee Zellweger to Tom Cruise: “You had me at hello.” 10) *The Postman*: A blind woman says to Kevin Costner: “You’re a godsend, a savior.” He replies: “No, I’m a postman.” See <http://www.warburtons.co.uk>. Additionally, the cable-television channel VH1 runs a serious on the “101 Cheesiest Moments” among other shows that highlight the worst (best) moments in popular culture over the past two decades.

<sup>221</sup> A book that was subsequently satirized by the newspaper *The Onion* with the title, *Chicken Soup for the Publisher’s Bank Account*. Again, this points to irony’s energy and humor coming from the ultimate reduction of something “hopeful” or “inspirational” to something at-root based on greed and self-interest. Thus, “it’s funny because it’s true.”

<sup>222</sup> The Registered Trademark on “Painter of Light,” is not a joke.

restaurants would include the chains Olive Garden, TGI Friday's, Houlihan's, Chili's, Ruby Tuesdays, or Cracker Barrel—this is especially compounded by these restaurants' location in a major urban setting, such as Time Square or the sprawling center of Los Angeles.<sup>223</sup>

This very small sampling shows the inherent elitism in the ironic sensibility. It pits dominant middlebrow American culture against a more refined (read: educated, authenticity-obsessed) version of what counts as culture. It holds middlebrow culture at arms length because it does not want to accept it as the same caliber or quality of what counts as *real* culture, as authentic. It subsumes the moral under the primacy of the aesthetic. These cultural items are despised and made fun of by ironists because they are things that contain no element of surprise or intellectual adventure. (Importantly, the cultural objects and works are deemed *kitsch* if they are not collected by ironists, *camp* if they are.) They are repeated forms and predictable content. In short, they are all products of the “culture industry,” having no real authenticity—exactly what the ironist wants from his culture and from himself. He sees middlebrow culture as an embarrassing problem to his national identity because it perpetuates illusions, faux authenticity, and bad taste. Reactionary distancing—aestheticizing, ironizing—helps him to view these places, items, and products as something not a part of himself. He is a stranger in a strange land among them.

### 3.1 *Trust: Irony in Relief*

*Trust and Intimacy: If someone assiduously seeks to force intimacy with another person, he usually is not sure whether he possesses that person's trust. If someone is sure of being trusted, he places little value on intimacy.*

- Friedrich Nietzsche, aphorism 304, *Human, All too Human* (1886)

Initial hints to answers to the tension between the ironist and the seriously engaged begin to be revealed when considering the role of the ironic attitude's opposite—trust—in modern society. As a moral attitude we have towards the strangers that surround us in daily life, trust is an essential component of modern social cohesion and has been written about voluminously over the past several decades; such a concentration reveals trust's

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<sup>223</sup> I am grateful to the art historian William Ganis, of the New York Institute of Technology, and the writer John Luther for their input on these examples.

troubled situation in contemporary social life and its preeminence in the concerns of political scientists.

Among some of the recent exhortations about the decline of American society and culture—a context within which the calls for an end to irony after 9/11 should be seen—are Gertrude Himmelfarb’s *One Nation, Two Cultures* (1999) and *The De-Moralization of America* (1995); Richard Stivers’ *The Culture of Cynicism* (1994); Michael Lerner’s *Politics of Meaning* (1996); Stephen L. Carter’s *Civility* (1998) and *The Culture of Disbelief* (1994); Robert H. Bork’s *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* (1996); Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000); William Bennett’s *The Death of Outrage* (1998) and *The De-Valuing of America* (1992); Jeffrey C. Goldfarb’s *The Cynical Society* (1991); *Trust* (1995) by Francis Fukuyama; Amitai Etzioni’s *The Spirit of Community* (1994); Alan Wolfe’s *Whose Keeper?* (1989); Robert D. Kaplan’s *The Coming Anarchy* (2000); Morris Berman’s *The Twilight of American Culture* (2000); Robert Bellah and his colleagues’ *Habits of the Heart* (1985) and *The Good Society* (1992); and numerous works by *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne, including the edited collection *Community Works* (1998); among many other books and article journals in places such as the left-leaning *The American Prospect* and communitarian *Responsive Community*—all to varying degrees dealt with the idea of America’s ailing social health, the decline of culture, and the “de-valuing” of America. Often, these works had an idea of a return to a better time (in the future), when society was (could be again) more civil, kind, and believing—not as cynical, less ironic.

Some of these studies remind us that whereas pre-modern societies in the West were based on given, inherited social roles stemming from feudal or familial ties, modern society saw itself thrown into a web of strangers, bound by abstractions, such as capital or legal relationships. “Modernity,” writes Boston University historian of religion and economics Adam Seligman, “is life among strangers, those we do not know and who do not know us....The self-regarding aspect of individuals in modern capitalism is precisely what makes them strangers and hence, in some ineluctable sense, unknowable.”<sup>224</sup> Trust mediates this existential situation and becomes the sacred bond among society’s members that allows for modern democracies to work. The deep trust necessary in the modern

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<sup>224</sup> Adam Seligman, “Trust, Confidence, and the Problem of Civility,” in *Civility*, Leroy S. Rouner, ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 68.

situation—what Emile Durkheim famously called “precontractual solidarity”—holds social trust at a near-theological level. Trust is categorized in the realm of the sacred; it requires the proverbial leap of faith, for “trust cannot be demanded, only offered and accepted.”<sup>225</sup> It is first an inward commitment because one must first believe in trust itself before outwardly acting in a way that is evidence of that trust. Thus it is something one gives rather than something that is an outwardly enforceable behavior.

This unenforceable behavior between two agents should flow outward from and be supported by larger systems of trust already extant and made so by institutional and organizational confidence. University of Chicago political philosopher Robert B. Pippin writes that “fellow *cives* aspire in their trade and professional associations, universities, civic clubs, corporations, and charities to a kind of distinctive ethical relation with one another, a civility, a relation we hope will also hold society-wide, not just in private associations.”<sup>226</sup> We must first believe that the other person will obey the rules of the formal contract even before we enter into it; we extend our ethical consciousness to the stranger and hope that he or she will do the same for us. To trust is therefore also to risk disappointment and the failure of others to fulfill their responsibility of being trusted. It is to have faith in the ethical reciprocity of strangers.

The ironic attitude’s relation to trust—essentially its opposite, its skepticism towards social roles and relationships, its not taking seriously the words of others or itself, its view of radical contingency—reveals an entrenched meta-disbelief towards modern society’s necessary trust amongst its members. Irony appears to point out the naïveté of holding a stance of belief in others. It fosters knowingness in replacement of knowledge. It negates and antagonizes civic trust. It values a constant, unyielding skepticism. The ironist is thus often seen as a sort of secularized agnostic: he does not fully believe in the public’s benevolent bond amongst its members. He does not live up to his end of the unspoken bargain of the social contract: that trusting strangers is required for the modern democratic situation or community to work; one must suspend disbelief to the contrary. Social trust, put into earlier American terms, then, is essentially a spiritual union—conceived in America’s Puritan past as the transfer of God’s bond with the

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<sup>225</sup> System theorist Niklas Luhmann quoted in Seligman, “Trust, Confidence, and the Problem of Civility,” in Rouner, p. 69.

<sup>226</sup> Robert B. Pippin, “The Ethical Status of Civility,” in Rouner, p. 105.

individual to a bond amongst those individuals within a community—that gives social union its religious tenor.

It is perhaps because of the element of unenforceability that the concern over civic trust and irony's relation to that trust assumes a religiously inspired opposition between the sacred and the profane. If trust retains its sacred bond, irony as something that casts doubt upon that bond is itself cast as the profane and corrupting influence. The Americanist Andrew Delbanco believes, as mentioned, that irony has become, in part, a repository for blame because it has transformed throughout the twentieth century into the replacement for Americans' sense of evil. In this older terminology (indeed resonant in today's debate), the ironist displays no *faith*. He is, by extension, not among the saved; he is without grace; he is cast out. These are old and religious terms. But in a day and age in the United States where faith is playing an increased role in political speech and in American life, the very implications mean trouble for the ironist.

Reaching beyond the social life of the United States, Western democracies *tout court* at the end of the twentieth century had been dealing to some degree with a shared problem of the “cynical” or “ironical” society insofar as those attitudes had been conceived as part of the broader problem of civic engagement. The attitude was increasingly seen as being intrinsically (and somewhat mysteriously) connected to the state of democracy itself at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>227</sup> Declining “social capital,” revealed, in part, citizens' donning of a cynical attitude towards politics, government, and the common good. Debate about it has been on the increase in the U.S. since the late 1980s. And for the last ten years, debate about civil society has reached a fevered pitch because, as professed by political scientist Chaloupka, “[now] the cynical citizen is a mass figure, not an eccentric outsider. Citizen-cynics are as easily found in rural Montana as in cosmopolitan New York.”<sup>228</sup> The attitude of wry social distancing is now widely shared, no longer hemmed off to an exclusive literary enclave, though it undoubtedly begins as a form of aesthetic consciousness that stands against the mainstream. Thus for Delbanco,

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<sup>227</sup> See *Democracy and Trust*, ed. Mark E. Warren. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>228</sup> Chaloupka, p. 45.

irony has become the normative style of contemporary life—a fact that is, of course, an irony of its own, since irony began its career, as Augustine noted long ago in recalling his days among the “Subverters,” as an expression of resistance to cultural prescriptions, until it is left with nothing to resist except itself.<sup>229</sup>

What began—speaking in Hegelian overtones—as a form of consciousness that negated other forms of life and sensibility had become throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century, according to a range of social critics and philosophers, a default way of being for individuals inhabiting Western-style democracies. If it continued to become an increasingly shared social posture, this attitude would threaten the very idea of participatory democracy itself. Something had to be done.

Thus in an effort to address the growing phenomenon (and from the perspective of governance, *problem*) of citizens’ public dwindling participation in democratic process, the first international Trilateral Commission on Democracy (whose core analysts were Michael J. Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki) convened in 1975 to discuss the governability of Western-style democracies and the role of civic trust—widely interpreted as the opposite of cynical disengagement—in the current state of successful democracies. Social demands were on the rise and, due to an era of lagging economic growth, the mechanisms of the state could not respond to them. Additionally and simultaneously, citizens’ faith in political and moral authority was declining. The authors concluded in *The Crisis of Democracy* (1975) that the future of democracy itself seemed to be in trouble.

Shortly after the meeting of the meeting of the Trilateral Commission on Democracy, President Jimmy Carter gave his foreboding “national malaise” speech, on July 15, 1976—two centuries and eleven days after the birth of the independent American nation. After returning from an extended stay at Camp David in Maryland, where he had met with constituents from “almost every segment of our society—business and labor, teachers and preachers, Governors, mayors, and private citizens,” Carter stood before a nation in the grips of a debilitating energy crisis and claimed that America had lost its spiritual way. His speech eventually addressed specific energy policy changes,

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<sup>229</sup> Delbanco, p. 208.

but the primary impetus behind the televised appearance was to be a beacon for civic renewal, to boost confidence and faith in Americans towards their special errand. In order to grasp the gravity with which Carter expressed his concerns for the nation, excerpts of the speech are worth quoting here at length:

So, I want to speak to you first tonight about a subject even more serious than energy or inflation. I want to talk to you right now about a fundamental threat to American democracy....The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our Nation....The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America....But just as we are losing our confidence in the future, we are also beginning to close the door on our past....In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose....The symptoms of this crisis of the American spirit are all around us. For the first time in the history of our country a majority of our people believe that the next five years will be worse than the past five years. Two-thirds of our people do not even vote. The productivity of American workers is actually dropping, and the willingness of Americans to save for the future has fallen below that of all other people in the Western world.

As you know, there is a growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media, and other institutions. This is not a message of happiness or reassurance, but it is the truth and it is a warning.

We were sure that ours was a nation of the ballot, not the bullet, until the murders of John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. We were taught that our armies were always invincible and our causes were always just, only to suffer the agony of Vietnam. We respected the Presidency as a place of honor until the shock of Watergate.

First of all, we must face the truth, and then we can change our course. We simply must have faith in each other, faith in our ability to govern ourselves, and faith in the future of this Nation. Restoring that faith and that confidence to America is now the most important task we face. It is a true challenge of this generation of Americans.

In the midst of a global oil-crisis and rising inflation in the United States, Carter

summoned the deepest concerns of social faith, summoned the ghosts of Kennedy and King, and reminded Americans of their earliest spiritual bearings, their deepest existential yearnings. More serious than the current economic slowdown was the “invisible” threat to American democracy: the crisis of confidence, the loss of national will, the erosion of “meaning” in individual lives. But oddly, while loss of confidence in the future was occurring, Carter claimed, so was the deprecation of the past; America was becoming stuck in an eternal present—one rife with hedonistic consumption, turning its back on God and on the authority of institutions. More importantly, it was turning its back on the promise of Americans’ expectations of themselves as citizens of the world’s oldest and greatest constitutional democracy.

It is well known that while Carter was at Camp David during that week that he was reading the *New York Times* bestseller *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) by the University of Rochester historian and social critic Christopher Lasch, mentioned earlier for his accounting of the survival mentality he saw increasingly prevalent in the American mind. A searing indictment of American culture as one diminishing in its expectations of itself in all realms, from sports to public education to conceptions of character, Lasch’s influential book claimed that Americans were increasingly focused on the present and had a waning interest in both the future and past. He protested that a therapeutic sensibility had overtaken public discourse; that citizens had become concerned, primarily, with survival rather than lofty social goals; and that the external world, including the state, had progressively penetrated into the private sphere of family and self—realms that the state and society were supposed to protect and nourish.

These trends in American society, Lasch claimed, were concomitant with the rise of the “liberated personality,” characterized by manipulative charm, a pseudo-awareness of one’s condition, love of sensuality, fascination with oral sex, hypochondria, protective emotional shallowness, avoidance of dependence, inability to mourn, and a dread of old age and death. This new personality type’s pseudo self-awareness and obsessive concern with therapy defended the subject against the besiegement of his inner life, according to Lasch, causing people to feel distanced from work and everyday life—a social arena that had become objectively bureaucratized and devoid of existential meaningfulness.

Significantly, Lasch saw “ironic detachment as an escape from routine,” and



psychic remove—as distinct from the social distance necessary for civic interaction to flourish—from political and communal life as strategies of psychic survival in contemporary American life, because “as more and more people find themselves working at jobs that are in fact beneath their abilities, as leisure and sociability themselves take on the qualities of work, the posture of cynical detachment becomes the dominant style of everyday discourse.”<sup>230</sup> Jokes, mockery, and cynicism are tools by which individuals adjusted to routine permit themselves to escape; by refusing to take seriously the various roles the modern subject performs, he dulls their potential to injure him. Though this sort of distancing, too, “becomes a routine in its own right. Awareness commenting on awareness creates an escalating cycle of self-consciousness that inhibits spontaneity.”<sup>231</sup> There was, for Lasch, to whom I’ll return in the following pages, “no exit” from the reification of modern forms of labor, the intrusion of the political and cultural into the private sphere, and the violent banality of contemporary life that created within citizens a survivalist mentality.

More broadly, Lasch saw the waning sense of historical time as characteristic of the age, which was accompanied by a nostalgia for past styles, but not for past lessons. This left the narcissistic personality searching for the meaning that Carter recounted in his speech. Lasch writes,

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<sup>230</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), p. 94. This thesis can hardly be doubted today, as advertising has made “the routine” into a self-aware marketing strategy that, luckily for the consumer, a multitude of products and services now offer to heal. A recent advertisement (January 2005) on television for the restaurant chain Chili’s features a young affluent couple coming home from work at the same exact hour, putting separate plates of food into the microwave, asking each other obligatorily how their days were, simultaneously answering “Good. How was yours? Good,” and then, after a short walk to the couch, plopping, finally, each with their own small folding table, in front of the television with a sigh of relief. The dubbed-over voice then asks, “Tired of routine? Live a little! Come to Chili’s...” The light-hearted and tongue-in-cheek tone simultaneously exaggerates the banality of contemporary middle-class living and, therewith, dissembles the oft-reported and statistically compelling accounts that daily living has become for many families a boring routine without purpose beyond survival. In this sense, Lasch’s observations seem even more astute for having been made 1979, as the ironic tone in many of today’s commercials highlight themselves as artifice, making it easier for social critics to pick up on the self-consciousness of the therapeutic impulse of advertising, something Lasch would undoubtedly find curious, as, perhaps, hiding in plain sight.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

The narcissist has no interest in the future, because he has so little interest in the past. He finds it difficult to internalize happy associations or to create a store of loving memories with which to face the latter part of his life, which under the best of conditions always brings sadness and pain. In a narcissistic society—a society that gives increasing prominence and encouragement to narcissistic traits—the cultural devaluation of the past reflects not only the poverty of the prevailing ideologies, which have lost their grip on reality and abandoned the attempt to master it, but the poverty of the narcissist’s inner life.<sup>232</sup>

Taking his lead from earlier criticism of American society by social theorists and philosophers of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse, Lasch combined Freudian social analysis with current statistics to paint an overall picture of social decline and an incipient character-type on the social horizon. He was a character increasingly dominated by outside demands and rules that threatened the integrity of his own personality.

Before continuing with the Trilateral Commission, I would like to take just a moment to digress on one aspect of this “push from the outside” made prevalent as a theme in some Frankfurt School interpretations of everyday life in the mid-century United States. This is relevant to Lasch’s understanding, among many others, of what was happening in American life.

Just over three decades prior to the publication of *The Culture of Narcissism*, the Frankfurt School exile Erich Fromm wrote in 1944 of the personalities he viewed in the American workplace:

In order that any society may function well, its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them *want* to act the way they *have* to act as members of the society or of a special class within it. They have to *desire* what objectively is *necessary* for them to do. *Outer force* is replaced by *inner compulsion*, and by the particular kind of human energy which is channeled into character traits.<sup>233</sup>

According to Fromm, the inner life, rather than acting from its own instincts and predilections, its autonomous agency, its strong sense of self, had been increasingly taken

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid, p. xvi-xvii.

<sup>233</sup> Erich Fromm, “Individual and Social Origins of Neurosis,” *American Sociological Review*, IX (1944), 380; reprinted in Clyde Kluckhohn and Henry Murray, (eds.) *Personality in Nature, Society and Culture*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948); reprinted in Riesman, p. 5 (note below).

over by the desires and directions from the social world. This change in the personality's source for motivation is what the mid-century American sociologist David Riesman would famously describe as the generalized social character moving from the "inner-directed" to the "other-directed" personality; the latter type which Riesman forebodingly saw becoming dominant in the white-collar workforce of the mid-twentieth century, particularly as a personality type that would come to dominate major urban centers.<sup>234</sup> In the *Lonely Crowd* (1961), Riesman writes

What is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual—either those known to him or those which whom he is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media....This mode of keeping in touch with others permits a close behavioral conformity, not through drill in behavior itself...but rather through an exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others.<sup>235</sup>

Similarly, we may look to the more foreboding mid-century analyses of Fromm's Frankfurt School colleague Max Horkheimer about this same trend from the inwardness to the otherness of individual motivation. He observes,

Just as all life today tends increasingly to be subjected to rationalization and planning, so the life of each individual, including his most hidden impulses, which formerly constituted his private domain, must now take the demands of rationalization and planning into account: the individual's self-preservation presupposes his adjustment to the requirements for the preservation of the system....The triumph of subjective, formalized reason is also the triumph of a reality that confronts the subject as absolute, overpowering.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> David Riesman, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961). Riesman's observation regarding the domination of the savvy/blasé mindset soon to populate urban centers are premonitory: "Since other-directed types are to be found among the young, in the larger cities, and among the upper income groups, we may assume that, unless present trends are reversed, the hegemony of other-direction lies not far off." P. 20.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>236</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), pp. 95-96. Quoted in Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, V. 1., trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), p. 353.

I mention these critiques in a lengthy digression, this shared view that the social was overtaking the sacredness of subjectivity, because the dialogue about irony as a corrosive social agent takes place in the broader context of a debate about cultural and social decline, specifically as presented by Lasch as a *defense* against penetration. Frankfurt School thinkers indeed contributed influentially to this debate both directly and by proxy, such as on the thought of Christopher Lasch, among many others. The thought of the Frankfurt School continues to form an intellectual and philosophical base (as “critical theory”) on which much American social and cultural criticism is based.

Suffice it here to say, that in Freudian fashion (brought heavily into the analysis by the Frankfurt School), Lasch attributed much of the root cause of the malaise to child-rearing practices of the 1950s and 1960s—a lenient set of behaviors that had the effect of dissolving the stringent effects of authority on the young, which resulted in a relaxed superego in later years. This resulted further in effecting general socio-economic conditions, according to Lasch, as well as in a change in the overall cultural climate. What were originally childhood issues—from fear of abandonment to dreams of omnipotence—became widely shared traits that would affect the future of the entire nation. Economies, Lasch implied, were built partially on the psychodynamics of its citizens. And the psychologies of citizens were surely built (or destroyed) by the dynamics and impacts of economic performance.

In any event, to return with these critiques in mind, the gloomy economic forecasts of the first Trilateral Commission proved eventually to be accurate, echoed in President Carter’s woes and in Lasch’s premonitions about the loss of American confidence. But the social and political predictions made by the Commission were, of course, completely wrong. The collapse of communism and the successful spread of democracy to further corners of the globe—with American capitalistic optimism in tow—dramatically underestimated democracy’s staying power. Still, even given the fall of democracy’s arch nemesis in the winter of 1991, the question of democratic social health persisted.<sup>237</sup> Social statistics continued to point toward citizens’ increasing alienation from the public sphere

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<sup>237</sup> The official end of the Soviet Union and the formation of a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) took place on December 21, 1991; Gorbachev resigned as president of the Soviet Union on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

and the disengagement from the democratic process.

So twenty years later the Trilateral Commission on Democracy met for a second time, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in September 1994 in order to discuss “why, in some of the world’s oldest democracies, in an era in which democracy as a form of government has triumphed worldwide, is public confidence in leaders and the institutions of democratic governance at or near an all-time low?”<sup>238</sup> This time the Commission included intellectual luminaries such as Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol of Harvard University, and Peter B. Evans of the University of California at Berkeley, and Alan Brinkley, among eleven other accomplished academics.

Whereas the first commission met to discuss the very health of Western-style democracy and the governability of those democracies’ peoples, the latter commission searched and found that the causes of the decline in confidence did not so much have their origins in an inherently fraying social fabric; the grid of democratic governance was found to be in good health. The decline had even less to do with general economic conditions, the end of the Cold War, or the media—three explanations that had been passed around as easy answers. The problem, the authors found, was instead with the specific people and actions in contemporary government and politics themselves; citizens did not feel connected to their elected representatives and were upset by the dealings and decisions those representatives had made on behalf of the public and, more deeply, on behalf of the national identity. A resultant disconnect and citizen cynicism had consequently taken root, leaving people feeling alienated from those who had claimed to have their best interests at heart, whom they claimed to represent.

The disconnect manifested itself in, among dozens of other quantifiers, a famed American public-opinion measurement—the Harris Poll. This questionnaire asks the responder to evaluate his or her agreement with the following five statements:

- 1) The people running the country don’t really care what happens to you.
- 2) Most people in power try to take advantage of people like yourself.
- 3) You’re left out of things going on around you.
- 4) The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.
- 5) What you think doesn’t count very much anymore.

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<sup>238</sup> Robert Putnam and Susan J. Pharr, eds., *Disaffected Democracies: What’s Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. xv.

In the 1960s respondents to the Harris Poll showed only nominal agreement with these statements; barely one-third of respondents concurred. By the mid-1990s, however, over two-thirds of respondents found these statements to accurately describe their view of the political world.<sup>239</sup> It was clear that the American population had slowly adopted a rational skepticism towards American politics and governance. They distrusted their leaders and felt isolated from a national identity created in part by the actions their leaders were taking in the world and at home. The result was a psychological break and delegitimizing of authority. The sure sign was an increasingly pervasive citizen-cynicism.

The New School sociologist Jeffrey C. Goldfarb's *The Cynical Society* (1991) had picked up on this earlier and reported with a patently clear iteration: "I believe that the single most pressing challenge facing American democracy today is widespread public cynicism....Cynicism in our world is a form of legitimation through disbelief."<sup>240</sup> Likewise, as there were no signs of let-up or ease in this seemingly mysterious growth of cynicism, Michael Lerner's broad-based *Politics of Meaning* (1996)—itself both a book and small social movement that included intellectual luminaries such as Naomi Wolf and Cornel West—begins with saying that

we are caught within a web of cynicism that makes us question whether there could be any higher purpose besides material self-interest and looking out for number one....The ethos of cynicism and selfishness plays through our personal lives, often in destructive ways.<sup>241</sup>

In 1995, Andrew Delbanco, a frequent contributor to the nation's intellectual quarterlies and prominent humanities professor at Columbia University, noted, in an increasingly frequent conflation of cynicism and irony, that "the triumph of irony has never been as complete as it is today. We have reached a point where it is not only specific objects of belief that have been discredited but the very capacity to believe."<sup>242</sup>

And such attitudes were not limited to American borders. In Great Britain on

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>240</sup> Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *The Cynical Society: The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culture in American Life*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 1.

<sup>241</sup> Michael Lerner, *The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism*. (Reading, Massachusetts, 1996), pp. 3, 9.

<sup>242</sup> Delbanco, *Death of Satan*, p. 210.

January 14, 1994, Prime Minister John Major's Chief Secretary of the Treasury, Michael Portillo, delivered a speech in front of a conservative dinner gathering in London, stating that "national cynicism...[is] one of the greatest threats that has ever faced the British nation."<sup>243</sup> Portillo went on to condemn, as his conservative counterparts in the United States were also wont to do, the universities, intellectual elitism, cultural relativism, and the decadence of the 1960s for the current state of public apathy and civic disengagement.

A year earlier, in 1993, the American group Teachers for a Democratic Culture had laid out their guidelines for doing literary criticism in a more democratic fashion, stating, in Regulation VII ("No Irony") that

the lesson is clear. Employing irony, speaking tongue in cheek, talking wryly or self-mockingly—these smartass intellectual practices give our whole profession a bad name. It there's one thing calculated to alienate an otherwise friendly and helpful press, it's irony. As Dan Quayle once put it, irony is an ill wind that bites the hand that feeds our fashionable cynicism....We cannot mince words about irony. Knock it off, and knock it off now....great literature demands of us a high seriousness of purpose.<sup>244</sup>

Irony was already on the outs with Americans with democratic fostering in mind. Even, (gasp), among literary critics! The dangers of the humanities and of irony's liberating possibilities at the expense of democratic procedure and, importantly, behavior, were at odds. Which is why, perhaps foreseeing the Portillo portent, in 1994 in Britain's (unfortunately, now-defunct) literary bimonthly, *The Modern Review*, editors Toby Young and Tom Vanderbilt inquisitively asked, (seven years prior to 9/11/01), if it was the "end of the age of irony?"<sup>245</sup> For Young, he had hoped not; the only alternative in this age would be, he proclaimed, naïve idealism, and that, for the intellectually honest, was not an option. Irony and detachment were a way of dealing authentically with the cultural situation in which he found himself. Two years later, in 1996, a momentous figure was reported by noted American journalist and social critic Daniel Yankelovich, who

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<sup>243</sup> Michael Portillo, "Poison of a New British Disease," *Independent on Sunday*, January 16, 1994. Quoted in Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity*, (London: Verso, 1997), p. 15.

<sup>244</sup> M. Berube and G. Graff, "Regulations for literary criticism in the 1990s," *Democratic Culture* 2, 2:2-3, 1993. Quoted in Hutcheon, p. 7.

<sup>245</sup> Toby Young and Tom Vanderbilt, "The End of Irony," *The Modern Review*, 1.14 (April-May 1994).

pronounced that “public distress about the state of our social morality has reached nearly universal proportions: 87 percent of the public fear that something is fundamentally wrong with America’s moral condition.”<sup>246</sup> Conflated in this worry was incivility, decline of civic trust, and a relaxing of “moral values.”

Widespread social opinion confirmed every worry over the state of Americans’ public trust in the mid-1990s. Even among the other areas represented in the Commission on Trilateral Democracies—Japan and Europe—the authors of the second Trilateral were forced to admit that the “downtrend is longest and clearest in the United States, where polling has produced the most abundant systematic evidence.”<sup>247</sup> Former Democratic U.S. Senator from New Jersey and 2000 presidential candidate Bill Bradley quoted a “Mood of America” poll from 1995 that found “76% of those surveyed agreed that ‘there is less concern for others than there once was.’”<sup>248</sup> Robert Putnam, co-author of the Trilateral report and author of the feverishly discussed *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), about the decline of social trust in the United States, noted that during the two decades from 1974 to 1994 neighborly socializing—a trusted indicator of social cohesion—declined from 61% to 47%.<sup>249</sup> Further, taking the temperature of Americans’ everyday behavior toward one another in public life, a *U.S. News and World Report* national survey from 1996, the same year in which Yankelovitch reported on the nation’s shaky moral bearings, reported that “eighty-nine percent of Americans considered the nation’s incivility to be a problem.”<sup>250</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government helped to sponsor the Saguaro Report, a lengthy brief on American civic health by a national research team spearheaded by Putnam and composed of academically illustrious sociologists, political scientists, demographers, and civic leaders. The final report, published in 2000, revealed that simple events like dinner parties had declined 25% since the mid-1960s; the number of people who served as club officers, attended school or

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<sup>246</sup> Quoted in William J. Bennett, *The Death of Outrage*. (New York: The Free Press, 1998), p. 35.

<sup>247</sup> Putnam and Pharr, p. 8.

<sup>248</sup> Bill Bradley, “Civil Society and the Rebirth of Our National Community,” *Responsive Community* 5, no. 29 (spring 1995), p. 5.

<sup>249</sup> Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone, Revisited,” *Responsive Community* 5, no. 2 (spring 1995), p. 28.

<sup>250</sup> John Marks, “The American Uncivil Wars,” *U.S. News and World Report*, April 22, 1996, p. 68. The above three statistics quoted in Christopher Beem, *The Necessity of Politics*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 1.



community meetings, political events, or worked with political organizations had dropped by 35%; and the number of times friends got together during a typical week had dropped 45% since the mid-1970s. Disturbingly, the report showed that less than a third of Americans felt they could trust one another, and that Americans' perception of their fellow citizens as moral and honest individuals had fallen dramatically since the early 1950s. The picture was progressively more clear: Americans were spending more time alone and spending less energy either thinking about or being with others.

The decline in civic engagement—or in Putnam's use “social capital”<sup>251</sup>—they claimed, was primarily the result of television having taken the place of social gatherings as a form of relaxation, a shift from a more civic-minded generation of adults to a less civic-minded generation of Baby Boomers, the expanding load of work hours, and the politically charged but statistically accurate observation that women's entry into the work world had sapped neighborhoods of once-vital civic leadership. Lastly, car-centered cities and insufficient amounts of communal space have had the effect of degrading and even preventing daily public interaction.

In a 1997 article on CNN's website, commentator William Schneider noted that polls taken in 1958 and 1964 showed that three-quarters of Americans believed they could trust the Federal government “to do what was right.” Furthermore, the percentage of Americans who said they trusted the government in Washington fell to 65% in 1966, 61% in 1968, and 53% in 1970. After Vietnam and Watergate, in 1974, 36% said they still trusted the government; this number rose to 44% in 1984. Thereafter, according to the same polls, in 1997, only 32% of United States citizens put their faith in the federal government to do the right thing. By yet another poll, quoted in a September 2004 article by *Harper's Magazine* editor Lewis Lapham, a survey of respondents about trust in government was at 62% in 1964; that number had sunk to 19% by 1994.<sup>252</sup> And most recently, a 2004 Reuters/DecisionQuest poll, taken at the time of this writing, revealed in

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<sup>251</sup> Though it's most often associated with Putnam, the term “social capital” was originally coined—at least in its English variation—by sociologist James Coleman in chapter five of *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). Coleman used the term to describe the social norms and expectations that form the base for economic activity but could not be grasped solely from an economic perspective. Putnam's later use (1995) popularized the term and introduced it to the general educated reader.

<sup>252</sup> Quoted in Lewis Lapham, “Tentacles of Rage: The Republican propaganda mill, a brief history,” *Harper's Magazine*, September 2004, p. 41.

that 61% of Americans had lost faith in both government and corporate leaders over the past four years, about which Philip Anthony, DecisionQuest's CEO said, "There is an epidemic level of lost trust here."<sup>253</sup>

For anyone who is remotely concerned about the state of social health in the United States, these are unsettling statistics. Regardless of how anyone may spin them, these data spell out the enormous loss of trust that citizens of the United States have in their elected officials, both national and local, the leaders of businesses—a crucial component to the financial support structures of civil society—and to other professions entrusted with maintaining public levels of truthfulness, such as judges and lawyers. Support and the legitimacy of democratic institutions is being shed in tow, as citizens gradually look to private life as refuge, as a "heaven in a heartless world."<sup>254</sup>

### *3.2 What's Irony Got to Do with It?*

When one is skeptical, one stands back to observe more closely what one is skeptical about; distance enables perspective. A military entrenchment on a hill has the advantage in conflict because it can see what is coming. Trust, by definition, is an attitude devoid of skeptical glances and suspicions. (Crucially, Durkheim saw trust not just as a category of social science, but as *the binding element* of social life; it had, as mentioned earlier, the character of the sacred.) Therefore, an increase in devious or deceptive actions by political figures—entrusted by the public to take care of the common good—leads to the electing democratic public to withhold their trust. When deceptive actions, lying, and misleading occur by corporations and institutions—both entrusted with public well-being in the private and public spheres respectively—the breakdown of trust spreads from skepticism towards authority (already handicapped in the American mind due to a tradition of anti-authoritarianism and hyper-individualism) to a general social skepticism towards trust in those one does not know—strangers, or, the public itself. This attitude

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<sup>253</sup> "Poll Shows U.S. Trust of Politicians 'Epidemic.'" Reported on Reuters, September 28, 2004 by Gail Appleson.

<sup>254</sup> This term makes reference to Christopher Lasch's book of the same title, *Heaven in A Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).

leads to what journalist Laura Pappano has identified as the “connection gap.”<sup>255</sup>

Claus Offe, professor of political science at Humboldt University in Berlin, offers a credible connection between declining social trust and the behavior of institutions and representative figures. “Any evidence,” he writes,

of institutions permitting (or failing to detect) lies, of being unable to make actors keep contracts and honor promises, of being biased and permitting unfair advantages, and of failing to compensate at least some major kinds of social inequalities appear to be the only legitimate reasons for ‘systematic’ distrust and eventually cynicism.<sup>256</sup>

In this sense, ironic detachment from public life—conceived of as the subject viewing himself as separate from a more broadly shared experience—is seen as a consequence, not a cause, of the current state of affairs. Indeed, the political scientist William

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<sup>255</sup> Laura Pappano, *The Connection Gap: Why Americans Feel So Alone*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001). An elaboration upon an essay originally published in the *Boston Globe Magazine*, Pappano’s book exhibits both genuine concern and brave vulnerability in the face of America’s waning civic engagement. She carefully points out that we are spending more time in front of screens than in front of people, more time obsessed with speed than with taking our time, more time thinking about ourselves and our images than about others and their well-being, and more time routing our lives around the values of the market—such as efficiency and convenience—than around the human values of loyalty, trustworthiness, and empathy. Pappano claims that the detritus and poetry of daily life are falling by the way side in exchange for individualized, stylized self-sufficiency—devoid of the edges that would prevent a streamlined life. She claims also that the word “community” gets kicked around a lot. But, unlike the communities that evolve from a shared experience of place and history, oftentimes the current use of the term involves only a “group of people” connected by an ethereal commitment to a certain brand, membership to a shopping club, chat room, or adherence to a respected zip code. Pappano’s method of personal social observation gets at some daily social ills and civic ailments, too: lack of general neighborliness, focus on the self over others in the supermarket line, time constraints on leisure activity and community involvement, “play dates” scheduled for children, the need for speed, the devaluation of everyday conversations, and the atomization of home and family life by media technologies. Though *The Connection Gap* might occasionally exaggerate the degree to which America’s civic life is ailing, recalling the Saguaro Report’s Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey allows for a sigh of relief: 80 percent of national respondents said that people in their neighborhood gave them a sense of community. And of the respondents who had Internet access—a little over half—only seventeen percent reported that they got a sense of community online. Additionally, the number of charitable organizations created in recent years has drastically increased.

<sup>256</sup> Claus Offe, “How can we trust our fellow citizens?” *Democracy and Trust*, ed. Mark E. Warren. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 75. Offe is also the author of *Contradictions of the Welfare State* and *Disorganized Capitalism: Contemporary Transformations of Work and Politics*, both from the MIT Press’s (Cambridge, MA) Studies in Contemporary German Thought series, edited by Thomas McCarthy.

Chaloupka offers a succinct claim:

The cynicism so easily diagnosed in political talk resists spectacles, sermons, and editorials. Its resilience raises an interesting possibility. The cynic may be cynical for good reason: the objects of a cynic's contempt might richly deserve such a response....[That is,] part of the reason we are a cynical society is that we have good reason.<sup>257</sup>

Similarly, from the same volume in which Offe's observation appears, *Democracy and Trust* (1999), editor Mark E. Warren, professor of political science at Georgetown University, notes the possibility that "citizens are becoming more cynical because their expectations have increased without a corresponding increase in the trustworthiness of officials."<sup>258</sup> The disjunction between citizens' expectations of officials and those officials' actual behavior, these claims indicate, results in a psychological disengagement from public life and a degrading of civic trust.

As institutions engender such trust amongst strangers, this bond is fragile and is the sole glue between a shared public life and individuals' private concerns and moral commitments. When that bond is broken or in doubt, detachment and skepticism result, not only towards the institutions and officials, but the strangers that those institutional relations were supposed to validate and protect. To this point, Sloterdijk insightfully offers that "the more a modern society appears to be without alternatives, the more it will allow itself to be cynical. In the end, it is ironical about its own legitimation."<sup>259</sup>

The statistical evidence makes it patently clear that a concern for the state of Western democracies' social health was garnering much attention during the 1990s. So much so that we can say, without affect, that Americans' trust in one another and in their government has fallen *drastically* in the past forty years. Whatever factors have contributed this demise, it can be confidently stated that "ironic detachment" is closely *related* to civic disengagement—indeed in certain places synonymous with that disengagement—and that this attitude somehow coincides with the decline in "social capital." Insofar as irony

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<sup>257</sup> Chaloupka, pp. 9, 28.

<sup>258</sup> Mark E. Warren, "Conclusion," *Democracy and Trust*, ed. Mark E. Warren. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 350.

<sup>259</sup> Sloterdijk, p. 112. The founding address for the discussion of legitimation of authority in modernity are addressed famously in Jürgen Habermas, *The Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).

proposes a skepticism towards or distance from social life, a guarding of private interiority and reflexive psychological remove, it is antagonistic and essentially anti-civic. The above statistics, then, seem relevant relationally, but not necessarily causally.

### 3.3 *Civil Society*

To set the stage for the exchange over civic trust, it is worth noting that it takes place within the larger context of the health of American civil society, the arena of social life primarily concerned with aspects created not by force or necessity, but rather by non-utilitarian motivations, by free association. Its binding element is the attitude of trust towards others that one does not know. In free association, one joins together with others of common interest to exchange ideas about mutually shared interests and objectives. As one eloquent and prolific advocate, Robert Wuthnow, writes:

The civil society debate is...about the quality of social life itself, especially in those voluntary realms governed by freedom of association rather than by coercive powers of law and politics, and in those spheres of life motivated by commitments other than profit and self-interest. The civil society debate is vitally concerned with the extent and quality of social interaction, with relationships that build and sustain moral commitment and character, and with the collective values that implicitly or explicitly define us as a people.<sup>260</sup>

The continuing civil society debate in the United States is at once about the intellectualized social structure of the way in which government, commerce, institutions, and the populace relate to one another, as well as about how citizen-strangers behave towards one another in public.

In order for civil society to work and remain healthy, reciprocal trust relationships must be formed, fostered, and maintained. Civic trust must forever renew itself through evidentiary behaviors and relationships that legitimate trust, as well as through public proclamations of its health and vibrancy. Individuals, groups, and institutions must therefore first acquire trust by those they served and maintain the legitimacy of that trust over time. A civil society is thus composed of private citizens who actively participate in

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<sup>260</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity and Civil Society: The Contemporary Debate*. (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1996), p. 3.

social affairs and who expect mutual and implicit *recognition* of each other as citizens. As far back as Aristotle, a civil society is understood as the opposite of “barbarism”; that is, it is the acknowledgement of the rule of law over the rule of force, the recognition of others’ free agency and free ability of self-determination, of self-possessed individuality. It therefore implied certain types of behavior circumscribed within its realm.

In *The Necessity of Politics: Reclaiming American Public Life* (1999), Christopher Beem, director of the Democracy and Community Program at the Johnson Foundation, recounts this concept of civil society—as setting barbarism and force against the rule of law, of recognizing agency—reviewing its use through figures such as Cicero, Augustine, and Aquinas, and then through Locke, Kant, and Rousseau. Between 1750 and 1850, Beem contends, modernity’s march had had a corrosive effect on the inherited concept of civil society, so much that

the virtues that corresponded to the old social order—a sense of one’s place, of being bound and obliged to the past, the land, and one’s community, a feeling of stability through time—all of these were slowly dying as well. Society becomes comparatively peripatetic and rudderless, more individualistic, more driven by self-interest and the quest for possessions.<sup>261</sup>

In Beem’s line of narration this image of social collapse was wrought by modernity and its new organizational structures, to which many social commentators today concede as the beginnings of social and cultural “decline.” In doing so, an attendant nostalgia is a near-constant traveling companion to analyses of social breakdown, usually evidenced and tied together in a host of related social problems, such as crime rates, illegitimate births, and ethnic or generational tensions. Indeed, as Beem notes, “beliefs about a declining social fabric are tied to a verifiable increase in a variety of social pathologies. Very concrete and ascendant social problems...are behind much of the contemporary feelings of anxiety, despair, and dread.”<sup>262</sup>

Thus recommendations for adjusting moral behaviors of actors in the social body are conceived of as part of the solution to general social unease. From Aristotle through Erasmus through Hegel, the idea of civil society has always contained within it

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<sup>261</sup> Beem, p. 45.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

prescriptions for civil conduct. And so it is within the current civil society debate that *civility* becomes an important and persistent concern as a mode of behavior that is expected of agents living and acting within civil society, and it comes with certain expectations and normative standards that are assumed and encouraged to increase or maintain high levels of civic trust and respect. As Gertrude Himmelfarb states, “Civil society has the function of...imbuing [the citizen] with a sense of duties and responsibilities as well as rights and privileges.”<sup>263</sup>

Among the motivating values of these behaviors are the “recognition of the full humanity of one’s self and others, recognition of interdependence with the other, and a desire to make common cause with the other.”<sup>264</sup> More succinctly, the situation of trust implied and necessary in civil behavior is the mutual recognition of the other’s agency. In doing so, citizens fully recognize the selfhood of the other and their ethical relationship and obligations to fellow citizens. Civil behavior thus makes possible this sort of relationship because it recognizes the free will—and simultaneously the non-givenness of agreement—of the other to negotiate their own behavior; a civil distance thus recognizes the self-regard of the other—it is the gap that exists between individuals necessary for the recognition of privacy. These values are supposed to motivate certain behaviors towards others, such as courtesy, generosity, deference, consideration, and sincerity. They are enacted only when there is significant trust within the social body such that enacting the behaviors is concomitant with being able to trust the social actors with whom one always lives.

Incivility, on the other hand, is often interpreted to reveal a lack of general trust among citizens themselves; it is perceived most often as a disregard for one’s neighbors or fellow citizens in a public setting, rude or disruptive behavior, discourtesy, and indifference to generally accepted norms of public behavior. Such incivility takes as its starting point a suspicion of other social agents and a withholding of trust from them. The implied motivation of incivility is not recognizing the full humanity of others, not wishing to come to common cause with the other, and not recognizing interdependence. These

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<sup>263</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999) p. 31.

<sup>264</sup> Adam McClellan, “Beyond Courtesy,” in Rouner, *Civility*, p. 92.

withholdings are interpreted by social commentators to be indicative of breakdown.<sup>265</sup>

### *3.4 Concerns of the Academic Punditry*

Politically, the early 1990s were characterized by a distaste for politics, which may explain, in part, the release a spate of books and institutions dedicated to reconfiguring politics and civic life. Congress was gridlocked over Clinton healthcare reform; militias were making news for their radically anti-government standoffs; the FBI blew up the Waco compound; Newt Gingrich Republicans launched a Contract with America; and Ross Perot became a serious outsider threat. There was general discord in Washington, D.C., and Americans heard the partisan clamor from Maine to New Mexico. Disgusted, they turned further away from public life.

In a counter-move to the statistical studies of civic health and the intellectual sparring about civil society, a sub-battle of the Culture Wars, the mid-1990s also saw a surge of foundations and institutes dedicated to restoring civility to public life and discourse in practical, policy-oriented terms. The Institute for Civil Society, based in Newton, Massachusetts, was started with an anonymous \$35 million grant to promote civility, hiring retired congresswoman Pat Schroeder as its spokesperson. The Forum on Civility was founded in the mid-1990s by former Secretary of Education, head of the National Endowment of the Humanities, and drug czar under the first Bush administration, William J. Bennett. Recruiting Georgia Senator Sam Nunn, the forum was launched as a response to “growing incivility in American public life” in the mid-1990s. Lamar Alexander, a former Republican presidential candidate, joined the Commission on Philanthropy and Civic Renewal as its chair in 1997, which is now funded by the conservative Harry and Lynde Bradley Foundation at the Hudson Institute of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Dozens of lengthy books on the topic of civic trust and civility, some mentioned above—about its makeup, health, and fostering—appeared every few months. From Robert H. Bork’s *Slouching towards Gomorrah* (1996) to Stephen L. Carter’s *Civility* (1998), Robert Bellah and company’s *Habits of the Heart* (1985/1996), and Amitai Etzioni’s *The*

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<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.



*Spirit of Community* (2004), the topic obsessed those concerned with the social health of the nation. Aptly, *The Social Health of the Nation*, by Marc and Marque-Luisa Miringoff was published in 1999, claiming to show “how America is really doing.”<sup>266</sup> Articles in magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Weekly Standard*, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Republic*, *The American Prospect*, *Commentary*, *Commonweal*, *Public Interest*, *The National Interest*, and many others were engaged in a heated debate about why incivility was reigning in America and what they could do to get civil behavior back into the running.

In what follows, I would like to discuss some of these works, but I will concentrate on two particular volumes that center specifically on the debate about irony and its relation to the public. I have found both of these works to be important, though they are written by minds of vastly different intellectual maturity: Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) and Jedediah Purdy’s *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (1999). Book-ending the decade of the 1990s, these two works seem to speak to each other by virtue of their relative distance from the otherwise Washington-New York insidership of the debate, which lends them a certain critical perspective and a broader consideration of irony and civic trust. The former book opened the floodgates on a decade of debate with an agile philosophical polemic about irony’s new role in contemporary cosmopolitan Western minds, and the latter, an attempt to discuss irony among so-called Generation X-ers, was the unsuspecting recipient of much ill-will that that the debate had generated over the previous ten years. I will discuss them after addressing some of the other works involved the political debate over civic trust and irony in the 1990s.

Of course, it is important to remember that such laments and concerns are not at all new in America. Metaphors of communal breakdown, rampant materialism, and social sickness have been alarming preachers and politicians (particularly when they were the same thing) for centuries. During the Great Awakening and the revivalism of the 1740s, 50s, and 60s, for example, when the French and Indian Wars were terrorizing,

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<sup>266</sup> Marc and Marque-Luisa Miringoff, *The Social Health of the Nation: How America is Really Doing*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

demographic dislocation was rising, economic recession (particularly that of 1745) was wreaking havoc on lives, and disease epidemics (for example, that of diphtheria from 1735-37), preachers were fast to harbingers the coming of cultural death...lest one repent, of course. Psychologically, the revivalists' remedy was a drastic change in social behavior and belief, one that starkly sets apart good from evil, purity from corruption, and so forth.

Today, though, conservative commentators like Ellen Goodman, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Paul Samuelson, Hendrik Hertzberg, Ken Bode, Charles Krauthammer, Mary Matalin, Bill Kristol, and Rush Limbaugh, all came to the discussion about civility with a renewed call to traditional values and family life. To varying degrees, these commentators believe that fundamental, Christian institutions—family, church, nation—were being eroded by a liberal, secularist culture and media bent on selling their version of anti-American relativism and a moral free-for-allism, and that such attitudes—accelerated by the decadent days of the 1960s—were having corrosive effects on the culture at large, from crime rates to drug use and illegitimate births. The solutions to these statistically corroborated social problems came in a variety of flavors; nearly all of them contained some version of a renewed respect for moral authority and social hierarchy.

For intellectuals of a conservative bent, the media had come to be known as the spawning grounds for social detachment and moral decay. Working within the broader metaphor of disease, neoconservatives and those standing for family values, argued that pop culture—through television, radio, rap music, and magazines—was releasing a morally degenerating influenza upon the nation's youth. Alas this target practice at pop culture arguably started with what has come to be known as the “Murphy Brown” incident, a public comment made in 1992 by George Herbert Walker Bush's vice president, Dan Quayle.

In response to then-recent studies about the rise of illegitimate births in the United States, Quayle—highlighted earlier for bemoaning irony's contribution to cynical atrophy—brought the topic of moral values and civility further into public discourse by pinning it to the television show *Murphy Brown*, the title character of which was played by Candice Bergen, for having portrayed a woman conceiving a child out of wedlock.

Though many of Quayle's fellow social conservatives agreed, the comment was just as equally met with laughter at the vice president's indignation at a fictional woman on a half-hour sitcom for being a harbinger to society's decline. He said, in August 1992:

It doesn't help matters when prime time TV has Murphy Brown—a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman—mocking the importance of a father, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another “lifestyle choice.” I know it is not fashionable to talk about moral values, but we need to do it. Even though our cultural leaders in Hollywood, network TV, the national newspapers routinely jeer at them, I think that most of us in this room know that some things are good, and other things are wrong. Now it's time to make the discussion public. It's time to talk again about family, hard work, integrity and personal responsibility. We cannot be embarrassed out of the belief that two parents, married to each other, are better in most cases for children than one. That honest work is better than hand-outs—or crime. That we are our brother's keepers. That it's worth making an effort, even when rewards aren't immediate. So I think the time has come to renew our public commitment to our Judeo-Christian values—in our churches and synagogues, our civic organizations and our schools. We are, as our children recite each morning, “one nation under God.” That's a useful framework for acknowledging a duty and an authority higher than our own pleasures and personal ambitions.

Quayle's sentiments were part of a growing political shift to the right in the concern for Americans' private morality, as well as in the concentrated critique of the academic left by conservative think tanks. The latter was brought on by frustration with flagging academic standards, tolerance for a lack of rigorous academic discipline, and the collective dislike of French literary theory, perceived as helping to further relativize and destabilize the dominant Protestant culture of the United States by casting into doubt a white, Christian, and heterosexual “homogenous” take on culture and history, at the expense of voices at one point not allowed or unable to speak for themselves, particularly those of African Americans, women, and the disenfranchised. As in Rosenblatt's excerpt earlier, it is important here to note that Quayle locates the “jeering” at moral values with the “cultural leaders in Hollywood, network TV, [and] the national newspapers,” in short, the beginnings of the characterization of the liberal mentality in the media.<sup>267</sup> The 1980s and 1990s saw a huge influx of funding to conservative think-tanks, foundations,

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<sup>267</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I am not looking at the finer points of Quayle's accusation. That is, I am addressing the content and concern of a well-known conservative politician's speech, not the accuracy of his claims. My role here, at best, is not that of a pundit.

and publications aimed at “correcting” the perceived ubiquity of liberalism’s influence.<sup>268</sup>

Among the outspoken, influential, and articulate critics of the left and of American public culture was 1986 Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork, whose *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* (1996) holds that the “liberal intellectuals” are responsible for the spreading of disdain, contempt, and disparagement of American values. To express his own aggravation with modern liberalism and the culture it had created, Bork quotes Austrian-born Nobel economist Friedrich von Hayek: “The mood of [the West’s] intellectual leaders has long been characterized by disillusionment with its principles, disparagement of its achievements, and exclusive concern with the creation of ‘better worlds.’”<sup>269</sup>

For Bork, now a senior research fellow at the avowedly conservative American Enterprise Institute, American decline began in the eighteenth century with the Founders themselves; the Sixties were merely the final culmination of all that was radically askew in the philosophical background of American founding principles. Bork reflected that

in the 1980s, it seemed, at last, that the Sixties were over. They were not. It was a malignant decade that, after a fifteen-year remission, returned in the 1980s to metastasize more devastatingly throughout our culture than it had in the Sixties...The Sixties radicals are still with us, but now they do not paralyze they universities; they run the universities.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> For a specific first-person narrative of observing the beginnings of this communication program on behalf of the conservative agenda, see Lewis Lapham’s “Tentacles of Rage,” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 2004. The article has been subsequently debated in the libertarian *Reason* magazine, as well as on Slate.com and on the Accuracy in Media website (“Liberal Editor is Disgraced” by Cliff Kincaid on September 24, 2004, at [www.aim.org/media\\_monitor/1965\\_0\\_2\\_0\\_C/](http://www.aim.org/media_monitor/1965_0_2_0_C/)), specifically for Lapham’s hasty “reporting” on characteristics of the Republican National Convention in New York City before the convention had taken place. In the *Reason* article from September 3, 2004, “Higher Goals: Republicans learn to stop worrying and love Leviathan,” ([www.reason.com/sullum/090304.shtml](http://www.reason.com/sullum/090304.shtml)) senior editor Jacob Sullum writes that, “When *Harper’s* editor Lewis Lapham described his thoughts as he listened to the speeches at the Republican National Convention, the problem was not just that the convention had not occurred yet. It was also that the Republican Party he imagined does not exist. Writing in the September issue of *Harper’s*, which subscribers received in early August, Lapham said ‘the speeches in Madison Square Garden affirmed the great truths now routinely preached from the pulpits of Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal*—government the problem, not the solution; the social contract a dead letter; the free market the answer to every maiden’s prayer.’ Even as a caricature, that list bears little resemblance to the main themes of the actual convention, where calls for cutting government and praise of the free market were conspicuous mainly by their absence.”

<sup>269</sup> Friedrich Hayek quoted in Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 83.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Bork's thesis has helped to form a standard canon of response upon which many discontented with modern American culture and society still rely. The general story, made explicit and widely digestible by Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987), himself influenced by the University of Chicago political philosopher Leo Strauss, goes something like this: the founding principles of American society, as circumscribed in the Constitution by the Founders, concentrate on the philosophical concepts of liberty and equality. Though sounding high-minded and worthwhile, these two concepts of modern philosophy—particularly influential in the thought of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and J. S. Mill—contain a decadent logic that has worked itself out for the last two-hundred years, culminating in the apotheosis of individualism and death of moral authority in the 1960s. We now find ourselves in recent years trying to reclaim those values against the continued propagation of liberty and equality gone awry. The basic thesis of Bork's book is thus that radical individuality and radical egalitarianism—the ultimate results of the principles of liberty and equality—are to blame for the current decline in American culture.

The abstract logic of liberty and equality—ensuring freedom from official interference in private life and demanding that individuals are treated identically before the law and government, regardless of birth or social standing to the greatest number of individuals—had the twin effects of releasing individual minds from the sense of duty, and of demanding the subservience of nature and a transcendent God to the will of man. Modern liberalism, according to Bork and likeminded thinkers, while expanding the conditions of liberty to all people, not just the elect, has stripped social relations of the natural boundaries of ability and rank (thus the entrenched opposition to affirmative action). The combined result of these logics has resulted in a world of individuals who hold themselves in incredibly high regard, have no conception of their appropriate relations to their fellow citizens, little or no respect for religious or familial authority, few or no limits set to their own personal gratification, and a refusal to submit their own wills and desires to the considerations of the larger community and to God.

For Bork, the solution to this problem—admittedly simplified here—is to create modern enclaves that separate the family from the influence of modern liberalism in American society, such as with home-schooling or gated communities. To produce moral

and spiritual regeneration, to foster social cohesion, Bork suggests four clear solutions: a religious revival, a renewal of the public discourse about morality, a cataclysmic war, or deep economic recession. Mostly, however,

the most promising development of our time is the rise of an energetic, optimistic, and politically sophisticated religious conservatism. It may prove more powerful than merely political or economic conservatism because religious conservatism's objectives are cultural and moral as well.<sup>271</sup>

In order for society to be healed from the wounds of radical individualism and egalitarianism, Bork believes we have to return to a time to before their influence was so pervasive.<sup>272</sup>

Though of a different political persuasion, the sociologist and oft-cited contemporary voice of Alexis de Tocqueville, Robert Bellah, set out with his team ten years earlier to compose *Habits of the Heart* (1985), a volume dedicated to looking at the state of shared morality and the destructive effects of individualism on public life. Along with the scholars Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, William M. Sullivan, Richard Madson, Bellah—already famed for having written earlier on the same subject in *The Broken Covenant* (1975), another influence on President Carter—interviewed some two hundred citizens to see how they viewed the current state of American public life. Bellah and his colleagues found nostalgic yearning for an America built of small communities and a coherent moral life. Because of individualism and the imagery and mythic system which propels it, however, the sorts of places and situations that individuals claim to want are beat out by the realization of the “unencumbered self”; all other relations are secondary attempts at total individual freedom.

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., p. 336.

<sup>272</sup> A recent film takes this nostalgic yearning to concrete (and frightening) literalization. M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* (2004) appears to be set in late 19<sup>th</sup> century eastern Pennsylvania. The entire film plays out with the viewer under the impression that it is a historical thriller. The surprise element, for which the director is known, is that the group living in the small community is actually the result of a self-imposed compact, agreed upon and entered into by cosmopolitans who became fed up with modern society and decided to hem themselves off from the modern world in the late 1970s. Founded, of course, by a *professor* of American History at the University of Pennsylvania, the group of ten moved to the eastern Pennsylvanian countryside and created, with the inheritance of the professor's wealthy father, a security-fence protected “wildlife preserve” where the community does its living and dying, as if it were one hundred years ago.

Religion plays a large role in *Habits of the Heart*; it is a motivating force that leads people back, they believe, to a sense of connectedness to others. *Habits of the Heart*, politically, unlike Bork, blames not the 1960s but the 1980s and Reagan myth-weaving of the rustic, nostalgic individualism that logically lead to a valuation and justification for personal greed. Cynicism, they believe, results from this view because it concentrates the efforts of individuals on their own acquisition and turns them away from consideration of the public good. Ultimately, Bellah and company, as well as Bork, are nostalgic for the same sorts of America that many of their respondents describe: relatively small moral communities that hold up local commitments to community and the ethical relationships necessary to sustain those communities higher than each member's selfish ends.

This sort of nostalgia is present as well in the books *One Nation, Two Cultures* (1999) and *The De-Moralization of America* (1995), by Gertrude Himmelfarb, a popular American political conservative and respected historian of Victorian social life and wife of Irving Kristol. More moderate than Bork, Himmelfarb argues as well that America is well into a state of moral decay. Among the primary culprits for the nation's moral decline, she believes, like some of her socially conservative counterparts, are the relativism and tradition-smashing counterculture of the 1960s. Whereas the 1950s represented the result of an unbroken tradition of respect for political and religious authority, family values, and a deep belief in the objective standards of truth and beauty, the 1960s were the breeding grounds for a flight from personal responsibility, celebration of individualism, rejection of notions of objectivity, unrestrained self-gratification, and disrespect for authority.

The social results of the 1960s, which she buttresses with impressive social statistics (assumed to be but not proven *causally* related), are an increase in the number of abortions, illegitimate births, violent crime, and the expansion of the welfare state seen in the decades following the 1960s. The counterculture has now moved to the center, Himmelfarb notes, but Americans are defying this trend with an increased religiosity, an attendant faith in moral absolutes, and an obedience to moral and political authority. Still, the center of American culture—seen in popular programming, music, and Hollywood—remains dominated by references to the hedonistic youth culture of the 1960s and 1970s. The vibrancy and representational dominance Himmelfarb takes in part to be evidence that the Sixties' ethos still having a stranglehold on the popular

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<sup>273</sup> Representationally this is true. But on the contrary, I would argue that current visual nostalgia for Sixties and Seventies fashion and culture seems to confirm *that those eras are definitely dead, not returning*. The dump trucks of popular culture began heaping nostalgia upon Americans in the 1970s with the television shows *Happy Days*, *Laverne & Shirley*, *Grease*, and *Sha-Na-Na*, and each in their own special way reminded citizens of the recently bygone 1950s. With greaser haircuts, leather jackets, a stable nuclear family, and poodle skirts, these programs helped to see a generation through contemporary social strife and to remember when things were orderly and right in the world, a place where Fonzie's hitting the jukebox always worked. The immediate past figures in popular culture as an idealized afterimage.

But over the past seven years the nostalgic turn of our generation has varied wildly from the 1920s (Gap swing ads) to, now, in 2005, the 1980s (return of 80s star Jason Bateman, pastels, upturned collars, Donald Trump, and over-priced Lacoste). A small sampling of American obsession in entertainment with things recently obsolete reveals *That '70s Show*; *Spiderman 1 and 2*; *Scooby Doo*; *Lavern and Shirley Reunion*; *Old Sitcom Stars—Where Are They? Childhood Stars—Where Are They?*; *That Eighties Show*; *NBC Celebrates Seventy-five Years*; *Mary Tyler Moore Reunion*; *M\*A\*S\*H\* Reunion*; *Cosby Show Reunion*; *Brady Bunch* appearance on (now itself nostalgic) *X-Files*; *Undercover Brother*; *Starz & Hutch*; *The Nick & Jessica Variety Show*, featuring the Muppets and Mr. T; *Good Times* skit on *Saturday Night Live*, Britney Spears as Marilyn Monroe in a Fifties Diner or on a Sixties Malibu beach as Gidget; Eighties break-dance moves in Mitsubishi car commercial; the return of break-dancing in general; and Mercedes-Benz advertisement as 1940s heartland TV show, and upcoming remake of *The Dukes of Hazard*, and VH1's "I Love the 70s/80s/90s (and every year therein)," just to name a few. In advertisements, Budweiser beer has just started (February 2005) running its original television commercials from the early 1950s, offering a "limited-time only offer" of the Budweiser six-pack with its original 1936 design. Reebok has begun posting billboards featuring the actress Lucy Liu as an adult, juxtaposed to her image as a child. The text reads, "I want to go back to the feeling of being a child, when the heart told you all you needed to know." Additionally, several companies have begun advertising with groups of cartoon mascots and superheroes from various products that many thirty-somethings consumed as children, such as the Jolly Green Giant, Puff 'n Fresh, and Count Chocula. If this is not Romantic nostalgia for lost innocence, I have no idea where else to look.

The mid-Nineties, however, were filled with Sixties nostalgia (Lollapalooza, Nirvana, Lenny Kravitz, bell bottoms), but America remains mainly smitten with the 1970s (thigh-faded jeans, OutKast funk, Grammy performance by George Clinton). And for that early 1970s feel, the clothing-brand Penguin and its graphic singularity is back. Not to mention those ubiquitous fishing hats (Henry Fonda, J. Crew ads, L.L. Cool J, and Cypress Hill). Popular culture likes referring back to fashions, characters, movies, television shows, and the general feel of decades that have recently passed. So much so, that it's increasingly difficult to see anything in popular culture that does not refer to something that came shortly before. What would the look of 2004 even be if not for historical pastiche? What would we do without mesh baseball-hats, undersized t-shirts that refer to truck driving, rodeos, fishing, local swim-clubs, washing powders, dated typography, or cheap cigarettes?

For starters, young Americans might have time to wonder: what is it about those times or places that we want back so badly? What are we trying to fix, relive, forget, or redo? It certainly can't just be the bygone clothes or footwear—Keds, Hush Puppies, Wranglers. It can't be the Kodachrome colors in-themselves. Is it the Cold War fear? The civic closeness such fear enabled? Authentic living unmediated by celebrity culture? Suburban living more deliciously remembered because it's economically more difficult to achieve? Traditional gender roles? Urge for pre-JFK and MLK assassinations, pre-Watergate, pre-Lewinsky political belief? A return to an easy social



In addition to the logic and ethos of the 1960s, Himmelfarb locates the transmission of the lessons and instructions of moral laxity inside American popular culture and its proliferation. From the confessional talk-shows to the “vulgarity on TV,” she blames television for its lowering of entertainment standards, recalling the past glory days of the television shows of the Edenic past. Connected to the criticisms of Bork and Bloom, Himmelfarb finds great fault with the academic postmodernists of the institutionalized

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ideology? The Public? Or is it a true lust for Tab soda, Jackie O. sunglasses, and Lite Brite? It's not just these things alone that have had marketing gurus, television producers, fashion editors, designers, and political pundits gainfully employed and harping for the bygone days for well over a decade. No, it's because this is the least embarrassing way to say that we miss something about our cultural past. Something more binding and less threatening than today's world.

But stylistic nostalgia for an era is evidence of a small death of that era's inner ethos. Like smoke from an extinguished match, visual references to past styles are a sign that the emotional drive of that era has gone out. The radical ethos of unobstructed individualism seen in the call of the youth of the Beat Fifties, the Sixties, and the early Seventies (freedom from social rules, anti-order, anti-authority and deference, obsession with youth, the celebration of immediate personal desires over the collective good, instant gratification, fun, sex, apotheosis of the present) has become—as people such as Daniel Bell, Tom Wolfe, and Thomas Frank have long held—a form devoid of content, have become the center. Jeans, *Vogue* photo shoots, computer sales-pitches, and hip-hop soda commercials, or politically radical Slim Jim sausage sticks claim the radical message; but these values don't dominant our practical lives or public culture in any meaningful way. And when an era becomes style, it enters the pantomime of history, shedding its redemptive value. As the American social critic and historian Christopher Lasch noted (albeit in 1979), “Having trivialized the past by equating it with outmoded styles of consumption, discarded fashions and attitudes, people today resent anyone who draws on the past in serious discussions of contemporary conditions or attempts to use the past as a standard by which to judge the present” (*Culture of Narcissism*, p. xvii). We see their cultural ghosts all around, but we have essentially said goodbye to hippies.

And this is exactly why we see more and more references to 1960s, '70s, and now, '80s: in a bizarre reversal, it's our way of saying those eras are dead, our way of showing that we know they are dead; a Viking funeral from the shoreline. The irony that hangs around with stylistic nostalgia thus behaves as a ghostly reminder: “Look at this fashion or idea that walks around, though I know it is now only a remnant of something once living.” Irony here distances the content of the nostalgic object or situation, turning it into something “interesting” or “kitschy” or just plain removed. By presenting nostalgia through fashion, graphic design, and entertainment, we're saying that we live in a culture where the cherished values of those decades no longer have a grip on us, that though we can see the shell of what the values once lived in, that the shell is now empty. Entertaining, but not meaningful.

We present recent history to perhaps to remind us of the contingency of our own present: that it too will become a time relegated to fashion, caricatured by its obsession with nostalgia. In our reach back to the three decades prior to our own, what we miss is not the objects, design, typefaces, and clothing in themselves, but the defining characteristic of the decades to which we hark back. There is something bittersweet about the recent past, something we project as more innocent and less demanding than the present. For T. S. Eliot, things had been going downhill since Dante. Homer had thought the golden age passed with Hesoid. Contemporary American popular culture takes the lower-brow version: all that was good passed away with trucker-hats, oversized '70s shades, and Atari.

Left. She sees these professors and researchers as implicitly and explicitly antagonistic of American values and citizenship, as creating a generation of Americans who will then continue the tradition of disengagement from citizenship's responsibilities.

Robert Kaplan, in his book *The Coming Anarchy* (2001), believes that America has gone awry not because of 1960s superego-less decadence, but because of financial affluence, which has taken us from a nation concerned with the welfare of others to one primarily concerned with individual well-being. Kaplan observes that

material possessions not only focus people toward private and away from communal life but also encourage docility. The more possessions one has, the more compromises one will make to protect them...[consequently] material prosperity [breeds] servility and withdrawal.<sup>274</sup>

The cause of this apathy and spiritual docility can be traced back to multinational corporations, which encourage more consumption and acquisitiveness over a concern for the commons. These corporations rise to power because of a void that throughout the twentieth century had been occupied with war and its concomitant social cohesion. Thus, for Kaplan, “universal peace is something to be feared....The Cold War may have been as close to utopia as we are ever likely to get.”<sup>275</sup>

Stephen Carter's *Civility* (1998), a centrist required-text, holds the same view of affluence: our culture of market capitalism has not exercised enough individual or corporate restraint or instruction with regards to human happiness. And America, as a place triumphantly pursuing the furthest reaches of capitalism, has suffered a crisis in civility because of it. Civility refers to things such as courtesy, public control of the emotions, respectability, and regard for others.

In short, civility as conceived by Carter—as for Erasmus, whom Carter invokes in his introduction as the popularizer of the notion that civility has a *moral* component—is the willingness on the part of individuals to act in accordance with social rules even when they would prefer not to do so.<sup>276</sup> To be civil is to curtail one's personal freedoms on

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<sup>274</sup> Robert Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War*. (New York: Vintage, 2001), p. 89.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 169, 171

<sup>276</sup> In 1530 Desiderius Erasmus published his book on proper table manners and behavior in polite society, *De civilitate morum puerilium* (*On Civility in Children*). It quickly became a dog-eared

behalf of the greater good, for

we live in society as in a household, and that within a household, if we are to be moral people, our relationships with other people...are governed by standards of behavior that limit our freedom. Our duty to follow those standards does not depend on whether or not we happen to agree with or even like each other.<sup>277</sup>

Throughout his influential book—well known to be a favorite of President Bill Clinton’s during his second term—Carter makes broad claims about the “growing incivility,” and “the disintegration of social life” in America. Though Carter is conscious not to hark back to a golden age (he is self-conscious enough of this tendency in so many other books of virtue-lament), he does claim that the “current level of incivility is morally intolerable and getting worse.” Ultimately, Carter sees the problem as one of declining trust. In order for civility to return there must be an increase in the amount of trust and understanding that Americans display towards those with whom they disagree.

In his review of Carter’s book, legal scholar Randall Kennedy, a frequent contributor to *The American Prospect*, notes that Carter, as well as Clinton, decry the “cynics” for having done an injustice to civility because they suspect the motivations of those in power; these cynics don’t display enough trust, Kennedy claims. As Carter writes,

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reference for the emerging bourgeoisie. The volume was also meant as an instruction manual for raising young boys born into this social class (the book was written specifically for noble boys and was dedicated to a prince’s son). *On Civility in Children* concerns itself generally with what was coming to be conceived of as proper behavior in society, but also with “outward bodily propriety.” As the resourceful German sociologist Norbert Elias has written of the treatise, “It contained simple thoughts delivered with great seriousness, yet at the same time with much mockery and irony, in clear, polished language and with enviable precision. It can be said that none of its successors ever equaled this treatise in force, clarity, and personal character.” This passage is from Elias’s seminal study, originally published in 1939, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1994), p. 44. This remarkable work provides not only an engrossing account of the development of bourgeois manners from the thirteenth until the early nineteenth century, but is also, because of Elias’s extensive use of direct source material, extremely entertaining/ hilarious. For example, Erasmus notes in his treatise that a boy “should retain wind by compressing the belly. Yet it is not pleasing, while appearing to be urbane, to contract an illness” (p. 106 in Elias), thus, “Let a cough hide the explosive sound.” And “Turn away while spitting, lest your saliva fall on someone” (p. 126). Lastly, for now, “It is very impolite to keep poking your finger into your nostrils, and still more insupportable to put what you have pulled from your nose into your mouth” (p. 120). The numerous examples from German, Dutch, French, and English instructional guides provide many, many more laughs.

<sup>277</sup> Stephen Carter, *Civility*. (New York: Basic Books, 1998), p. 15.

“Cynicism is the enemy of civility: it suggests a deep distrust of the motives of our fellow passengers, a distrust that ruins any project that rests, as civility does, on trusting others even when there is a risk.”<sup>278</sup> Kennedy wisely notes, of course, that only by suspecting those in power can we prevent larger injustices from occurring. For him—as for the line of social skeptics running from Diogenes through Voltaire and Lenny Bruce—there is a degree of virtue in skepticism.

The prolific and controversial *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne is convinced that politics, at its best, offers both social and personal remedy, and that when cynicism and detachment among the populace is present, it is because the *practice* of politics has not been seeking that remedy. He sees citizens becoming cynical about politics—a message straightforwardly delivered in his equally straightforward book *Why Americans Hate Politics* (1991)—when political campaigns and messages don’t answer naggingly shared issues. Voters then disengage. In order to get them back, campaigns respond with their own brand of cynical advertising, saying, “Hey, we’re just like you—annoyed and alienated!” This does not help matters, according to Dionne, because it continues the cycle, leaving voters even more alienated than before. In this case, it is the political world in Washington, D. C., rather than television or the media, that is the genesis of voter cynicism. Like much of the social science data—and Dionne seems to be one of the only academics actually taking it as actual evidence—his opinions speak not to an abstract cultural or social decline, but rather, to the concrete behavior among politicians that cause otherwise decent people to disengage from the moral and ethical squalor they see occurring by those that inhabit the nation’s capitol buildings. Understandably, Nixon is for Dionne the touchstone of cynical collapse, and Watergate the crisis that set the cynical wheels into high-gear.

Aptly, like Dionne, *The Cynical Society* (1991) by Jeffrey C. Goldfarb contends that *both* voters and politicians are involved in a cynical logic. Politicians say things that they don’t believe, that they need to say to get elected. Voters know politicians engage in such maneuvering and so cast immediate askance upon political speeches and promises. Cynicism—an entrenched disbelief, even “legitimization through disbelief”—is for Goldfarb the dominant operating logic of the social body as a whole. It also, while

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<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

thinking that it is changing or uncovering the operative logic of a situation or power, further entrenches that logic. From education and politics to literature and television, a knee-jerk disbelief “defines our present-day situation....Cynicism is shared by the haves and have-nots.”<sup>279</sup>

This is why Goldfarb holds the observation, shared by Sloterdijk, that cynicism today passes for political wisdom: to deny this reality is to shoot oneself in the foot and to deny the dominating logic of the way in which contemporary politics works. Comparing various points of the totalitarian mind to that of the cynic, Goldfarb takes several realms to theoretical task for particular elements of their involvement in propagating a cynical view of the world: social science, literature, journalism, popular culture, and politics. “I investigate,” Goldfarb writes,

the parallels between cynical totalitarian practices and the cynical practices of ideology and mass manipulation in American society. While the differences between modern tyrannies and democracies should not be minimized, the significance of cynicism in our political and intellectual life indicates that the defeat of Communism does not represent a simple victory for democracy and freedom....If we look closely at our everyday practice, as I try to do here, celebrations of the end of history of the victory of the West appear to be inappropriate, to say the least.<sup>280</sup>

Goldfarb runs through several American public figures he considers to be espousing inadvertently, a cynical ideology—Allan Bloom, E. D. Hirsch, William Bennett, William F. Buckley, and “especially” Ronald Reagan. In an acrobatic text, Goldfarb then spells out how each of these figures, while thinking that they are “curing” the cynicism they see, are actually helping to perpetuate it, for they, as self-appointed virtuecrats, don’t bring themselves into consideration. They continue to foster the cynicism they have tired of.

Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor and publisher of *Tikkun Magazine*, wrote *The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism* in 1996. The book, as mentioned earlier, fostered a minor social movement that included intellectual luminaries such as Cornel West and Naomi Wolfe in “an attempt to shift the dominant discourse of our society from an ethos of selfishness and cynicism to an ethos of caring and idealism.”<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Goldfarb, pp. 12-13.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>281</sup> [www.tikkun.com](http://www.tikkun.com) (May 1, 1995).

Lerner and company saw contemporary America in the midst of a deep spiritual crisis, in search of meaning in a culture of cynical self-interest:

Cynicism about ideals and other people's motives is one of the major correlates of this worldview. According to the dominant thinking of our age, those who pursue higher ideals beyond self-interest, who let ethical vision determine their life choices, must either be dissembling or deeply disturbed. In either case, the rest of us should keep our distance, because such people are either consciously trying to manipulate us or unconsciously seeking power and likely to hurt us in the process. This cynicism permeates daily life, undermining people's ability to trust others or to pursue ethical or spiritual vision, and making it extremely difficult to convey to the next generation the shared ethical values and spiritual experience of the human race.<sup>282</sup>

Lerner saw contemporary American political persuasions as attempts to hem off a part of private life from the spiritual violence of the market. Conservatives, he argues, were tired of the alienating forces of the market and popular culture and were longing for an (albeit nostalgic) past where human beings related to each other in more humane manner. They often spoke in religious terminology. Liberals, Lerner maintains, were right to criticize this sort of nostalgia that all-too-easily dismissed the racial, social, and gender inequalities present in conservative quixotic stories about the past. Generally, *The Politics of Meaning* purports that American society is an alienated society because it has become obsessed with the wrong goals, goals which do harm to the very conception of the good society. Though everyone knew that this was true, citizens did not know how to go about changing the ethos of the times in which they lived. People felt powerless to change things, and their own private lives were suffering because of it.

But here's where things become easily pigeonholed and dismissed (in effect, for the ironist, *cheesy*; for the social conservative, hippie-like banter). Getting over this problem of social disconnect, for Lerner, would involve changing the bottom line of the "capitalist system" from efficiency and productivity to maximizing

loving and caring relationships and ethical, ecological, and spiritual sensitivity. If that can happen within a capitalist system, God bless, and if it

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<sup>282</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/politics.htm>

can't, then okay, then the changes have to be made. What I want to ask is not what's the abstract economic system we're for, but what is it that we really want, what values do we really want? And the values I want are love and caring. And I want every institution to be judged by how much they produce loving and caring human beings.<sup>283</sup>

That is to say, Lerner sees the inward turn of citizens as a defense against the rampant individualism stressed in the national media and popular culture. To re-imbue meaning into the lives of Americans would take a social movement, not just adjustment to a system that is bent on the acquisition of goods at the expense of spiritual wellness.

William Chaloupka, the Colorado State political scientist and author of the timely and discerning *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* (1999), has a welcomed take on the situation of cynical culture in the United States past and present. This book and Purdy's *For Common Things* were published within weeks of each other, creating an electric atmosphere for social and cultural critics; an atmosphere that, in my view, retains its relevancy. Though Chaloupka does not address the issue of irony directly, per se, stating that it seems more appropriate as an "individual commitment," his attempts to describe rampant cynicism in American political speech and historical mentalities made an important contribution the understanding of how cynicism "works" today, and how it is inherently bound to the American mind as far back as Madison's *Federalist Ten*. He offers some solutions to this cynicism at the end of this thorough analysis, but is primarily concerned, unlike many others in the debate, with the historical genesis of cynicism in America in order to better understand it, rather than putting it up as an unworthy and condemnable adversary. Chaloupka respects the phenomenon as worthy of more than calling for its demise.

Like Goldfarb and Dionne, Chaloupka sees both politicians and the voting public as involved in a cynical logic, such that "confronted with cynical institutions, cynical media commentary, and intractable public predicaments, Americans are an angry lot....[That] Americans are awash in cynicism...seems so obvious that it borders on the banal."<sup>284</sup> Taking cues from Sloterdijk's analysis of the cynic/kynic distinction (in short: the former has power, the latter is a gadfly), Chaloupka moves from a subtle investigation of the

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<sup>283</sup> Michael Lerner in an interview with David Gergen at <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/gergen/lerner.html>

<sup>284</sup> Chaloupka, p. xv, 5.

workings of cynicism as *justified* disbelief in the political atmosphere of the present (“Part of reason we are a cynical society is that we have good reason”) as well as a mechanism of manipulation among political leaders.<sup>285</sup> Speaking to and analyzing the cynical logic in some key exchanges by public figures such as George Will, George Bush, Newt Gingrich, Bill Clinton, William Bennett, Dan Quayle, and Dick Morris, Chaloupka not only uncovers the complex operating principles behind some of these exchanges, but shows how in attempting to “get beyond” cynicism, much commentary unwittingly and more deeply entrenches it. And when both sides are entrenched in this mode of enacting their agency in the democratic situation—a mode enhanced, Chaloupka offers, by a myriad of possibility provided by modern mass media, such as television—then politicians frequently offer the “values remedy.”

This is where Chaloupka seems more like Sloterdijk—and indeed more contemporary—than his contemporary social-science peers. For Chaloupka, cynicism will never be solved by laments over the loss of community, a renewal of values, or calls for civility—all regular solutions provided by intellectuals and moralists through dull books or seven-minute talk-show appearances. This is because cynicism is set up to *absorb* these refutations as well as “invite a response it is always already prepared to fend off.”<sup>286</sup> Having deeply ingested the truths of corruption and deception, the cynic knows that the powerful will become hypocrites and dissemblers as soon as doing so is useful. In retaining its social skepticism, then, cynicism secures a force of critique in a culture of lying and master-cynicism by the powerful. The values remedy often protects the very privilege it ostensibly blames by deflecting attention away from the abuses of the powerful that lead to cynicism and onto the “lack” of community by those affected by those actions. In short, Chaloupka makes the convincing case that calls for civic renewal from above will always fail, for the suggestions originate from the very place where its ailment was caused. The clerics are to blame.

The thing about recounting the various condemnations and assessments of the above books, save Chaloupka’s, in my opinion, is that they have become quickly

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., p. 6.



predictable, thus oddly confirming Chaloupka's view of the cynic's pre-prepared defense. Many of these polemics play into prefabricated caricatures that make it tempting to swiftly deduce palliatives from certain complaints: not enough religion? Make citizens go to church. Too selfish? Create a war or a common enemy to have citizens see beyond themselves. And so, as Chaloupka himself writes,

Every diagnosis of cynicism renews a call to believe, and Americans at least talk believer talk. One moralist after another, whether politician, televangelist, professor, or commentator, announces that we must reestablish belief and reconstruct community values that have fallen into disrepair. These moral complaints are always coupled with recommendations on how authority should present itself, how the media or other institutions should be reformed. Ethical rules must be revived. Victims must rehabilitate themselves. The "values remedy" is always presented as the cynics antidote. If the problem is cynicism, the solution must be belief—in leadership, education, obedience, and the responsible application of moral criticism.<sup>287</sup>

The basic complaints that run through many of these thoughtful and considered diagnoses can be summed up thusly: social conservatives and communitarian liberals are understandably saddened by the lack of respect and regard that human beings have for one another in the contemporary culture of the United States. Some see the contemporary culture as being radically off track, and some just slightly. There is nostalgia involved in much of the criticism of contemporary culture, such that, as the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has noted,

Root-and-branch critics of modernity hanker after old public orders, and they assimilate personally resonating visions to mere subjectivism. Some stern moralists, too, want to contain this murky area of the personal, and tend as well to block all of its manifestations.<sup>288</sup>

That is to say, these kinds of social critics care a lot about the state of the society of which they are a part and that has provided them the privileges to comment upon it. They see this social disconnect stemming from an over-inflated belief in individualism and a lack of respect for moral authority and the broader community. This disbelief, as many hold,

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>288</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 90.

comes from the culture of the 1960s, which, though once marginalized, has become the dominant force in American commercial culture. Or it comes from the hedonism and greed fostered by the culture of the 1980s (“greed is good,” spoke *Wall Street’s* Gordon Gecko). Further back, some critics see the culture of the 1960s as being the result of the founding philosophies of American Constitution in general: liberty and equality eventually turn into self-gratification without concern for others and a debunking of hierarchy in exchange for sole belief in the self. Combined, the two logics—logics that define and delimit modernity itself—cause a society to treat itself badly.

If we take the general tone of many of these books to conflate the turn toward selfishness as something identified with elitism and high self-regard, of conflating cynicism with irony, of blaming popular culture for the creation of bad character traits, and, by extension, of treating personality as something that always willingly chooses its own values, then there are few objections to be briefly aired here before moving on to the same considerations in the work of Rorty and Purdy. I do so in order that we may better understand some of the general images of the good citizen and the parameters that are being spelled out in order to make normative a certain picture of the right kind of American as collaboratively framed by both sides of the political debate in the 1990s.

#### *3.4.1 A Brief Critique of Recent Commentary over Civic Disengagement*

Much commentary about civic disengagement—both as a menace and as a necessary social attitude in contemporary society—contains several assumptions about its causes that often miss the mark and thus lead to ineffectual thinking about irony as a mode of disengagement and its relation to the public. This is especially true for those who are attempting to “rid” the public of irony with calls for civility and community, as alluded to by Dionne and Chaloupka. As if irony were a disease, some of the critiques offer antidotes that will cure the social body of its ailment and return social life to its once-upright stance, to health, where everyone is a true believer. Irony is only temporary, and it is repeatedly assumed that civic trust and irony cannot coexist.

Firstly, an overarching argument often made by social commentators is that the ill effects of television have affected an otherwise wholesome populace. Some social conservative commentary—such as that by Quayle, Himmelfarb, and Bork—often

assumes a model, still relevant in the 2004 election year, that takes the “good sense” of the American people as something being assailed by popular media. Though this claim seems to be plausible—and indeed is not totally without corroboration—social science evidence, as always, complicates the picture. While it is true that television *entertainment* does have a negative effect on civic trust, television *news* generally encourages civic engagement and social trust. The surprising net effect, revealed in political scientist Pippa Norris’s study of television and civic engagement, is that television media, taken as a whole, actually encourages civic participation and social trust.

Norris undertook a lengthy and detailed comparison of nine advanced industrialized democracies’ habits of television watching and their levels of civic engagement or cynicism.<sup>289</sup> She set out to determine whether television watching had a noticeable effect on citizens’ engagement with their local and national cultural and political life. Her study utilized widely distributed international questionnaires and surveys, particularly the General Social Survey, the 1995-1997 World Values Survey, the 1996 National Election survey, and the 1997 British Election study. After a detailed analysis that took into account the data from several nations, Norris’s results pointed to two primary conclusions: one is that “the amount of time people devote to watching television is in fact associated with indicators of civic malaise (including lower levels of social trust, voluntary activism, and political participation).”<sup>290</sup> Though it is not possible to quantify the causality of this relationship, Norris notes, “television watching and civic malaise is consistent in many countries.”

But Norris also found that the specific relationship between civic malaise and television watching was less about the actual watching of television than what and how much one watched, which lead to a combined net effect, considering the socially mobilizing effects of television news, of a *positive* association over time between television watching and public participation in the democratic process. After concluding the study, one of the most lengthy of its kind, Norris found that “the evidence suggests that we need to look elsewhere than television news for the source of our political ills....We should look more directly at the functioning of representative democracy an stop blaming the

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<sup>289</sup> Pippa Norris, “The Impact of Television on Civic Malaise” in *Disaffected Democracies*, Pharr and Putnam, eds., pp. 231-251.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

messenger.”<sup>291</sup>

Likewise, political scientist Eric M. Uslaner of the University of Maryland disagrees with the perception that television is the primary culprit in the dissolution of civic trust in America—a finding often cited by famed political scientist Robert Putnam of Harvard University—and argues instead that “trust has [more] to do with the psychological dispositions of optimism and pessimism that in turn reflect perceptions of key life experiences, such as economic security.”<sup>292</sup> Uslaner instead saw levels of trust in institutions and government as more closely contingent upon levels of income. Those that had not “done well” financially were more likely to become pessimists, and thus have less trust in government; instead they had more trust in local arrangements in the community of people that shared their lot. Those with a higher income were more likely to join political organizations and have sustained trust in institutions.

Uslaner also concluded that there are “no effects for viewing [television] either on trust or on membership in voluntary associations.... Virtually no type of programming demobilizes people. Some types of programming—news and public broadcasting—led people to become more engaged.”<sup>293</sup> For Uslaner, pessimism and a preference for being alone are *preconditions* for heavy television watchers: “If they had extra free time, they would not spend it helping others or improving their intellects. They would probably devote more time to watching television. If we took away their television sets, they still would be bored and pessimistic.”<sup>294</sup> The “revealed preference” for being cynical and socially removed precedes the act of disengagement via television watching. Such a conclusion contradicts the model that the emanation of popular culture through television media has a deleterious effect on watchers, suggesting instead that disengagement from public life and cultural events predicates watching a lot of television, and that the two are not mutually exclusive.

A second common imputation in the discourse is, like in the idea of “malaise,” that irony in society is nearly always tinged, as mentioned, with the metaphor of disease, an argument hinted at in the above examples. There are assumptions that irony must

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>292</sup> Mark E. Warren, “Introduction,” in *Democracy and Trust*, p. 10.

<sup>293</sup> Eric M. Uslaner, “Democracy and Social Capital,” in *Democracy and Trust*, p. 137.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

“originate” somewhere, or that irony is “transmitted” through several media: television, popular culture, literature, Hollywood, rap music, or the behavior of famous athletes and national celebrities. This view treats irony like an actual disease or virus that emanates from somewhere.

Like the medieval black or yellow bile that “caused” (or, more accurately stated, “was”) melancholy or excess energy in the medieval mind, irony is conceived of similarly, in the disease model as a physical thing that has dimension and motility, capable of transmission from a source, capable of infecting by circumvention of an immune system. Even Chaloupka, who wrote one of the most insightful books on cynicism in modern America, asks, “once the cynical strain has been set loose, where might we search for the antidote?”<sup>295</sup> This also includes the assumption that irony is something like a cold, to be surmounted or gotten over. It is a phase in an otherwise grand road of social progress. This in itself reveals an interesting assumption: irony is always assumed to be temporary, not a permanent stance towards the world. As a mode or a method of speech, it cannot work long-term; there must always be a default non-ironic mode against which irony works.

To re-emphasize, instead of operating under this metaphor, I suggest that we view the ironic attitude as something more like an immune system rather than as a disease or invasive virus. Shifting to this way of asking turns the question from “What is causing the ironic attitude in the national psyche,” to “What is irony fighting off?” Given the “good sense” of the American people that some politicians like to exalt, politicians might be particularly dismayed at the widely shared perception that it is them. The complaint that irony or cynicism is the poison comprises a frequent refrain among some of the self-appointed moral authorities. Taking aim at them, English professor emeritus at Amherst College and frequent commentator Benjamin DeMott has observed,

While the citizen disengagement from public life that civility promoters term “mysterious” is clearly a complex phenomenon, some influences on it aren’t arcane. Rude, abusive speech and action reflects, in one of its dimensions, belief in the need for an attitude—*some kind of protection against sly, sincerity-marketing politicians and boss-class crooks*. “Uncivil” refusal by ordinary citizens to labor unpaid in the cause of points-of-light good works

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<sup>295</sup> Chaloupka, p. 157.

reflects, in one of its dimensions, the daily exposure of ordinary citizens to powerful anti-mutuality instruction from above—oblique but persuasive lessons on how to pull your oar ceaselessly for the benefit of Number One; how not to fret about hungry children in the street; how to feel good when, in the age of homelessness, a corporate bright boy spends \$45 million on his own one-family dwelling; how to avoid being suckered into caringness. The “new incivility” needs to be recognized, in short, for what it is: a flat-out, *justified rejection* of leader-class claims to respect, a demand that leader-class types start looking hard at themselves.<sup>296</sup>

Physician, heal thyself. Additionally, the sociologist of religion Alan Wolfe, director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College and regular contributor to *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and various think-tank publications, has written in a similar mood of frustration and legitimate concern over the handing over of authority and civil respect to the nation’s leaders that

moral authority is too important to people who have experienced moral freedom to be accepted just because those who would exercise moral authority claim that they have a monopoly over it. Moral authority must be earned before it can be exercised. As they look out on the world around them, not all Americans are convinced that their institutions—as well as their practices and their leaders—have done enough to earn it, which is why they reserve some of it for themselves.<sup>297</sup>

The reservation of trust for those deserving of it is a good way to make sure that trust retains its high status, is not given away too freely.

A third mental habit in the debate over irony or cynicism is that individual attitudinal shifts—such as ironic detachment—are frequently treated in contemporary American popular culture as isolated incidents, and therefore as solely individual acts of willfulness. These emotions or attitudes are thus most often seen as disconnected from any larger movement in culture because they are not measurable or scientifically quantifiable. When it is common in the general culture to see individuals and their emotions as wholly internalized subjective entities, we detach individual reactions from social causes, most

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<sup>296</sup> Benjamin DeMott, “Seduced by Civility: Political Manners and the Crisis of Democracy,” *The Nation*, December 9, 1996, v. 263, n. 19, p. 11. Italics mine.

<sup>297</sup> Alan Wolfe, “Are We Losing Our Virtue?” in Rouner, *Civility*, p. 139.

frequently defaulting to the explanatory model of biological or genetic predispositions.<sup>298</sup>

This materialist model sees the human being as a self-contained physical circuit, a hermetic vehicle—the radical opposite of the behaviorist model. Seeing the self as this sort of isolated unit existing in social space concludes, for example, that one is not depressed because of a lack of community or social engagement, or because of maintaining conflicting moral beliefs or philosophical views, but because of an individualized chemical imbalance. The solution is most frequently to prescribe medication; statistics about the rise in prescriptions for antidepressants bear this out.

Of course, as always, there are exceptions. Some individuals do experience debilitating depression, or melancholy, because of physiological imbalances. But the incidence of depression, anxiety, and feelings of alienation are tragically widespread. This is significant. “In some [advanced] countries,” wrote columnist Daniel Goleman in *The New York Times* in 1992, responding to then-recent epidemiological studies of depression,

the likelihood that people born after 1955 will suffer a major depression—not just sadness, but a paralyzing listlessness, dejection, and self-deprecation, as well as an overwhelming sense of hopelessness—at

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<sup>298</sup> As the American sociologist C. Wright Mills noted, “‘Private problems’ are often internalized ‘public issues.’” (Quoted in David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980], p. 93). Conditions such as ego weakness or narcissistic defenses are for Mills, more often than not, expressions of objective situations in the social and economic structure in which the person lives. Likewise, Christopher Lasch has written that psychotherapy of the 1970s “[obscures] the social origins of suffering—not to be confused with complacent self-absorption—[which is then] painfully but falsely experienced as purely personal and private” (*Culture of Narcissism*, p. 30). More recently, this picture of the psychic-social connection in the political realm was assumed by Michael Lerner, who has written that the loss of meaning that many Americans claim to experience causes deep pain, “yet we are surrounded by media and other interpreters of public values and social norms who not only deny the possibility of meaning, but also insist that we hide this kind of pain from ourselves and one another. On the one hand, we are encouraged to interpret our pain as a personal problem, one that we have brought on ourselves by not being more psychologically healthy. The disintegration of trust and connection among people, the instability in families and friendships, the sense that people are out only for themselves, and the feeling that our work serves no higher purpose and is thus frustrating and alienating—all are experienced as personal problems.” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/politics.html>.

The noted Americanist Warren J. Susman argues much the same about the everyday citizen mindset of the Depression era, wherein life was increasingly seen to be a gamble, and that one’s personal misfortunes, though actually caused by national economic disaster, were interpreted in purely individualist terms. See his canonical *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.)

some point in life is more than three times greater than for their grandparents' generation.

Likewise, the plucky social-psychologist Martin Seligman wrote that though Americans are among the least depressed advanced countries, “we are in midst of an epidemic of depression, one with consequences that, through suicide, takes as many lives as the AIDS epidemic and is more widespread. Severe depression is ten times more prevalent today than it was fifty years ago.”<sup>299</sup>

Cartoon commercials and sing-songy jingles for antidepressant drugs, such as Zoloft or Paxil, in print and on television do not necessarily help matters. Though fostering the positive effect of de-tabooing depression and anxiety, they, at the same time, perpetuate the perception that feelings of social anxiety or melancholy are solely individual occurrences, thus perpetuating the cycle of feelings of alienation that are part of social anxiety to begin with. Feelings of being “detached” from, or judged by, others could just as well be interpreted as an acute perception that we actually are increasingly alienated and assessed, as a finely tuned sense of the hyper-competitive social world in which we live.<sup>300</sup> Seen as such, ironic detachment is a default mechanism for dealing with these tensions in social life—it’s how one maintains both integrity of self and social grace simultaneously; it’s how one maintains a sense of meaning. Getting “beyond” this tension is a challenge that, for some, is tantamount to a spiritual quest for wholeness.

Conceived under this model, then, we begin to understand the ironic attitude as an

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<sup>299</sup> Martin Seligman, *Learned Optimism*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), p. 10.

<sup>300</sup> The contemporary statistics on depression are staggering: nineteen million Americans are diagnosed with serious episodic depression each year; twelve million of whom are women (source: Dr. Karen Schwarz, John Hopkins University psychiatrist on the *Today Show*, September 2004). In their own words, women described the feelings of depression as “purposelessness,” “despair,” “an aching hole of blackness,” “anxiety,” and “don’t feel like a person.” Combining a nostalgic element, some sufferers described their depression as a sense of “homesickness,” or “homelessness.” Importantly, though Schwarz, like most others in mainstream psychiatry, admit to not knowing the “cause” of depression, they are finely attuned to the symptoms: loss of interest in hitherto pleasurable activities, sleep problems, feelings of despair or hopelessness, guilt, thoughts of suicide, and physical aches and pains. Causes that have been “isolated” are genetics, stress, and hormonal imbalance. Still, Schwarz states that there is no reliable way to credibly predict or determine the onset of the “disease.” It is difficult not to interpret the incidence of this disposition outside the framework of the philosophical symptoms of modernity and postmodernity insofar as the latter posits an existential rootlessness, a consciousness of the incredulity of big stories that hang everything together and into which one may subsume his or her identity to acquire meaning.



individual's expression of his or her perceived disjunction not only between his or her individuality and the social world, but between a morally sacred inner self and a corrupt social world outside the self (This model is implied in the title to the mid-twentieth century Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man in Immoral Society* (1960)). Seeing the ironic attitude as an attempt to deal with this Protestant-Romantic perception of a pure inner self and corrupt outside world is especially useful if the outside world's networks of trust are, in fact, corrupted.

Lastly, regarding some false roads taken in the debate over irony—larger assumptions about human motivation, our view of the self's "reasoning," have contributed to the interpretation of irony in society. As cynicism has come to dominate the contemporary mental landscape—both in our suspicions of those in power and the behavior of those in power that leads to those suspicions—people have become more sure that they know "what is up." There is a boiled-down version of what goes on in the world: ego-seeking, power-struggling, survival-of-the-fittest, money-grubbing motivations rule everything. Cynicism "passes for political wisdom," as Goldfarb observed. All the rest is simply fluff or distraction. A psychoanalytic view of personality—a suspicion of all human motives as selfish, aggressive, sexual, self-aggrandizing, self-curative, or having some other "ulterior" motive has, over the course of the latter part of the twentieth century, come to dominate our views of personality.

As such, an "up front" (that is, not hidden or masked) view of behavior is immediately suspect. *Meaning* something directly—verbally or in action—can now be a sign of a lack of proper social polish. A doctrine of psychological (hidden) predestination assumes the driving interpretive scheme when thinking about "why" someone would do something. Altruism is debunked as having some other selfish motive—fame, attention, a search for reward. Even further, altruistic acts are often perceived to have been motivated by a desire *to be seen* as altruistic, and thus morally superior to others. This logic is accompanied by a strange negation of its opposite: when someone powerful says they are going to "out-and-out" do something out of pure selfishness, and then they do so, it is seen as confirmation of the secret selfish motivation of everyone, rather than as something

motivated by a “hidden” altruism. This confirms the view of Machiavellian rule.<sup>301</sup> And it is clear enough by now, partly because of Nietzsche, Foucault, and company, that power is the new metanarrative. And “everybody knows.”

To summarize: in the contemporary and politicized debate about the ironic attitude or cynicism and their relation to civic life, several vectors come together to perpetuate irony’s logic that the social and political critiques attempt to dissolve. First, there have been two common assumptions: (1) television is to blame for ironic disengagement from social life because (2) television and popular culture “transmit” irony as if it were a disease. These are joined by, thirdly, an interpretive schema that leads to furthering the disengagement that commentators wish to preclude: concomitant psychological results of ironic detachment from public life, such as melancholy or anomie, are often reified as purely individual traits, disconnected from public problems, thus creating continued alienation. Lastly, within the ironist worldview itself, individuals are conceived of as masking some other base motivation, such as greed, desire for attention, revenge, or some other self-interest; when a political figure or moral authority does something wrong, rather than being seen as an anomaly, this confirms the ironist’s stance that the truth has been unmasked but was there all along.

And one aside observation: the odd contradiction about irony supposedly creating a shared social distance is that the understanding of ironic meaning between to people who understand what is going on necessitates a closer, more subtle understanding of, and relationship to, others, for they communicate a message but do not do so with literal transmission of words. What irony does do, rather, is separate out who understands and who does not. It should not, then, be seen so much as a general social breakdown than as a balkanization of social groups. In the current political climate, this usually takes the forms of the elites and intellectuals, who share certain references, versus the mass of

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<sup>301</sup> This logic was clearly on display for *New Yorker* investigative journalist Seymour Hersh when writing about the Pentagon’s “plans” for going after Iran in the summer of 2005. Appearing in January 2005 on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, the seasoned Hersh repeatedly iterated phrases such as “Look, they have a plan. They are going to do this; it’s just a matter of when. They mean business. These guys aren’t joking around.” Translation: they did not hide. Watching Hersh in the interview, one had the feeling that his “discovery” of the Pentagon’s forethoughts did not matter much to the Pentagon itself, nor the administration, though they did do some obligatory public-relations damage-control. The lesson is this: when power is naked, *noblesse oblige* becomes far less convincing—or necessary.

“middle America” and the politicians that claim to represent them. The weeding out of who gets it and who does not can always be configured to the immediate social situation.

### *3.5 Irony and Public Philosophy*

To return to the central concern of this chapter: public philosophers, as opposed to political commentators, are usually ahead of the curve at spotting shifts in the moral life of a nation, and usually somewhat more even-keeled at retelling the story of how society got to where it is. From John Dewey, Walter Lippmann, Alisdair McIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and William Galston, among scores of others, minds that concern themselves not only with persistent problems in academic discourse, but with the general life of their nation have frequently been helpful to shaping and influencing public policy. And intellectuals, generally, as a species of the genus *liberalis*, are some of the first to call for renewed belief, for hope.

That said, there are two contemporary writers who have identified “irony” as being crucial to the attitude the above commentators continue to describe, who have concerned themselves with public life and irony in its presence, who have understood irony as relevant to the discussion of the public. As they lean on this word “irony” explicitly, it is worth some time in the present consideration of irony’s relationship to the notion of civic health as discussed by Richard Rorty and Jedediah Purdy. Both of them discuss irony as a mood, as a cosmopolitan attitude that affects, in various ways, both personal psychology and the tenor of public life.

#### *3.5.1 Richard Rorty*

Irony and its relation to public life was explicitly discussed over ten years ago from a mature and informed philosophical perspective in Richard Rorty’s influential *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), which provided a clearly written contribution to contemporaneous literature about irony and nostalgia as aesthetic and social forms characteristic of the postmodern.<sup>302</sup> I want to suggest that Rorty’s work on irony can be read as a harbinger to the social commentary in the decade that followed. One can see

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<sup>302</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Rorty as prefiguring the ironist caricature that would be used in the politicized debate about civic trust and its foes that would follow. Throughout the above caricatures of the detriments of the cynic and ironist, he is often cited as being someone for whom commitment is not important, truth is convincingly relative, and who is concerned, primarily, with self-creation, with the pursuit of self-styling over considerations of the greater good. For Rorty, the ironist is defined as someone who has

1) radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary 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.<sup>303</sup>

The ironist is someone for whom “final vocabularies”—references to stopping points in someone’s rationale for what they do and why they do it: God, country, History, the Church—are never final, but rather just another group of words or justifications for behavior. Ironists are nominalists (who deny the existence of abstract universals—referents of things like “red” or “chair”) and historicists (who hold that things like God and country are historical and social ideas of human beings, rather than real entities). They are social constructivists, and they believe that social construction is how things get done in the world, from science to city councils.

Ironists attempt to gain autonomy in this move, for they wish to control the standards by which they are judged, instead of being held to a metaphysical template which they don’t believe exists; all that may be used to judge one vocabulary are other vocabularies. Given this distinction, Rorty believes that metaphysicians are the opposite of ironists. In deploying “common sense,” they believe that there is a final and universal resting point for discussion. The metaphysician is seen as the figure searching for ultimate essences and the final truth of objects and statements. The ironist is someone who is convinced that these are not things that can be found, that there are no essences to things, only descriptions and re-descriptions over time. When ideas lose cache, the ironist comes up with new ones to redescribe reality.

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid. p. 73.

This can be done because for the ironist language is contingent. She does not believe that her words can be measured against some ultimate reality to see if they are being used correctly; and our words are all we have. As such, where the ironist specializes in redescribing things, the metaphysician thinks he is getting closer the essence of the thing with his practices of philosophizing, science, poetry, or praying. The ironist tells others that the language they are using to describe their world and selves is up for grabs, not ultimately true, not common sense, which is why redescription often humiliates. But, Rorty contends, the metaphysician also redescribes, but in the name of “reason” rather than imagination. The difference is that the metaphysician redescribes by way of argument—or, as the ironist sees it, redescribes under the cover of argument. The metaphysician’s redescribing posits a Truth that the interlocutor is coming closer to—he is being “educated” by the conversation, as the method employed in Plato’s dialogues (paradoxically, through the use of Socratic irony). The metaphysician comes to believe that he is being empowered and more free by changing the description he has of himself because he is getting in touch with something greater than himself.

Because the ironist does not offer the reward of a correct match, she is often seen as irresponsible and irretrievably subjectivist; there is no way to say that one way of describing is “better” than another. The ironist is socially irresponsible, therefore, because she does not empower the other in the way that the metaphysician does. She does not tie the vocabulary she suggests into an ultimate correspondence to the way things “really are.” For Rorty’s ironist, weapons, will, and luck—not matching up to a transcendental template—make people more free.

Examples of ironist philosophy for Rorty begin with Hegel and continue through Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. Instead of “solving” old philosophical problems, these kinds of thinkers changed or re-described the original language because the old way of talking became obsolete or dead; it lost its compelling narrative power over readers. Philosophical achievement came in relation to their predecessors, not in getting to some closer relation to truth. Yet, Rorty writes,

Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Hegel have in common the idea that something (history, Western man, metaphysics—something large enough to have a destiny) has exhausted its possibilities. So now all things must be made

new. They are not interested only in making themselves new. They also want to make this big thing new.<sup>304</sup>

The ironist still wants to have the last word on redescription of the past; she wishes to beat the metaphysicians at their own game. She wants to have the final word—but her arrival at that final word is still something that was created by herself in private, not something she claims to be overarching and totalizing for society.

And here is where irony becomes relevant to the discussion of the public, in how irony affects the obligations of citizenship. For Rorty, the ironist is created in her private sphere, usually through reading books or watching movies and then constructing private self-images about the kind of person he or she would like to be based on some of the narratives they have taken in, have admired, and have found worthy of emulation. The ironist constructs an identity based on the valuation of herself as a special individual worth spending time composing an identity. It is a way of forming a narrative about one's identity, about being inspired by others humans—fictional or real—that have moved one to work on their own identities. Because of Rorty's stress on the ironist as someone who works on herself in solitude, as a private "project," he's come under fire by a number of critics for shearing philosophy (or, books of philosophy) from its original motivations of speaking broadly for all humanity and not just for one's private self-image.

But where Rorty likes to think of the liberal ironist as constructing a self in private—keeping the public and private separate—there seems to be a problem when it comes to something like the concept of *character*, which requires both an inner commitment to certain behaviors and values, and an objective observation and confirmation of those moral behaviors over time. One might like to imagine oneself as an honorable person and may have come to this self-conception through reading certain books or watching certain movies. But self-conception alone does not an honorable person make. Thus it is difficult to see how Rorty can get away with an account of how the ironist can create his own redescription without reference to whether or not that redescription holds true in the world—that is, can be confirmed by others. Someone might like to redescribe themselves as an honorable person, but may, in fact, be a compulsive liar or leave promises repeatedly unfulfilled. In this case redescription is

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid., p.101.

plainly not true; it does not conform to the events that it redescribes. If the private and public are left disunited, concepts like character —essential components for civil society to flourish—are in trouble.

And this is why perhaps Rorty's most notable jousting partner, Jürgen Habermas, sees Rorty's private ironist as ultimately destructive of broader social hope. Habermas sees philosophy as responsible for providing some social glue in the absence of credible religious belief; he wants to have a theory of intersubjective communication that serves to bind together the disparate parts of culture. Consequently, Habermas has held that broader criticism of the Enlightenment—such as that which occurs in much postmodernist literature, with roots in the Marquis de Sade, Goya, Foucault, and various Frankfurt School theorists—is a move towards dissolving normative social bonds. He thus sees folks like the idol-smashing, anti-Christ Nietzsche as, ultimately, socially irresponsible. This view stems from a quasi-Marxist conviction that the real meaning of a philosophical view consists in its political implications. As such, Habermas sees Rorty as shirking the duty of philosophy as offering broader application to society rather than just private self-creation.

Rorty, however, willingly admits that although private irony teaches people that their own vocabulary is not the ultimate truth of the world, were this sort of position to be advanced in public dialogue, it simply would not work. A shared notion of universal human rights, for example, cannot work if we see it as “merely” a contingent idea, a useful set of words, a random concept that could just as well be replaced by Nazism or apartheid should the community decide it, as something subject to change at anyone's whim. We need something enduring and objective to support that claim, otherwise there is no “reason” to continue to support the idea. The liberal novelist, poet, or journalist is good at putting the suffering of others into convincing language that awakens in people a capacity to feel others' pain and humiliation. This is where, for Rorty, social cohesion is possible—in literature, narrative, culture, and poetry, not in abstract philosophical language about the nature of rights and responsibilities, for “the idea that liberal societies are bound together by philosophical beliefs seems...ludicrous.”<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

It is the liberal metaphysician who wants the “wish to be kind” to be grounded in a transhistorical argument, in some overarching story that will be the ultimate stopping point or rationale for certain types of behaviors and the prohibitions against others. He wants a “reason” for being kind. For the ironist, the common susceptibility to being humiliated is all that is needed to ground liberal politics, formulate social bonds, or make laws. A person is simply “something that can be humiliated.” His sense of social connection is “based on a sense of common danger, not on a common possession or shared power.”<sup>306</sup>

These polarized opinions hinge on a notion of what makes for an integrated self. Where the liberal ironist thus consciously makes the public-private split, the metaphysician insists that the inner and outer must be as one. This sort of split results, in the ironist conception, in role playing, acting, and the possession of an interior life that is held in check by social forces and expectations. Therefore, according to Rorty, for the liberal ironist, it does not matter if people have very widely varying private final vocabularies, as long as we share an *overlap of the vocabulary of human humiliation* of what should not be done because we don’t want it done to us. The Golden Rule need not be anything more than the imaginative entry into our own suffering and the extension of that understanding into our treatment of others. It will provide a common *feeling* of connection, not a *reason* to believe it. The liberal ironist thus finds it important to have others notice suffering when it occurs and empathize with it. Literature—something that contains a story about human lives that suffer and die—therefore plays a crucial role in expanding moral imagination and consciousness of the sorts of lives that have been or could be.

This is why, for the Rortian ironist, only private descriptions (and reading novels, poems, ethnographies, etc.) can get rid of cruelty: they sensitize us to the pain—physical, moral, spiritual—of others. Solidarity has to be constructed out of little pieces of private hope rather than the expectation of finding a grand common reality that was always already there, waiting for us to find it. In the end, ironist philosophers are private thinkers and travelers who have read lots of kinds of books about the way people have lived and acted. Their work is of no use to political and public purpose. Novelists can help us

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., p. 91.



awaken to the cruelty within ourselves. Theory, as a kind of writing, has become, for ironists, a means to private perfection rather than to public solidarity.

### 3.5.2 Jedediah Purdy

As has been being discussed, cynicism and irony have been implicated, often as causes of social unease, in a spate of books over the past dozen years—mostly all of them after Rorty had published *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, which had addressed the notion of private irony and public hope as separate items that don't have to be held together in some grander story. The issues of how this private irony was nonetheless affecting the broader conception of the public was brought squarely to the fore in a small red book by twenty-four-year-old Jedediah Purdy. *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, published in 1999, came at the tail end of the debate and worry over civic engagement in the 1990s. Lambasted by many young reviewers before it even reached bookstores, this small treatise, faults and all, raised the issue of ironic disengagement and civic trust, particularly as it affected a young, educated, media-savvy generation, to a new pitch. It insisted that these issues had to be grappled with if we were to understand what is going on in public life and why politics seems an unattractive answer to this essentially spiritual situation.

*For Common Things* was so hotly debated partly because it came at the tail-end of a decade that had been debating civil society so intensely. The rash of books commenting on civility and civic detachment had at their roots a notion of a lack of individual commitment to public betterment. Though Purdy was criticized for being vague about the way he was using the term “irony,” he clearly did not mean a literary mechanism, but rather, a general disengagement from public life and a snide, knowing view of social reality held by his fellow Harvard students, as well as by others lampooned in his book—Jerry Seinfeld, Tom Peters, *Wired* and *Fast Company* magazines, spirituality cults, and cartoons like *South Park*, *Beavis & Butthead*, and, yes, *The Simpsons*.

*For Common Things* purported to diagnose an “ironic culture” pervading the author's generation of young, college-educated, media-savvy Americans, as well as their elected officials, and some distinctive parts of culture, such as the media and higher education. Without condemning the methodology or tactics of rhetorical irony, Purdy instead took

aim at the ironic personality, whom he saw as superficially adept at all kinds of social situations, comically filled with quotations from past movies, cartoons, and rap music. This social figure is alert, socially mobile, aloof, and, ultimately, secretly melancholic about his inability to connect with others. The book clearly touched a nerve; it sold out of its initial 35,000 print-run in six weeks and went immediately into a second printing.

The narrative structure of *For Common Things* sees Purdy moving from a private hunch about his own behavior and pervasive feeling about irony—a sense that his own actions are affected by this ironic culture that he did not entirely choose—to a larger social and political diagnosis. Raised and home-schooled in West Virginia before heading to Exeter Academy in New Hampshire for his senior year of high school, Purdy draws a strong dichotomy between his younger years spent in the country with nature and farming, and his years among the educated elite in New England. Harvard University, where Purdy headed at seventeen, taught him that much of the ironic temper in culture had been produced by Ivy-league-educated writers who entertain the nation with sitcoms and movies.

Conceiving of irony as a character trait that defined a large portion of American life, Purdy's book, he claims in the Preface, is a response to an ironic time. Irony for Purdy is distinct from cynicism: whereas the cynic thinks he is superior to others, the ironist is just detached from them. But, importantly, irony is not something measurable or ubiquitous. As such, Purdy writes that “irony does not reign everywhere;...[but] the more time one has spent in school, and the more expensive the school, the greater the propensity for irony.”<sup>307</sup> The noteworthy reasons he saw for the presence of the ironic mentality in American youth were the disappearance of credible public crusades; the public display of confession; the Freudian idea that noble goals are somehow ignoble or secretly selfish; that values are conceived as subjective standards rather than as impersonal benchmarks of behavior; marketing as a form of life; and the conception of personality as a bundle of desires and secret ambitions.

Our irony, Purdy writes, is insistently doubtful of the qualities that would make us take another person seriously; the integrity of personality, sincere motivation, the idea that opinions are more than just symptoms of fear or desire. The ironist does not believe

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<sup>307</sup> Purdy, p. 10.

in the adequacy of his own words. He has a constant, nagging feeling of inauthenticity and derivative behavior. “The ironist,” Purdy writes, “is at ease in banter, versed in allusion, and almost debilitatingly self-aware.”<sup>308</sup> Holding up that ‘believing in nothing’ is a measure of pride, the ironist thus refuses to commit to anything beyond the viewpoint of irony. He cannot be tricked by anyone or anything. He constantly maintains a skeptical attitude towards the world and society, and he is always tense with disbelief, or, when relaxed, aloof. This irony imagines perfect self-sufficiency, the need for no one. This constant and persistent sensibility has made us indifferent to public life.

Though socially capable and apparently affable, the ironist for Purdy is secretly sad and defeated because there is no room in the culture for true, free individuality. Like the social critics Theodor W. Adorno, Daniel Bell, Lionel Trilling, and Thomas Frank before him, Purdy repeated the observation that dramatic dissent made sense in a conventional age, but since our age is one of commoditized dissent, personal dissention has become style. As Trilling wrote in 1961 of his students, they displayed “what we might call the socialization of the anti-social, or the acculturation of the anti-cultural, or the legitimization of the subversive.”<sup>309</sup> As such, this observation continued in Purdy concludes that young people, rather than experiencing the unity of their dissent, are essentially alone in the ironic view. He often contrasts this sort of despair with the strong values of Emerson, Thoreau, Tocqueville, Montaigne, Rousseau, and the Polish political dissident Adam Michnik.

The antidote to despair is to generate hope. And America is good at generating hope, just not with magazines like *Fast Company* and *Wired*, which, for Purdy, offer hope through escape from the mundane world by transcendence through (market-driven) technology and individualized business endeavors. One can become a superman or feel at home on the Web through a sort of branded (and illusory) hyper-individualism. Likewise, spirituality and belief in angels are ultimately “consolations”; this is opposed to a religious conviction that challenges us to be better for ourselves, our loved ones, and, ultimately, the public world of which we are always a part. In the end, both of these alternatives to despair evade public commitment and so perpetuate the problem from which they want

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>309</sup> Quoted in Delbanco, *The Death of Satan*, p. 203.

to escape.

So there is something privately fearful in the ironic stance as Purdy portrays it—a fear of betrayal—yet, he concurs, there is also some accuracy in the detached perception of things: government and politics have been corrupted by lies and immoral behavior. Politics, therefore, become dead to the imagination. Once the site of hope, it is an endeavor now widely seen to be the place of bad motives and dishonesty. The public failure of politics and its squandering of public trust in the past thirty years are among the real reasons for this perception; we live in the aftermath of political hope. Irony fills the vacuum.

As politics is supposedly the collective will, it belongs to the public realm. But, according to Purdy, “public” has somehow come to represent the “disgusting” opposite of private: public phones, bathrooms, transportation—these are all second-rate options when given the choice of a private version. Private entails that one has enough fiscal power to afford what is private and avoid what is public. What is public, in material terms, is that which cannot be afforded through private means. Public intellectuals and public servants have come to be outmoded terms, less enticing than going into the “private sector,” or concentrating one’s energies on private acquisition. Due to the eventual privileging of private over public, a generation has retreated from public life in favor of private fantasies and smaller social dramas. They have, in so many words, fulfilled Rorty’s recommendations for private self-creation. And this has led us, as Purdy sees it, to have superficial connections and reliances to those not in our immediate realm—now a very small realm indeed. The ironist keeps his mind and heart private, and this deprives him of the feeling of being connected to things larger than himself and his small world of self-interest.

### *3.5.2.1 Criticism of For Common Things*

In the months following publication, like most books perceived as making a controversial contribution to the national conversation, Purdy’s book was reviewed voluminously, especially for a work that was generally roasted as being written by a twenty-four-year-old know-it-all. I would like to discuss here some of the criticism, as it lends evidence to the general tone of response to Purdy’s book—much of it ironical.

Purdy had indeed trespassed on some kind of sacred ground, for as the critic Elise Harris put it, “Jedediah Purdy, author of last year’s *For Common Things*, [has become] the ironist’s whipping boy.”<sup>310</sup> Why would this be?

It is because Purdy’s book reframed the debate about civic trust insofar as it pointed to a living, broad-based and oddly personal phenomenon that was ailing civic trust. It brought the debate out of the abstract conversation about “liberal metaphysics” and put it into terms that many young, thoughtful people could understand in their own lives. As ironic detachment needs actors to be ironic, Purdy’s relating of irony to civic trust went a long way in bringing the conversation back to the everyday, which is where irony, as Linda Hutcheon, mentioned earlier, says, “happens.” I will spend some time summarizing these criticisms, as they form the crux, the rapid-fire response to the issue of irony; they inform the “discourse” around which assumptions and frustrations hang.

Unfortunately, however, the tenor of the debate was frequently unfair, that is, its contributors did not always accurately summarize the book, frequently made *ad hominem* remarks, and gave short-shrift of the author’s claims in exchange for a one-upmanship, some even admitting as much, such as when *Time’s* Joel Stein wrote that he only read the book, and parts of Kierkegaard, because he “wanted to seem smart” to his colleagues.

Though not exhaustive, the reviews collected and summarized below do lend insight into a general tone of young writers commenting on a peer. Specific to the topic of irony as an attitude that spanned well beyond the necessity of having to read the book being reviewed—it seemed as though everyone wanted to get their two cents in. The topic is sexy, ambiguous, and interpretive; it required no expertise. This in itself is indicative of irony’s very public life. Reviewers assumed that the topic of irony was fair game. The very free-for-allism of the reviews spoke to the notion that irony was approachable from all realms of commentary—from National Public Radio, to high-minded publications like the *New York Review of Books*, *Social Policy*, and *The New Yorker*, to the farcical *Harvard Lampoon*, to the libertarian *Reason* magazine, and the all-purpose websites of *Salon*, *Slate*, and CNN.

Throughout nearly all of the reviews that followed publication of *For Common Things*, Purdy was spoken of with skepticism and cynicism; reference is made in almost

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<sup>310</sup> Harris, “Infinite Jest.”

every review to his upbringing on a farm in West Virginia, his home schooling, his hippie parents. Authors most frequently called attention to how Purdy misused the meaning of “irony.” They claimed that Purdy conflated the term with sarcasm, cynicism, narcissism, and relativism. Oddly, the tone of many reviews seemed to further confirm Purdy’s views of the ironic attitude rather than convincingly argue against them.

For example, the September 1999 issue of *Harper’s* wittily featured “Thus Spoke Jedediah” by then associate editor Rodger D. Hodge.<sup>311</sup> Hodge begins, as many others did, by talking about Purdy’s West Virginian upbringing—about his home-schooling, nature walks, and mud-slathering. Hodge retells Purdy’s life as hayseed narrative: he was born and raised in the wilderness, then went to the Mammon badness of the big Harvard campus, where he was overwhelmed and drenched in “easy sarcasm,” which Hodge contends is Purdy’s definition of irony. And though Purdy can be summarized in a few sentences, according to Hodge, his “unctuous sentimentality can be conveyed only through quotations.” Hodge asks jokingly, “How is it that an ancient and venerable figure of speech long associated with Socrates, Plato, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, and Cervantes, to mention only the most distinguished of ironists, came to be the cause of so much unhappiness? Jedediah doesn’t say exactly.” Mocking Purdy’s complaint of *Wired* and *Fast Company*, the *Harper’s* editor jokingly calls those publications—about top-end business and information technology—“dangerously subversive.” Purdy also “treats us” to a number of etymologies, but never one on “irony.” Hodge also muses, “Why do the second- and third-rate musings of a twenty-four year old command our attention?” Purdy to Hodge’s “realistic” eyes is merely another product of marketing executives who thought his story would pretty-up their catalogues. As such, Purdy belongs to a long line of young, Ivy-educated, self-righteous critics, including Katie Roiphe, Wendy Shalit, and Dinesh D’Souza; “How nice for them to be published so young, attend expensive schools,” Hodge bites, “yet how worthless their books, now sitting on remainder shelves.” Suffice it to say that Hodge was not a fan of *For Common Things*.

No matter: in a more thoughtfully considered article from the *The New York Review of Books* from March 9, 2000, entitled “The West Virginian,” Benjamin DeMott called Purdy a

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<sup>311</sup> Rodger D. Hodge, “Thus Spoke Jedediah.” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 1999, p. 84.

fierce scolder of elites, their cheerleaders, and their jesters, [who] chides Harvard students for moral indifference, Tom Peters for claiming “life is a hustle,” Jerry Seinfeld for being “irony incarnate,” and at times sounding like a mid-career Archibald Macleish pounding “the irresponsibles.”<sup>312</sup>

DeMott wryly notes, like Hodge, that because of Purdy’s self-proclaimed outsidership and strange upbringing that he is a perfectly marketable specimen. DeMott observes that Internet chatrooms “hummed” with talk of the book, and many of them harped on Purdy’s snotty, Ivy-league education, saying he was out of touch with the real world.

For all the generated buzz, however, DeMott thinks that the “young Walter Lippmann” (how Princeton sociologist and co-editor of *The American Prospect*, Paul Starr, assessed Purdy) never emerges. Purdy quotes too many well-known nonconformist, uplifting authors, which only points to his inexperience, youth, and lack of familiarity with a wide range of books outside of college English and philosophy classes. Finally, for DeMott, there’s the issue of definition: according to Purdy’s concept, irony is a synonym for cynicism, skepticism, narcissism, and a fear of betrayal and humiliation. DeMott observes that Purdy seems unaware that irony is also a practical and socially effectual means of holding dim outlooks and wilted language in precise, sustained focus, for perusal and edification. DeMott worries about Purdy’s gaucheries such as these, about his youthful and naïf ways, but he nevertheless wishes him well for the brave efforts of exposing private predilections in the public realm. A vote of confidence from DeMott, even with his reservations, was a clear sign that this book and topic had something worthwhile to say.

An important exchange occurred on *Slate.com* on September 20, 1999, “The State of Irony” by Michael Hirschorn. A former editor at *SPIN*, *New York Magazine*, and *Esquire*, Hirschorn begins, in an email exchange with Purdy, with the observation that the author has become the sort of celebrity that he derided in his book. With a flair for the topical, the editor Hirschorn spells out that Purdy has become a hot media item because of his interesting background and story, and it would not have happened if he were and

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<sup>312</sup> Benjamin DeMott, “The West Virginian.” *New York Review of Books*, March 9, 1999, p. 17.

“assistant professor at Oswego State.”<sup>313</sup> Hirschorn notes that irony, in the past, was an interesting form of rebellion, used by comedians such as Lenny Bruce, but that it is now a spent cultural force; irony has become party to, and a reliable weapon of, the forces of smugness and fatuity.

And so Hirschorn asks: “How do we live earnestly without following Wendell Berry to a farm? Isn’t there room for shallowness and commitment? Irony and earnestness?” This is perhaps the most interesting point of Hirschorn’s commentary, for it contrasts the categories within which he (and others) are operating: it’s either smug, urban, and ironic, or earnest and rural. His question is a good one, for it seeks a third way—a third way that is actually a historical way, back to the morally inspired satirical tradition (Rabelais, Shakespeare, Erasmus, Voltaire, Twain, Wilde, Mencken)—that overcomes the false dichotomy of irony and earnestness, that were both. Clearly on the trail of something relevant to its young, educated readers, *Slate.com* followed up a few months later, on January 4, 2000, “The Backlash Against the Backlash Against Irony,” by Judith Shulevitz, a columnist for *New York Times Book Review*. Master ironists—by this she means the pop-culture makers, magazine editors, and punditry roasted by the civically concerned—had now knee-jerkingly reacted against irony, she observed; and now “we’re on the path to neurotic self-negation.” Irony, Shulevitz smartly noted, was essentially a tragic view of life, neither defensible or inherently bad or good.

On September 9, 1999 *The New York Times* ran “Why Seinfeld (‘Irony Incarnate’) Is So Menacing,” by Christopher Lehmann-Haupt.<sup>314</sup> An “impressive if somewhat pious first book,” Lehmann-Haupt wrote, noting that Purdy and Thomas Carlyle complain about the same thing: ironic man is a menace. Accordingly, for Lehmann-Haupt,

the difficulty is that little of what Purdy writes is new. On top of this, he labors at length such crashingly obvious ideas such as the ethical ambiguities of technology and the decline of neighborly communities. Worse, he often sounds self-righteous.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Michael Hirschorn, “The State of Irony.” *Slate.com*, September 20, 1999, at <http://www.slate.com/archive>

<sup>314</sup> Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “Why Seinfeld (Irony Incarnate) Is So Menacing,” *The New York Times*, September 9, 1999.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*



Lehmann-Haupt concludes that the ultimate problem with a book like this is that it fails on two counts: it won't reach the superficial people it condemns, and it trivializes the opposition by reducing all ironists to *Seinfeld*. These are smart points, and indeed ones echoed in the social and political observations of Dionne and Chaloupka. Nonetheless, Lehmann-Haupt is sympathetic to Purdy's considerations and congratulates him for taking on a menace that is "afflicting an entire generation."

In a review that appeared prior to the book's publication, on August 23, 1999, *The New York Observer* published "Against Irony, Really (Truly): Spongy Screed Wrings False," by Adam Begley, who observes that Purdy is interested in celebrating public life and belief in a shared destiny, and "he hopes to make hope look less risky." Though believing in the goal of the daunting task, Begley says he does not understand why irony has to enter into the picture. Consequently, he thinks Purdy gives irony a false "dissing." Purdy complains in a generations' inability to express or hear others' sincere emotion—and "if he's right," Begley thinks that Purdy paints an unnecessarily bad picture of people who use irony, because Purdy sees them as secretly sad. But, observes Begley, Purdy never truly defines the term, and though the young author gives it a slight nod at the end (as "ecstatic irony"), this lack of definition is the cause for much confusion for those reading and reviewing the book. As such, "Mr. Purdy's plague of irony is a mystery curse without historical origin; it descends on certain populations and spares others. America has it bad."

In issue twenty-five of *Image: A Journal of Arts and Religion*, editor Gregory Wolfe took a few pages to write his editorial statement in defense of irony. "Irony, it seems," Wolfe wrote,

is the hot topic of the moment. The trigger for this spate of op-eds and Sunday arts-section essays is the recent publication of a book by a graduate student at Yale University.... The argument is that America is suffering from a pervasive attitude of irony.<sup>316</sup>

From there, Wolfe notes that nearly all commentators have agreed that "irony is a form of intense self-consciousness—a knowing, cynical mistrust of institutions and shared

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<sup>316</sup> Gregory Wolfe, "Editorial Statement: In Defense of Irony." *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*, issue 25, Winter 1999-2000.

truths....The conviction that everything is derivative.” Wolfe was being generous with his own understanding of irony, for many of the commentators of Purdy’s book did not pursue such a definition, but rather, went after Purdy for conflating terms. To be fair, Wolfe also raises the point that the word is too subtle and complex to capture the attitude that Purdy describes.

Noting that the ironist has a kinship with the rubbish bin of history, “quoting” styles and phrases in a way that at once signifies the past but consciously shows our ultimate separation from it, Wolfe is especially concerned with the number of religious people who condemn contemporary art with the derogatory word *ironic*. Wolfe, while signaling that complexity of the historical concept, then himself drops back into the literary use of the term, saying that we’d ought to recognize the origins of the literary device and how valuable it is and, further, not use the term to describe the postmodern self-consciousness that “we’ve begun to grow tired of.” If we use irony in a “responsible” way, he contends, it can help us to see how difficult it is to be sincere. Here irony becomes like a pharmaceutical drug: used wrong, it can lead to destruction; used responsibly, it can help point the way to betterment.

In *Lingua Franca* (an unfortunately now-defunct magazine covering the academic world) associate editor Caleb Crain (now assistant professor of English at Columbia) took intelligent aim at Purdy. His initial tone is light, witty, and knowing, even if by turns harsh. He starts reviewing Purdy’s book by noting that Purdy was home-schooled in West Virginia and “unlike every other child in human history, did not mind doing chores.”<sup>317</sup> But in terms of the book’s content, “intellectual fogy-porn” is how Crain first refers to *For Common Things*. Humorous but distracting *ad hominem* attacks follow: “In his bangs and cotton sweater with no shirt...he identifies Michel de Montaigne as a ‘sixteenth-century Frenchman’...as if he expects a pat on the head.”<sup>318</sup> Crain goes on to correct Purdy’s use of the term “irony,” saying that he confuses it with sarcasm, cynicism, skepticism, narcissism, materialism, and despair, and that “perhaps it’s hard for him to track something so unfamiliar. After all, there was none of this lubricity of words and things in West Virginia, where he ate the cows he named.”

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<sup>317</sup> Caleb Crain, from the general-interest website Salon.com from September 7, 1999, p. 1 of 4. See: <http://www.salon.com/books/review/1999/09/07/Purdy/>

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

According to the review, Purdy has dislodged irony not with faith, but with “sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity.” Purdy, to Crain, fits the form of the jeremiad perfectly: the young author laments that there once was a time when people enjoyed and respected politics. Now people have retreated from the public sphere and have shielded themselves from despair with irony. To cure this, we should aspire to community service and attachment to work and places. “Humility doesn’t merit a book,” Crain retorts. When Purdy observes that it’s worth noting that cars with bumper stickers that say “Magic Happens” often also have stickers that say “Mean People Suck,” Crain answers that, “no, it’s not worth noting. And it’s snide.” In the end, Crain assails Purdy for not being a disciplined thinker, as he runs from one topic to another, all based on associations rather than reasoned argument.

In the journal *Social Policy* from spring 2001, Kevin Mattson, associate director of Walt Whitman Center at Rutgers University and author of *Creating A Democratic Republic* (1998), offered “Irony’s Irony: Jedediah Purdy and the Plight of the Young Writer.”<sup>319</sup> Mattson’s first sentence is already a rhetorically ironic jab at Purdy: “Poor Jedediah. At the age of twenty-four, he published *For Common Things...*” He continues by noting that the book produced a rare thing—a controversial event in American letters. The book, Mattson observes, produced a personality for consumption in a matter of weeks due to all the press surrounding the book’s publication.

Reflecting on the recent history of young writers such as Dinesh D’Souza (*The End of Racism*, 1995), Wendy Shalit (*A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*, 1994) and Katie Roiphe (*The Morning After*, 1993), Mattson tosses off a few sentences about how the young writer, as even Normal Mailer advised, needs a hook and an interesting story to be generated by the Public Relations department at a publishing house. It’s a cynical view—that is, it is a view that plans for the future concealment of its plans—but Mattson then talks about how this also makes sense because it’s harder now to write and sell literary journalism and social criticism that it used to be. After a fairly standard assessment, Mattson intelligently broadens the topic to observe that there is a “general tendency in American culture to prioritize the personal.” Unfortunately, he stops there.

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<sup>319</sup> Kevin Mattson, “Irony’s Irony: Jedediah Purdy and the Plight of the Young Writer.” *Social Policy*, Spring 2001.

A now-defunct Boston publication, *Hermeneut.com*, from September 28, 1999, sported a review by Joshua Glenn, the journal's editor and publisher, and now a writer at the *Boston Globe*. After a short intro, Glenn asks, "Why, then, are professional ironists so consumed with Purdy these days? One reason is because he said what so many of us already know, that we can't cleave to demanding values. Secondly, critics are after Purdy because he misuses the term "irony." Glenn points out that although Montaigne, Twain, and Swift were ironic, they were also engaged. Glenn writes that much of the commentary about Purdy is itself ironic, and, though other critics have missed this point, that Purdy does see the value in irony in its *liberating* possibilities. Purdy calls this "ecstatic irony." Ultimately, Glenn welcomingly notes that this *is* a form of seriousness. Glenn also says that one of Purdy's embarrassingly unintentional points is that he does not really understand pop culture, as if Purdy has read books about television but never actually watched it.

After observing an onslaught of Purdy criticism, novelist Benjamin Anastas, mentioned earlier in this essay, wrote on *The New Republic Online* from May 18, 2001 "Irony Scare: How Did A Literary Device Become A Public Enemy?" Anastas's tone is sarcastic in the beginning:

If you are a regular consumer of cultural journalism you will already know about the fierce battle underway between the scheming agents of irony—infidels all—and those honest souls in the arts who practice 'earnestness.' That is, a cultural war pitting the crusaders of Truth and Beauty versus the dark forces of Deconstruction and Moral Relativism.<sup>320</sup>

Though such a question begins to get very engaging, and indeed touches on a much broader and more important conversation, Anastas does not, likely due to space constraint, push this point further. Such is the nature of fifteen-hundred-word reviews, but Anastas does well to continue broadening the scope by saying that although Purdy's arguments have been refuted, his fallacious use of the term *irony* has been adopted by all sorts of commentators who say that all that is good in American life is being corroded by cynicism, parody, sarcasm, and vice—a conflation of the word *irony*.

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<sup>320</sup> Benjamin Anastas, "Irony Scare: How Did A Literary Device Become A Public Enemy?" *The New Republic Online*, May 18, 1999. <http://www.tnr.com/online/anastas051801.html>

Anastas continues by offering the origin of the term (the Greek *eirōn*), and saying, oddly, that it is “nothing more than a literary device.” Anastas smartly highlights the easy caricature of the culture wars: “Do away with irony and hope will return to America; let it fester, and the country’s moral stature will continue to degenerate.”<sup>321</sup> Noting the superior subtlety of art over media, Anastas warns that we should not take the media’s definition of the irony at face value, saying that they understand it as a national disease; as contrasted to earnestness or honesty; as an absolute good, and that art should imitate life in all its boringness. Our culture is flooded in confession and putting ourselves ‘out there’ in art; irony as a mode of critique is thus replaced by satire, cynicism, and parody. According to Anastas, it is not irony itself that brings squalor to the national discussion, but those who use the ironic or honest stance in order to comment rather than contribute. The national problem for Anastas, in the end is not irony, but spectatorship.

In *Reason* magazine from January 2000, “Jedediah the Ironist” by Jesse Walker, an associate editor at the libertarian publication, delivers a vitriolic, though predictable, review of *For Common Things* and of Jedediah Purdy.<sup>322</sup> Starting out by calling the book presumptuous, pretentious, richly bad, and so intensely undermining of itself that “one simply can’t take it at face value,” Walker claims that Purdy is unclear about his use of the term “public,” that one does not know if he means public sector or public sphere. Humorously, Walker admits that “part of me suspects that Purdy doesn’t actually exist.” This sort of attitude is hardly surprising from the libertarian angle, where skepticism is regarded as a sort of self-legitimizing virtue. But primarily Walker writes that the book is such a huge failure because

Purdy’s defense of earnestness is like an advertisement for irony; it’s like a long college-essay that moves from personal anecdote to big ideas with names that certify the author as Well-Read: his use of authors does not offer a novel interpretation, but rather drops them around to prove something.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Jesse Walker, “Jedediah the Ironist.” *Reason Online*, January 2000. <http://www.reason.com/0001/bk.jw.jedediah.shtml>

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

After lambasting Purdy for his incessant use of the third-person plural, Walker asks, “are the Ivy’s and prep schools the best places to take the temperature of the national mood?” Citing a factual disagreement, Walker observes that Purdy never gives examples of any people or politicians who have shied from public life, though Purdy laments that lots of people do it. The only civil thing that Walker has to say about the book is that when it addresses strip mining in West Virginia, to which Purdy commits an entire chapter, it offers the “the importance and contingency of tradition.”

The literary review *McSweeney’s* from its October 12, 1999 web update published “Jedediah In Love” by Todd Pruzan.<sup>324</sup> A spiff on Jedediah Purdy’s perceived sanctimonious unfunniness, Pruzan sketches a satirical scene in the back of a stretch limo where he and Purdy and in a hot-tub with beautiful Las Vegas women. They talk and drink and smoke cigars, and Purdy tells a story of how he received oral sex that morning from Pruzan’s “friend” Marcie. Pruzan speaks of how well Purdy is doing at the tables in Vegas, how he’s ahead many thousands of dollars, how they’ve lived off of Pepsi and

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<sup>324</sup> Todd Pruzan, “Jedediah In Love.” *McSweeney’s*, October 12, 1999. [www.mcsweeneys.net/1999/10/12jedediah.html](http://www.mcsweeneys.net/1999/10/12jedediah.html). Not long after the publication of this article in *McSweeney’s*, I spoke with Jedediah Purdy (who will not remember) in Boston at a re-launch party for *The American Prospect* magazine. He said Pruzan’s yarn was tough medicine to swallow, and that he was hurt by it. Shortly thereafter I was introduced to Todd Pruzan (who will remember) in New York City; he felt bad after he heard that Purdy was hurt by his article, and said he agrees mostly with what Purdy talked about in *For Common Things*. Pruzan’s article about Purdy is, without doubt, very funny—as is Pruzan himself; yet the article performs the act of satirizing Purdy’s personality rather than engaging, like some of the other critiques, the ideas present in the book. This is perhaps why it’s the most fun to read, as well as the most effectual way to comment on the topic of irony in culture—through doing it. In any case, Pruzan satirized Purdy, but in real life sympathized and, ultimately, agreed with Purdy’s take on the force of ironic detachment in hip-intellectual metropolitan culture and how it can be harmful when it comes to generationally-similar people trying to speak honestly with each other about common concerns and the moral impetus of citizenship, what makes the contemporary situation confusing, and so on.

The relevancy of mentioning this is that this split between actually sympathizing with Purdy’s points in private while mocking him in print is symptomatic of the ironist stance in that there is a performative aspect that belies the sincere understanding and that is embarrassed to expose itself as an operating principle. As Sloterdijk writes, “[murky cynicism] has withdrawn into a mournful detachment that internalizes its knowledge as though it were something to be ashamed of, and as a consequence, it is rendered useless for taking the offensive (*Critique*, p. 7).” This is not at all to undercut or disparage Pruzan whatsoever, but merely to state that the demands of the debate, the narratological pressures that exist within the context of publishing in the Literary Kingdom of the Northeast Corridor, foist upon its contributors a set of unspoken rules that demand parties to avow something more “knowing” than what one actually (sincerely) feels.

amphetamines for the last fifty-three hours. He paints a picture of Purdy as a swinger, a gambler, a guy with no worries. As cool.

Then in comes a Nevada State Gaming Officer. Pruzan tags Purdy to the officer as the “world’s foremost philosopher on decency.” The gaming officer wants to check his age because he looks so young. As the two Las Vegas ramblers pop champagne and laugh uproariously, Purdy says, “You want to know what I think of the common things? What I really think? I loooooove the common things.... And I really mean it.”

In Johns Hopkins University’s *Charles Street Standard* the author, Gavin Elster,<sup>325</sup> opines that *For Common Things* will “frustrate anyone who considers himself part of modern society.” He continues to note that Purdy has good observations about the current cultural climate of America and that Purdy is right to suggest the culture is devoid of naïve devotion, belief, or hope. Elster believes that the book fails to reach its audience because Purdy himself is an ironic figure but fails himself to see it: born and bred in west Virginia, educated at Exeter, Harvard, and Yale, “Purdy smacks of either country bumpkin of Ivy-league snot.” Elster continues that this inadvertent irony is

unfortunate, since beneath the moments of evangelizing there exists a core of valid statements made about the condition of the American conception of the world....The detachment from issues of gravity through ironic means and the degradation of the ‘common things’ in life are what concern Purdy the most. As his evidence suggests, this concern is a real and immediate one.<sup>326</sup>

Elster, like many other reviews, though frustrated with the means by which Purdy expresses his concerns, nonetheless recognizes the immediacy and vitality of the topic, believing not only that irony spells out the concerns of (one may assume) his generation but of American culture generally.

Apologies are perhaps due for reciting so many of the reviews at length. But the reaction to Purdy’s small red book to be more heated about something that was repeatedly called simply “a rhetorical technique.” Something else was going on; the book had touched on some living theme that concerned many people in the chattering classes.

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<sup>325</sup> I am not certain if this is the author’s actual name or a pseudonym. “Gavin Elster” is also the name of the protagonist of Alfred Hitchcock’s 1958 classic, *Vertigo*.

<sup>326</sup> Gavin Elster, “Review of *For Common Things*,” *Charles Street Standard*, Fall 1999.

Would the reviewers have been so irate about the misuse or mischaracterization of a different rhetorical trope, say, a synecdoche?

Many of the reviewers of Purdy's book focused on his misuse of the term, on his conflation of some kind of disengaged attitude with the word "irony," though many intimated that Purdy was going a step forward with the concept of "ecstatic irony" insofar as it touched on a literary tradition that spoke truth to power, that reignited hope in the face of cynicism. The phenomenon Purdy had discussed in *For Common Things* might not have matched the literary definition of the word entirely, but the broader idea he was discussing was clear enough that some critics seemed to have read and interpreted in "bad faith." But, as mentioned earlier, Purdy's interpretive turn was certainly not new; the critique of irony in culture has had a long and complicated history in philosophical thought. This sort of talk—of irony that had a liberating quality—has a tradition of reaching far outside mere academic circles and into political speech. Yet while containing a motivating force of liberation, it also, as a social attitude, was blamed for being a contributing factor in the decline in civic health.

In this mini-debate over irony, there are philosophical assumptions that come to the fore, that show their colors by being guiding principles under which the critiques laboriously make their point. The question of the individual citizen's duty to the public, for example, the question of how one gets "beyond" being disengaged, the question as to why one would want to. If there is an overarching conception that all is a clammering for survival, that everyone is dubious and secretly self-interested, that reality has taken on the character of warfare—indeed reified by reality television and the incessant talk of survival—what is the point of thinking and acting towards a benevolent and better future, fulfillment of national ideals and duties, or sacrificing the chances for amassing personal fortune for the larger good? Even to utter the term "larger good" has for some time sounded hokey and nostalgic.

Under these kinds of assumptions, then, irony in the Purdy debate and beyond seems to have taken on a magnetic character for commentary, and Purdy's small treatise became the "whipping boy" of other political issues that were enervating Generation X writers and social observers. The book attracted many of the negative complaints about



American society and culture that had been kept in reserve, and following the publication of Purdy's book these complaints were hurled at the scapegoat of irony. As mentioned, Anastas' smart question "How did a literary device become a public enemy?" really gets to the heart of this phenomenon. Though missing the broader conception of irony as social disengagement, as a sensibility, Anastas' question highlights how it transformed into a concept for a host of negative moral qualities. Traits such as relativism, narcissism, decadent behavior, self-indulgence, and arrogance accreted around the term following the Purdy book, and even more so after 9/11.

I think that this speaks less to irony, per se, and more to the fact that there are many of people, even in the so-called liberal media, who are dearly concerned about the state of civic life and public morality. Irony, contrary to its inherently (though camouflaged) liberating ability and critical capacity, has become a scapegoat for some, and falsely defended as the tone of rebellious individuality on the other.<sup>327</sup> In short, the simple word and the debate it generated hides other concerns around it, other values for which irony either vies or is conceived of as eradicating.

### *3.6 Values in the Debate: Sincerity, Authenticity, Seriousness*

This sampling of some of the key punditry over civic trust and engagement, as well as the discussion of Rorty, of Purdy and his critics, reveals some underlying conceptions of the underlying *normative* pictures of what the citizen's attitude and duty to society should be, as well as how and why irony would be destructive to that picture. That normative citizen certainly does not include or foster characteristics such as sarcasm or ironic detachment to the degree that he loses the trust that is the default expectation put upon him as a citizen. As University of Chicago philosopher Robert B. Pippin aptly notes,

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<sup>327</sup> Some of the places that seem to get it right (and there are quite a few, but some, by virtue of intelligence, distribution, and timing, are able to be more functional)—that is, that summon the satirical tradition wherein irony serves the larger liberation of consciousness from deadening social forces, old clichés and stereotypes, thoughtless biases, and oppressive public mores—are various television programs on Comedy Central (like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Chappelle Show*, and *South Park*), *The Simpsons*, magazines like *Harper's*, *The Gawker*, and *McSweeney's*, and satirical newspapers like *The Onion*.

A society of suspicious or sarcastic or cynical or judgmental or self-involved persons—let us say a world full of *Seinfeld* characters...corrodes and undermines the dependencies and reliances central to the modern *civitas*, [which involves] some sort of appreciation of the dependence of life on others within some community of dependence, and the enactment of social forms appropriate to that dependence.<sup>328</sup>

Namely, as Pippin alludes to, the good citizen needs to be serious and honest about the things that are required of him. His sense of moral commitment to the community and to the nation is not to be taken lightly; that is, he needs not only to *perform* his role in the social realm, but to *believe* that it is good and worthwhile. He cannot take himself too seriously or value himself to the extent that he shuts out others around him neglects his community; a common morality and body of expectations should bind likeminded moral actors together. The public role needs to be “readable” in order for one to be a good citizen, for hiding meaning or intention takes for granted someone else’s good-faith efforts at understanding and generosity. This sort of picture of the social actor’s role in society may be characterized as the traditional-moral conception of the individual’s duty towards society.

Hoover Institute research fellow Stanley Kurtz explains the difference between this model of the citizen and the aesthetic model of the ironist:

From a traditional religious perspective, humans strive to create a community based on shared moral standards. Conscious of his own weakness, an individual enters a community and places himself under the authority of its moral norms. He knows that both he and others will at times fail to meet those norms. Yet a refusal to articulate and impose moral requirements on himself and others would be a betrayal of the community itself. It would, so to speak, be unbrotherly....The aesthete, on the other hand, is first and foremost an individual. He substitutes personal expression for moral judgment. To the aesthete, the moralist’s judgments are oppressive attempts to coerce creativity and stifle the inner self. For the aesthete, music, sex, even drugs are extensions and revelations of his spiritual self....For the traditional moral man...the aesthete’s refusal to make judgments is tantamount to withdrawal from the community. Moral man sees the spiritualized pleasures of the aesthete as a form of idolatry—an attempt to turn all that is selfish in man into a substitute for God.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Robert B. Pippin, “The Ethical Status of Civility” in Rouser, *Civility*, p. 110.

<sup>329</sup> Stanley Kurtz, “Freedom and Slavery: Our Moral Predicament and Bill Bennett’s.” *National Review Online*, May 13, 2003.

This is a concise description of two competing worldviews that form the poles in the above considerations of irony and civic trust, and one, as we'll see, that harks directly back to the same tension experienced in the first days of the Reformed Protestant errand in America; one that can be described as *serious*, and the other that, I believe, we can safely describe as *ironic*.

It is this second attitude, this traditionally conceived “anti-civic” way of being in society, at which much of the commentary takes aim. The descriptions, even when not pointing such as attitude out as explicitly “ironic,” each point to the same characteristics—self-absorption, skepticism towards moral authority, relativism, lack of commitment, a lack of seriousness with regards to the social well-being—that would fit the philosophical mold precisely. Recall, just briefly, Theophrastus’ observation that the ironist was someone “who could never...commit himself in speech so that he was forced to take sides in an active discussion...Irony is a social vice,” Mann’s ironic description of irony as “bad for civilization,” and the initial introduction by Carlyle, who held that ironic man makes a bad citizen, that he is a menace.

It’s important to remember that ironic disengagement as social attitude introduces a moral dimension, for irony requires a community that understands what is happening and one that does not. It pits getting it and not getting it, lending implied intellectual or aesthetic superiority (though never explicitly moral, for *speaking directly* of morality is seen as prudish and controlling) to those who do. Posturing the ironic attitude is frequently called “arrogant,” “elitist,” “bitter,” and “cold.” Each of these descriptions—from *Time* columnists back to Aristotle—consistently set up ethical implications of donning the ironic stance as a social mask. It refuses to treat all others as equal; it implies arrogance to those who are not in the understanding community; it denies the full humanity or agency of those who are not. As such, this dynamic sets up a window into the moral values for normative citizenship. As such it puts into relief why the ironist is condemned for not honoring and *displaying* them.

There are several implied values that lead to the individual being valued as trustworthy, as having good character, as being a good citizen: *sincerity*, *authenticity*, and *seriousness*. The ironic worldview as a social disposition affects each of these values insofar

it plays with appearances; it acts and performs but means something other than what it appears to mean or be. It sees things as other than they are. It dissembles exteriorities. It points to its meanings through gestures or intonations, but in doing so it hides what it “really” means. It fosters second guessing and secretiveness. It twists the *observation* of the values and characteristics of sincerity, authenticity, and seriousness in ways that become unrecognizable, though in many ways it still holds these values itself. And if the normative picture of the individual citizen is based on transparency of purpose and meaning, on literalness, then irony represents the undercutting of this normative picture because it does an affront to directness and encourages an unseen reality to take priority over what is seen. At varying times it can be said to mask or unmask. I would like to address each of these characteristics briefly to see how they play a role in the relationship of normative social trust and how irony supposedly corrodes that reliability. This will lead into a more extended discussion of irony and civic trust.

Civic trust requires *sincerity* of commitment and purpose to the common good. In necessitates an inward disposition that transcends self-interest in favor of public well-being. In doing so, citizenship must be performed sincerely, not merely because it is one’s obligation; and it must be entered into with the whole will. To be generous or civil should equally be done out of sincere desire to perform certain activities for their own worth, not simply because one *must* do them. That would not actually be being generous, as Robert B. Pippin writes, but would be “simply giving more than strictly required in some context.”<sup>330</sup> To engage the civic body and to be a trusted individual, one must be perceived as being sincere in one’s engagement, not pretending to be kind and understanding in order to do something else, something hidden. As the literary critic Lionel Trilling contended:

Society requires of us that present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see to it that we really are sincere, that we actually are what we want our community to know we are. In short, we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the

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<sup>330</sup> Pippin, p. 106.

sincere person, with the result that a judgment may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic.<sup>331</sup>

The words *sincerity* and *earnestness* are often recruited to stand in as the great defenders of all that is good and right within the context of the debate of civic trust. Sincerity is being true to one's self, and in doing so, being true to others, showing them your authenticity. We have to "mean it." Irony as a way to engage the world, as a social stance, only makes sense if there are attempts at sincerity, directness, earnestness, and honest engagement set against it. Irony thus gets its flavor and negative charge from opposing the normative means of social engagement. It attempts to undercut the forms by which social actors attempt sincerity in order to point to hypocrisy, defend themselves against attack, or undercut authority. It's therefore worthwhile spending a little bit of time talking about how sincerity as a morally loaded mode operates and how it's been conceived in opposition to irony, what it looks like to the moral imagination. Ultimately, the concept plays an important role in the ironic sensibility, not because it is its opposite, but because it is the goal of what the ironist is trying to do. In Kierkegaard's version of Socrates, it is what made Socrates' irony worthwhile, because it pointed to something beyond itself; it was purposeful and earnest underneath its ignorance and irony. It held itself back in favor of something bigger being said.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most succinct and concentrated essays on the cultural history of this sentiment is Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*, published in 1974. For the literary historian and critic, sincerity throughout the tradition of Western literature has been a moral sentiment and a state or quality of the self. It is the concurrence of spoken avowal and actual feeling. One knows if one is being sincere, and often others can discern the sincerity of a speaker. At a point in modern European history, during the sixteenth century, the ideal of showing the world one's innermost feelings and ideals became a very important attainment. Throughout the Western literary canon and in within bourgeois society this ideal was tantamount to moral uprightness; to dissemble and deceive was "villainous." Trilling situates this increased valuation in the nineteenth century with figures such as Matthew Arnold, of whom he gives the following poetic example:

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<sup>331</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 10.

Below the surface-stream, shallow and light  
Of what we *say* we feel—below the stream  
As light, of what we *think* we feel—there flows  
With noiseless current strong, obscure and deep,  
The central stream of what we feel indeed.<sup>332</sup>

If Arnold's "surface stream" is everyday social reality, there is an implication that social masks and language cover over actual feeling—the Romantic stance. There is a difference between what we say and what we feel, what we think and what we feel. The intonation is that both language and thought cannot properly convey feeling, the true arbiter of sincerity, the litmus test of our acting morally.

But sincerity has not always been a *moral* value. Originally *sincere* meant "uncorrupted," having entered the English language, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, by 1540. The term, derived from the Latin *sine cera* (without wax, as a patching agent) was used to describe things such as wine or glass, things that would possibly contain impurities but that did not, earning them the mantel. Something that was unadulterated, that existed in its pure sense was considered sincere. Even Samuel Johnson gave priority to the word as regards things, not people.

As an attribute possessed by human beings, sincerity rose to coveted status during the English Renaissance, particularly with Shakespeare, who used the word with no pretense or leaning toward metaphor. This use was inspired partially because in the sixteenth century, in Trilling's admittedly pared-down narrative, parts of European society saw increased social mobility and the slow decline of clear social bounds and roles. Men and women alike, especially in England and France, left their inherited classes for the betterment of their social status. Such movement required that when one moved on and met others, one should display one's true intentions outwardly; only "villains" and non-Christians were "dissimulators," intentionally showing themselves falsely to others. Such a person was morally reviled, for he attempted to rise above the station in which he found himself by guile, false avowal, and cunning. This mode would eventually be displayed for all its modernity in Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* (1805).

A mock conversation between the author (*Moi*) and his obsequious nephew (*Lui*),

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<sup>332</sup> Arnold in Trilling, p. 5.

*Rameau's Nephew* sets two modes of moral behavior in opposition: the straightforward rational moralist and the deceptive young man who both openly discloses his desires and who performs socially to get what he wants. Reduced to shameless self-abasement for the purposes of self-promotion, Rameau is seen by Diderot as his own worst enemy in the moral errand of obtaining a purity of heart. He is his own opposite. Above all, these characteristics occur because Rameau is concerned with his place in society and how to better this standing, how to achieve fame as an artist.

In explaining the course that Rameau runs in order to do so, Diderot pitches the nephew as running his spiritual course *within* the realm society. And it is this process, as something detached from Nature, that Diderot sees as the corrupting influence of the individual soul. By trying to appease and raise himself beyond his standing, the nephew becomes alienated from himself, from his own interiority. Instead, he apes the gestures and rituals performed in polite society; he is hyper-self-conscious to all the cues and commands that social dictates impress upon him. As such, the dialogue as a whole “lays bare the principle of insincerity upon which society is based and demonstrates the loss of personal integrity and dignity that the impersonations of social existence entail.”<sup>333</sup>

Additionally and importantly, Rameau, by reducing the behaviors of socialites to mere gestures, triumphs the truth of art in performing an opera, and in doing so *transcends through art* the accreted traditional categories and dictates of morality. He assumes various roles (the appearance and performance of the self in the public sphere), and in doing so, elevates the individual spirit beyond particularity into the universal, here characterized as becoming more free. As we’ve just seen, this for Hegel has its limits, but the making self-conscious of these categories was for him a part of spirit becoming conscious of itself, part of the individual overcoming the social whole to become free. Diderot, like Rousseau, thus exemplifies the dialectical tension of pure interiority and social violation.

Trilling notes that sincerity in the twentieth century came to be devalued, as it began to be seen as quaint and simple minded. Even in the beginning of *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Trilling announces that today, “if we speak [the word sincerity], we are likely to do so with either discomfort or irony.”<sup>334</sup> Aesthetic consciousness has increasingly

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<sup>333</sup> Trilling, p. 31.

<sup>334</sup> Trilling, p. 6.

privileged performance and display over the revealing of the felt internal life. Literary movement through the Romantic era into modernity saw the value of sincerity—that is, of an agent revealing his innermost sentiments in a direct and unaffected manner—decline into naïve expressionism. The model of aesthetic production—an activity that assumed a directly line of communication from the artist to the audience—became in late aesthetic modernity a complicated picture wherein that very relationship came into question.

Yet as a social rather than aesthetic value, sincerity clearly retained its importance for the affairs of government and public life. Importantly, the ideal of sincerity formed the moral basis for citizenship in the modern democratic nation-state such that the person belonging to the society has the legitimacy to investigate the state and scrutinize the polity. Clearly, this is the basis behind journalism and freedom of the press. This model, of course, assumed that the person is sincere in his or her analysis, that there should be an agreement between the avowed goals of a society and its actions, and, finally, an assumption that the state should not intrude on private life so much so as to corrupt the sincerity of its citizens.<sup>335</sup>

Through a complete account of sincerity as a moral value would require far more space, even a lengthy digression would have to immediately lay claim to the fact that the value of sincerity has its direct roots in, and was an explicitly supreme value of, the Reformation. As the esteemed historian J. M. Roberts writes, “The Protestant Reformation displaced so many traditional values by the one supreme value of sincerity.”<sup>336</sup> Given the central emphasis that Luther placed on direct communion with God and the ultimate legitimacy for this communication is placed within the individual himself, to feign sincerity of salvation was ultimately to do harm to oneself. And doubly so: for one was not only sure of the secret knowledge that one was not saved as well as the knowledge that one has lied, thus doing an injustice to the precepts of the faith.

Thus by opposite accounts—and here thrown into perhaps an oversimplified juxtaposition—insincerity was increasingly seen as something of a moral problem wrought by Christianity itself. As Max Horkheimer wrote in *The Eclipse of Reason*

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>336</sup> J. M. Roberts, *History of the World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 553.



(1944)—following the Nietzschean interpretation of Christianity’s quelling of superior, dominating values and instincts:

By the very negation of the will to self-preservation on earth in favor of the preservation of the eternal soul, Christianity asserted the infinite value of each man, an idea that penetrated even non-Christian or anti-Christian systems of the Western world. True, the price was the repression of the vital instincts and, since such repression is never successful, an *insincerity* pervades our culture. Nevertheless, this very internalization enhances individuality.<sup>337</sup>

*Authenticity* stems directly from this attitude, as being authentic is akin to being sincere. Importantly, both the ironist and the virtuous citizen espouse the ultimate moral value of authenticity; their means of expressing it, of going after it, vary greatly. Where sincerity implies the description of an activity of *expression* of the self (actions and words), authenticity, in the “jargon” of philosophy, implies the *characteristic* of a moral being. To clearly represent the state of one’s interiority without dissembling or acting is to *be* an authentic person. More importantly, the modern authentic person is his own judge of authenticity. The model of the registered overlay between avowal and intention here again apply. The values of sincerity and authenticity play perhaps the supreme role, the deepest assumption behind the expectations of citizens. Being a sincere and authentic person is required for the social contract and the binding together of civic life to function at all.

For the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, in his discerning investigation *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991), authenticity as a moral value in modernity is often trampled upon with words like “narcissism,” “hedonism,” and “relativism,” all of which camouflage the *moral* impetus behind a reach for authenticity. To be relativistic in morality is simultaneously to hold the value of “being true to one’s self” higher than that of fashioning one’s behavior to ideals that one did not choose. Adherence to such values would be “inauthentic,” or perhaps “rigid.” Taylor holds that the moral ideal of authenticity, having stemmed from the Romantic insistence on sincerity and the overlay of action and inner feeling (moral or not), has become, in its own right, the dominant modern moral value—that is, an ultimate aspiration because it helps people feel

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<sup>337</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, pp. 137-138.

integrated and whole; it points towards the good life, the best way to live. Stemming from, in Taylor's account, Rousseau's insistence that morality is a voice within, authenticity warrants an attempt to get in touch with that voice. An authentic being, then, is one who has to some degree shunned external directives and morality in exchange for his own direction; he "does his own thing." Importantly, Taylor believes, this inner urge is "unrepudiable by moderns."<sup>338</sup>

Thus the conflict between traditional moral pictures, which hold objective standards for behavior regardless of how one "feels" about doing them, flies squarely in the face of the urge towards authenticity; or, rather, the inward urge towards authenticity, when held as a higher value, can trump traditional notions of moral behavior and thus be characterized as "hedonistic," or "anti-civic." For example, if a driving picture of the self and of human beings is that they are fundamentally survivalist atoms prone to manipulation and self-serving utilitarianism (instrumentalism), being sincere is troubled, for now appearing to be sincere becomes *useful* to getting what one wants. To admit openly that one is manipulative and shameless in one's use of feigning sincerity, is to be authentic—the supreme moral value, as the social critic Thomas Frank has written, of the modern American mind.<sup>339</sup> The values of sincerity and authenticity in this case have come unhinged. It is now possible to be authentic without being sincere because one may be insincere to be self-interested, which is authentic, truthful. And thereby it is possible to be honest while being manipulative.

Made explicit throughout the debate about irony and civic trust is the distinction between the ironist and those who are serious. There were two camps spelled out very clearly, and as Rosenblatt detailed in the conclusion to his diatribe against irony after 9/11, the event shifted the unreality of ironists to the belief in "what is real" of the true believers:

In short, people may at last be ready to say what they wholeheartedly believe. The kindness of people toward others in distress is real. There is nothing to see through in that. Honor and fair play? Real. And the preciousness of ordinary living is real as well—all to be taken seriously,

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<sup>338</sup> Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 23.

<sup>339</sup> Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

perhaps, in a new and chastened time. The greatness of the country: real.  
The anger: real. The pain: too real.<sup>340</sup>

To be real and to be serious fall in line. The phrase “there is nothing to see through in that,” directly implicates the ironist as someone who is going around “unmasking,” things or “seeing through” motivations. What is serious is reality, and what is real is serious. “Are you looking for something to take seriously?” Rosenblatt asks, “Begin with evil.” Being *serious* about one’s duties as an individual in society, about one’s ethical commitments, is thus also implied in the model not only of good citizenship, but also in good personhood. For being serious says that actions will follow the things one has said; *serious* implies commitment to future actions, an agreement to bear or mete out consequences when those commitments are broken.

Seriousness, like sincerity, implies an alignment between appearance and reality. Yet the element of time is also a factor, because seriousness is a promise to be acted upon in the future. A non-serious promise does not exist. Because of this metaphorical alignment, seriousness is associated, spatially, with being deep, and it also implies certain modes of gesture, tone, and behavior that are used to convey seriousness. Unseriousness, on the other hand, whether intentional or not, is the incongruity of what is said and what is done, or what is and what is not. Thus, for social psychologist Karl E. Scheibe, where seriousness implicates alignment of inner and outer, “playfulness, falseness, whimsy, caprice, deception, frivolity [signify] the lack of alignment.”<sup>341</sup>

Similarly, sincerity is, as Trilling said, the concurrence of spoken avowal and actual feeling. So, as forms, sincerity and seriousness have much in common. Seriousness has staying power; it has life-altering power. Seriousness also goes to the core of the human experience, versus the superficiality of custom, tradition, mores, and protocol. When something is serious, these sorts of social behaviors are foregone in order to react in an existentially direct way to life and, more frequently, to death. And so the proximity to death, pain, or confinement is directly proportional to the degree of seriousness with which we take something. Illnesses can be serious or not; crimes can be serious or not. Thus seriousness, like irony, orients itself towards the future with all the force of the past.

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<sup>340</sup> Rosenblatt, “The Age of Irony Comes to An End.”

<sup>341</sup> Karl E. Scheibe, *The Drama of Everyday Life*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 29.

Either one can signal a lack of or growth in hope. As Nietzsche jovially thundered, “The past, the longest, deepest, and sternest past, breathes upon us and rises up in us whenever we become ‘serious.’”<sup>342</sup>

Civic trust is serious in the commentaries cited because without it, there is no society; there is but a Hobbesian vision of all clammering for survival, individual against individual, unmediated by the mutually agreed upon laws—which must be taken seriously because they have consequences—that govern individual and social behavior. The critics above, to their credit, provide a critique that is equally anti-Machiavellian as it is anti-ironic. A middle-way to citizenship that combines both sincerity and good faith efforts towards one’s neighbor form the overriding picture of the sorts of people that should be society. Both the Machiavellian manipulators and the “Seinfeldian” ironists make for bad company. Thus, to not be serious about one’s responsibility for sustaining civic trust by being sincere in one’s dealings, is to contribute to the dissolution of social cohesion. That is, one is to be more serious to the cohesion of the civic body—the common good—only by taking one’s own self less seriously. As Scheibe astutely notes, “we can be responsible to the beneficent *socius* only by refusing to take *ourselves* too seriously.”<sup>343</sup> To take one’s personal ego less seriously, but take the *socius* very seriously is the proper moral mode of citizenship.

For Nietzsche, as merely an interesting counterpoint, to take things seriously was nothing more than the intellectual inability to think well and laugh simultaneously. The inability to do so was merely a prejudice, not an inherent problem in being human:

*Taking Things Seriously.*—The intellect is with most people an awkward, obscure and creaking machine, which is difficult to set in motion: they call it ‘taking things seriously’ when they work with this machine and want to think well—oh, how burdensome must be good thinking to them! That delightful animal, man, seems to lose his good humor whenever he thinks well; he becomes ‘serious’! And ‘where there is laughing and gaiety, thinking cannot be worth anything:’—so speaks the prejudice of this serious animal against all ‘Joyful Wisdom.’—Well, then! Let us show that it is prejudice!<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals & Ecce Homo*. Walter Kaufmann, ed. (New York: Vintage, 1969), p. 61.

<sup>343</sup> Scheibe, p. 39.

<sup>344</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom*, trans. Thomas Common. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1960), p. 252-253.

We would love to believe more that this is true, that it is readily possible. But seriousness has a way of sticking around without laughter, has a way of canceling out jest very quickly. That is to say, seriousness is always grounded in a worldview and set of values prior to the situation requiring the serious response. As we'll see in the coming pages, the worldview behind the seriousness of the social bond is ultimately religious in nature; it is therefore deeply held and hard to trespass against without invoking ire or umbrage. And given the historical grounds for the legitimization of the social bond—from God-to-man, to man-to-man, trust as secularized faith—to affront social trust is also, by proxy, to transgress a religious sense of the sacred.

## Chapter Four: The Roots of Inner Dependence

*Beloved Pan, and all ye other gods who haunt this place, give me beauty in the inward soul; and may the outward and the inward be at one.*

- Socrates

*Men seek for seclusion in the wilderness, by the seashore, or in the mountains – a dream you have cherished only too fondly yourself. But such fancies are wholly unworthy of a philosopher, since at any moment you choose you can retire within yourself. Nowhere can man find a quieter or more untroubled retreat than in his own soul.*

- Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (167 AD)<sup>345</sup>

*Do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth.*

- Augustine, *De vera Religione* (390 AD)<sup>346</sup>

*Let it suffice to say this concerning the inner man and its liberty, and concerning that righteousness of faith, [it] needs neither laws nor good work; nay, they are even hurtful to it, if any one pretends to be justified by them.*

- Martin Luther, “On Christian Freedom,” (1520)<sup>347</sup>

*Morality is character, character is that which is engraved; but the sand and the sea have no character and neither has abstract intelligence, for character is really inwardness.*

- Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*

*Emigration has become a fact of mass psychology. Entire strata of the population have been living for a considerable period in an inner somewhere-else. . . They do not feel bound to what are called the fundamental values of society.*

- Peter Sloterdijk, *The Critique of Cynical Reason*

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There is a larger picture prior to the modernist models of how irony interacts with the subject, how this ironic worldview is built. Both Romanticism and cool require a certain view of the self to operate—indeed they operate upon the same logic of distancing—and they require certain self-imposed regulations and desires for the self’s

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<sup>345</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (Book IV.3.) trans. Maxwell Staniforth. (London: Penguin Books, 1964).

<sup>346</sup> Augustine, *De vera Religione* (On the True Religion), Book XXXIX.72.

<sup>347</sup> Martin Luther, “On Christian Freedom,” *Luther: Selected Political Writings*, J. M. Porter, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), p. 33.

public presentation. For even this inner distancing to be possible, there must be a valuation of private interiority; there must also be an unspoken yet widely accepted view of the self that sees it as something as existentially special when contrasted with the world of objects and events. There is mind or spirit, internal to a being, and there is matter, external to the being and “in the world.” So commonsense is this view for us, for it forms the very philosophical basis of the autonomous individual that is the foundation of the modern idea of personhood.

How did this picture come to be? What would a picture of the self have to look like in order to conceive of it as a place to turn to for guidance and standards by which to judge the world? What are the philosophical narratives that went into comprising how this distance from the world evolved such that one could actually judge it? Does the Protestant view of the self allow and encourage the ironic perspective? What sorts of specific religious directives encouraged this movement—and more importantly, why? Regardless of how psychoanalytic theory or discussions of how “cool” helps to defend the ego from attack, how did this picture of the self as something that needs to (or could be) defended originate? How did we come to a place where we conceive of the inner self as an “object” in the world that has as much existence as other objects, that we could be conscious of it at all? How does the ontic logos have to look in order to perceive thoughts and judgments as internal to the mind versus outside of the mind, in the mind of God?

Again, these are hyperbolically enormous questions that I know I cannot fully cover responsibly here. Still, they are interesting questions. But it is important to recount the story of the valuation and turn toward “inwardness” in the religious and philosophical tradition, as such directional change of consciousness plays a vital role in the creation of irony as a worldview. In what follows, therefore, I will summarize a narrative of inwardness in the Western philosophical tradition insofar as it takes me to the concern with how irony will rely on this to function. This story comprises perhaps a major narrative in Western philosophy, and thus, in the modern liberal conception of subjectivity.

In order that I do not myself embarrassingly overstate, generalize, and simplify, I will say it in another’s words—someone more qualified to speak more broadly. The political philosopher Charles W. Anderson has keenly observed of this tradition and

narrative of inwardness

that the individual has the power to transcend, and thus to assess, culture is a view that is fundamental to the liberalism of Kant and Hegel, Mill and Dewey, as well as to the individualism of Plato and Aristotle, the Roman Stoics, and all of Christianity. This idea of individuality runs deep through our philosophical heritage. It is, I believe, fundamental to our liberal public philosophy.<sup>348</sup>

That is to say, the notion, the narrative, of private interiority as carved out by philosophical notions of personhood, and as being the fundamental “location” and “guarantee” of freedom, would eventually create the foundation for the entire notion of outwardly extending privacy—including property, space, and constructs of the legal rights of persons. It is the foundation of individual autonomy, implying detachment and disinterestedness, that is the basis of liberalism in the West—indeed a continuing set of values that guides the behaviors of nations and laws in the present age.

I will take additional solace in the fact that this path has been tread over far more competently than I could by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. In the following chapter, I will briefly address the development of this sense of inwardness that runs from Augustine up through Calvin in order to point to the perception of (and, significantly, *feeling* for) the importance of the inward self for basis of Romantic irony.

#### 4.1 Augustine

In his commanding work *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), Taylor explains that it was St. Augustine who had much to do with our modern notions and images of the self as a private place inside of us, connected to the divine, something sacred to be protected. Augustine’s view of the world was, in part, much like those of his contemporaries. He inherited the Platonic conception of a reflective world—passed on by Plotinus and the Pseudo-Dionysus, among others—which saw the objects and events in the world as symbols, as reflections of God’s thoughts. The world behind the world. Since God, the creator of that world, is all good, everything that exists must also be good, and

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<sup>348</sup> Charles W. Anderson, *A Deeper Freedom: Liberal Democracy as an Everyday Morality*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 54.



the universe exists for a purpose known ultimately only to God. The universe of objects and events is ordered—nature—according to the mind of its creator. The world of forms, hidden behind the perceptible world, was the ultimate reality. And, finally, for the good of humans, whether they understood or empathized with the world they saw around them, they should see and *love* the order that God has created in the world. It was there for their discernment and wonder.

It is in this notion of love, according to Taylor, that Augustine breaks with Plato. Augustine alternately refers to the Platonic differences between spirit/matter, higher/lower, eternal/temporal as the difference between *inner* and *outer*. There is the inner and the outer man; the outer is the body, the inner is the soul. As Augustine writes in the opening quotation: “Do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth.” In this sentiment one sees the Stoic tradition of Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Cicero, all of whom praised turning inward to the “inner citadel” for the true source of strength, virtue, courage, and wisdom; Augustine’s early studies of Cicero informed and influenced his views of inner sacredness.<sup>349</sup> The outside world may have man in bonds, he may be subject to peril, coercion, and death; the world may tempt him with riches, bodily pleasures, and opportunities for avarice and umbrage, but with a view of himself as containing total and infinite inward freedom, the possibility of release from the external world to the ultimate rock of the divine inside, he is saved; nothing can harm him; he has joined the eternal and unshakable foundation of the universal mind. Go inward; set sail for the safe harbor of the soul.

Thus for Augustine, as for his Stoic predecessors, such as Marcus Aurelius, the inward turn is the way to God. As God is equated with Truth, turning inward was the way to find Truth in the world. The principal way to God, in Augustine, then, is not simply in the created order of the world, but in ourselves; it is the very ontic support of our being. Further, man was joined to God in an unbroken chain of being; the likeness of the innermost part of man to the image of God was what bound him inexorably to the highest power. Man thus directed consciousness towards this connection. This shift in

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<sup>349</sup> For eminently accessible and applicable readings on the history of Stoic spiritual practice and its intertwining with philosophy, see noted French classicist and historian of Ancient philosophy Pierre Hadot’s, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* Trans. Michael Chase. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) and *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. Michael Chase. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

direction stresses and fosters the language of inwardness, and encourages the subject to take up a reflexive stance: “Augustine’s turn to the self,” Taylor writes,

was a turn to radical reflexivity, and that is what made the language of inwardness irresistible. The inner light is the one which shines in our presence to ourselves; it is the one inseparable from our being creatures with a first-person standpoint. What differentiates it from the outer light [of Plato] is just what makes the inward light so compelling, that it illuminates that space where I am present to myself.<sup>350</sup>

Augustine thus introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the incipient Christian conception of internal divinity. That “place” of inner light would eventually come to be known as “conscience.” It is the ultimate guide to moral behavior; it is that sense which guides our outward actions as if given direction by an inward captain. This story—religiously interpreted—tells us that it is by the spark of the divine inside that we find our way in the world.

#### *4.2 Luther/Protestantism*

This notion of the inward self, the “inner man,” is motivated by a desire to observe more closely the nuances of, in Christian terminology, the movement of the soul. And it is Protestant Reformation’s main revolutionary inward turn—inherited, in part, from Augustine and the Stoics—that enables a view of the self, a story about the self, necessary for democratizing the belief in *sacred individual interiority* that would result in the flowering of dozens of Protestant sects to come: various nationalities of Calvinists, Methodists, Bretheren, Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Quakers, Shakers, Moravians, Mennonites, Pietists, Evangelicals, and so on. Consciousness in all of these, however much the details of their theological views are nuanced, complex, and differing, is fundamentally directed inward to find God instead of outwardly toward the world of objects, toward the symbolic order of God’s creation, or toward the ultimate authority of some person other than one’s deepest subjective core and its relationship to the Divine. For the Reformed Christian, spirituality becomes free.

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<sup>350</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 131.

This new creation of a sense of inward value, of self-possession, of skepticism towards the moral/spiritual authority of Catholicism and of Rome, of a sense of unique identity and individual relationship to God—all of these elements, created by the Lutheran Reformation’s view of man’s place in the world and his relation to God, are components of the burgeoning of individual subjectivity of the fifteenth century. Already present in autobiography of the late Middle Ages was the shift towards further concentration upon private life.<sup>351</sup> According to the eminent historian of the late Middle Ages Georges Duby, the turn towards increasing self-consciousness is already present—evidenced in sculpture, writings, and paintings—in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Ideas of salvation, prior to the Reformation, had already begun insofar as

salvation was not acquired simply by passive, sheeplike participation in religious rites but was “earned” by an effort of self-transformation. Because sin was now held to reside not in the act but in the intention, in the most intimate recesses of the soul, the new view was an invitation to introspection, to exploration of the conscience. The apparatus of moral governance was shifted inward, to a private space that no longer had anything to do with the community.<sup>352</sup>

But the Lutheran Reformation, incipient in the late fifteenth and flowering in the early sixteenth century, took to new heights of exaltation and persistence the idea that absolute individual commitment to God, that is, salvation by faith alone (*sola fides*)—the total inward turn—and the personal reading and subjective interpretation of the Book of Books, the Bible, were the keys to the salvation and regeneration. Whereas Catholicism continued to hold that this commitment was reserved for the elite “counsels of perfection,” Reformers demanded that *each and every* Christian must dedicate themselves wholeheartedly, for “personal commitment must be total or it was worthless.”<sup>353</sup>

In this way, it is oft cited that Luther, in one swipe, dignified all kinds of work, from everyday chores to the running of a principality. So long as it was done with commitment

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<sup>351</sup> For a very detailed and documented account of this autobiographical shift in writing and visual representation, see the thoroughgoing volume *A History of Private Life: Revelations of the Medieval World*, Georges Duby, ed., Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988), specifically Chapter Five, “The Emergence of the Individual,” by Georges Duby and Philippe Braunstein, pp. 507-630.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513.

<sup>353</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, p. 215.

and faith towards God and others, work was justified. “No way of life is truly good,” wrote Augustine, who influenced Luther perhaps more than any other theologian, “no matter how much it is line with nature, unless it is endorsed with the whole will”; the inability to will fully was Augustine’s conception of sin.<sup>354</sup> It was this idea of commitment and complete willfulness, the guidance of conscience, and the valuation of inwardness that will carry on to serve as the tinder the Reformation thought of Luther and John Calvin.

Luther’s stress on the split between inner freedom and the secular world (including the civic world) separated, for a time, individual conscience from civic life; it also freed economic activity from ethical and religious constraints. Thus the economic and political causes of the Reformation were not only religious and social, but also political and economic.<sup>355</sup> The Reformation’s stress on individual faith, private conscience, and Biblical exegesis, also fostered economic and religious individualism; the Christian conscience, now described as something separated from all outward considerations and abeyance to even church authority, becomes, as Luther thought, fundamentally free from worldly intervention. It was now the seat of uncorrupted and divinely inspired moral agency. As the great sociologist Marcell Mauss wrote:

It is the Christians who have made a metaphysical entity of the “moral person,” after they became of its religious power. Our own notion of the human person is still basically a Christian one...From a simple masquerade to the mask, from a “role” to a “person,” to a name, to an individual; from the latter to being a being possessing metaphysical and moral value; from a moral consciousness to a sacred being: from the latter to a fundamental form of thought and action—the course is accomplished.<sup>356</sup>

And therefore, as Max Weber famously observed, by imbuing the individual with moral power for self-regulation and self-possession, the Reformation theology spiritually justified

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<sup>354</sup> Ibid., p. 185. Additionally, for Augustine on total commitment, see *Confessions*, (book VIII, section 9).

<sup>355</sup> See Lewis W. Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation 1517-1559*. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985) and Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1987).

<sup>356</sup> Marcell Mauss, “A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of the Person, the Notion of the Self,” in *The Category of the Person*, eds. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 19, 21-22.

individual worldly activity. A plethora of autobiography, journals, and first-person narratives would follow. It is at this time, as many scholars of the late middle ages and Reformation have contended, that “men became individuals.” Previously individuals did not have so much of an awareness of what historian Georges Gusdorf called “internal space.” The resulting conception, then, is one where there now exists an external domain of objects and an internal realm of divinity to which we can respond in numerous ways.<sup>357</sup>

The Reformation’s three major considerations of moral personhood—inwardness, recognition of particularity, and commitment—comprise, then, our conception of the self as something, as Taylor describes it, “anchored in our being.” Considered in opposition to a worldview that held valuation and ideas as things “in the world,” or, in Platonic thought, in the transcendent realm of ideas, the resulting existential feeling of subjects as having thought and feeling (that is, ideas and valuations), in their own *private* psychology was one both of inward freedom and of simultaneous disengagement from the social world. This new notion of inward space created in individuals an image that there was a core to their being existing in an internal *space*.

For Luther, surrounding this space of the soul—where “faith is the innermost core of the person”<sup>358</sup>—was a set of moral laws through which one acted. Faith in this sense

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<sup>357</sup> For Taylor, the idea of magic and witchcraft is tied up with the idea that God is in the world and not “in” humans. For the concept of witchcraft or possession to work, there must be a credible worldview in place that holds that an outward power is capable of going inside of an individual to possess their individuality. He describes the persecution of witchcraft in sixteenth-century Protestant societies and in Puritan New England in the mid-seventeenth century as essentially the contest between the encroaching worldview that valued the individual’s self-possession and a worldview that remained true to the belief in the omnipotence of an outside, universal force. The latter view was, essentially, he argues, tantamount to a residual Catholicism. Taylor writes, “Perhaps the obsessional concern with witches, and the spectacular rise of belief in and sense of threat from them, can be partly understood as a crisis arising in the transition between identities” (*Sources*, p. 192). Working against this worldview was incipient Protestant valuation of self-possession. Taylor, again: “One of the most powerful forces working against magic, and for the disenchanting view of the world, was the Protestant Reformation, which was profoundly suspicious of such meddling with occult forces. Magical practices couldn’t be allowed as a proper use of divine power, because that would be to assume human control over this, which was against the very principle of the Reformation” (p. 191). For an extended work on witchcraft from a similar perspective of conflicting identities and understandings, as well as the medical approaches to “curing” (very painfully) the mental illnesses perceived to have arisen from sin, see University of Virginia historian H. C. Erik Midelfort’s *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), as well as his *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany, 1562-1684* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972).

<sup>358</sup> Ferguson, *End of Happiness*, p. 118.

was inexpressible, it was an inner cosmos, an inward qualification of the spirit. And around the core of this faith are moral rules through which faith is expressed. The true Christian would enact his faith through the *spontaneous expression of virtue* through this scrim of moral precepts.

From the viewpoint of this new sense of self-possession, of self-consciousness of interiority, there involves a “freeing” of the subject, a new kind of self-awareness, as well as an imagined “closer” and unmediated relationship of individuals with the divine. The innermost part of one’s being was, thus, through faith, connected to the divine in an immediate and real way for the believer. Faith was experienced as “absolutely free inner spirituality.”<sup>359</sup> As Luther wrote, “No one can understand God or God’s word, unless he has it directly from the Holy Spirit, and on one has it unless he experiences and is conscious of it.”<sup>360</sup> Thus Protestantism ushered in the principles of the elimination of intermediaries between man and God, the heightened sense of human dependence, and the focusing of attention upon the individual religious consciousness. The Scottish sociologist of religion Harvie Ferguson writes,

All the medieval theological categories had been abolished to be replaced by a single remaining qualitative distinction: that which was drawn between the “inner man” in relation to which the person, who “is sufficiently justified by faith,” ought to reject all forms of external coercion...and the outer world including bodily existence whose unregenerate nature provokes an urgent and endless need for good works.<sup>361</sup>

For fifteen hundred years prior, the Roman Catholic Church had concentrated on the centrality of Scripture, tradition, sacraments, ecclesiastical calendar, deduction, and custom to meet the spiritual requirements of believers. Thus the difference between the Catholic and Protestant believer at this time, as regards faith, was such that the Protestant must not only understand and accept God’s salvation, but believe that it applies to him. As the historian Ralph Barton Perry has written, “He must not only believe it, he must

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<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1944), p. 89.

<sup>361</sup> Ferguson, *End of Happiness*, p. 120.

believe *in it*.”<sup>362</sup> The Catholic mind, Perry argues, has no such assurance, for regardless of his faith, he must see if that faith will stand the test of perseverance. For the Protestant, faith itself is the sign of salvation—grace comes as a sequel. The Protestant, as long as his faith is secure, therefore “enjoys a peculiar sense of certainty and finality. His strength lies in this, as does his tendency to cocksureness and self-righteousness.”<sup>363</sup>

### *4.3 Calvinism and the Self*

The counter-Reformation as a social and political force was a fierce enemy that John Calvin saw as necessary to oppose with great vigor and total discipline if the tenets and achievements of the Reformation were to remain influential. Encroachment from the world and corruption by the flesh could lead to a dissolution of identity through the compromise of the Protestant religious ideals inherent in one’s person. In an attempt to rescue Lutheran reforms from the dangers of complete social withdrawal and against the counter-Reformation, the sixteenth-century ethics of Calvin—ruling over the virtual theocracy of Geneva—indeed continued the Augustinian notion of sin as the inability to fully commit oneself to moral precepts, one’s salvation, to God.<sup>364</sup>

Calvinism (as distinct from the faith and order of Calvin himself) attempts, then, in part, to rescue the central tenets of Protestantism from what it saw as its inherent tendency toward dissolution made possible by a radical inwardness that had the effect of shearing the individual from others, of leading to a variety of self-absorption. Individualism and direct communication with God could lead to withdrawal from the congregation; it also threatened social and political hierarchy. Rather rigorous means and structuring of society were upheld in Calvinist communities, such as mandatory church attendance, tithing, strict rules of personal and communal behavior, corporal punishment, public inquisitions, and death and banishment to heretics.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Perry, p. 89.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>364</sup> The same could be said for John Knox’s disciples in Scotland; many of Oliver Cromwell’s supporters in England had hoped for the same. See McDougall, p. 55.

<sup>365</sup> Some of the examples of punishable prohibitions in the early days of the Massachusetts Bay colony, in 1655 in Essex County, were: eavesdropping, meddling, neglecting work, taking tobacco, scolding, naughty speeches, profane dancing, kissing, making love without consent of

Giving in to the daily temptations of the earthly world that lead to sin were to be defended ultimately against with the *conscience*, that inward guide directing one from concerns of this world and toward the work of God. It was as well duty to protect one's neighbor from these temptations; if one was to protect the sanctity of God in preparation for His rewards, it would be at all costs. The historian Thomas H. Greer writes that "if the individual could not avoid wrongdoing, Calvin believed, it was up to other Christians to be their 'brother's keeper.' He used his pulpit to admonish and frighten potential sinners."<sup>366</sup> Calvin's systematic thinking held, yet he paradoxically proclaimed that inward direction towards the way of God must be so total that we should cultivate a deep hatred of the world. "If we would truly glorify God," Greer describes in his explanation of Calvinist zeal, "we must first rid ourselves of distractions of the flesh; we must achieve, in short, a contempt for the world."<sup>367</sup> Prayer is one way for a person to withdrawal from the tumult of life; it is a waiting for the Lord to appear inwardly; it is shunning the world, protecting the self. For Calvin, prayer can be said to be carried into one's wakeful life, such that we "ought to cultivate an indifference to the world of the senses."<sup>368</sup>

The rejection and revulsion of the external world in original Calvinism went to the extreme of denouncing friendships and social proximity, particularly from those

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friends, uncharitableness to a poor man in distress, bad grinding at mill, carelessness about fire, wearing great boots, wearing broad bone lace and ribbons. *Between 1656 and 1662: Abusing your mother-in-law, wicked speeches against a son-in-law, confessing himself a Quaker, cruelty to animals, drinking tobacco, i.e. smoking, kicking another in the street, leaving children alone in the house, opprobrious speeches, pulling hair, pushing his wife, riding between two fellows at night (if a woman), selling dear, and sleeping in meeting. And up to 1670: Breaking the Ninth commandment, having a dangerous well, digging up the grave of Sagamore of Agawam, going naked into the meetinghouse, playing cards, rebellious speeches to parents, reporting a scandalous lie, reproaching the minister, selling strong water by small measure, and dissenting from the rest of the jury. These and other examples found at George Francis Dow, *Everyday Life in the Massachusetts Bay Colony*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1988), particularly the chapter "Crimes and Punishments," pp. 199-226.*

<sup>366</sup> Thomas H. Greer, *A Brief History of Western Man*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1968), p. 314.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid*, p. 313. In using the word "zeal," it is important to note the clarifications that Puritans themselves made in handling it, lest we continue the *Crucible*-like caricature of the Puritan mind; the clarification is made especially clear by Perry Miller: "Mere zeal alone, however sincere, was not sufficient. The ideal was guidance of the heart by the mind, and while God requires zeal of his people that they may be 'active and forward in the pursuit of the things which they engaged,' yet in order that zeal may be truly serviceable, 'it had to be well regulated with a right and clear understanding of what they do.'" *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939), p. 68.

<sup>368</sup> Ferguson, *End of Happiness*, p. 124.



doubting or not cognizant of the way to salvation. This sort of early revulsion in Calvin—though radically altered throughout Calvinism’s development in England, Holland, Germany, and America—was inspired, in part, by Old Testament directives, such as that found in Jeremiah 8:4-6:

Beware of your friends;  
do not trust your brothers.  
For every brother is a deceiver,  
and every friend a slanderer.  
Friend deceives friend,  
and no one speaks the truth.  
They have taught their tongues to lie;  
they weary themselves with sinning.  
You live in the midst of deception;  
in their deceit they refuse to acknowledge me,  
declares the Lord.

The true Christian, in this Calvinist sense, should always be suspect of friendships and dwell only inwardly; he should remain primarily conscious not of the personality of the individual, but of his abeyance to the law of God. Man’s chief concern, above all else, should be the state of one’s salvation.<sup>369</sup> This sort of placing all human relationships subordinate to that of God had the effect of a profound introjection of consciousness, alienating man at his core, save be with God. The English Puritan Thomas Adams maintained this aversion to the world in his *A Commentary Or, Exposition Upon The Divine Second Epistle General Written By St. Peter* (1633), when he recommends that every morning before going among others that one should imagine going into “a wild forest full of dangers, and to pray God for the cloak of foresight and righteousness.”<sup>370</sup> Onward, Christian soldiers.

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<sup>369</sup> As Miller, again, has pointed out on several occasions, this salvation-obsessed caricature of the Calvinist Puritan mind should not disallow for the recognition of their highly-logical thought and philosophical reflection, though “they did indeed subordinate all concerns to salvation, and they did force their social and philosophical thinking into conformity with religious conclusions, but they were incapable of confining themselves solely to dogma or giving over the arts and sciences into the keeping of the unregenerate. They were first and foremost heirs of Augustine, but also they were among the heirs of Thomas Aquinas and the pupils of Erasmus.” *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, p. 66.

<sup>370</sup> Thomas Adams quoted in Weber, p. 179

Inwardly, however, the self-reflexive disposition and concentration, the hyper self-awareness, had the ultimate goal of determining the subtle inward signs of whether or not one was saved, whether one had been a recipient of grace, whether the Devil was working his ways upon the soul. But nothing could be done about it. This was so because clearly in the Calvinist theology—set as it was against the Catholic doctrine of works—one could not make efforts toward grace; one’s fate had been predetermined since eternity by God alone, written in the Book of Life. Any effort in the direction of “lifting oneself up” was to exhibit a will that believed itself free, which it was not when it came to regeneration. Only detailed conversion experiences led to a changed and saved life. “Conversion was seen as a humbling of the heart,” writes Perry Miller, “but it was also construed as enlightening the mind, and humiliation unaccompanied by a considerable degree of information was worthless.”<sup>371</sup> Knowledge without grace was possible but flawed; grace without knowledge, perfect proof of salvation. No one was spared; “even the meanest believer must give the grounds for his belief.”<sup>372</sup>

For the understanding of the place of the individual consciousness in the world under Calvinism, it is important to understand, briefly, the denomination’s five founding tenets, or Five Points, commonly remembered with the mnemonic TULIP: *Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints*. These precepts were part of the Puritan religious mind.<sup>373</sup>

*Total Depravity* (or *Total Inability*) is the state of man and is the effect of the Fall upon him; sin has extended to every part of his personality—his thinking, his emotions, and his will. Because even his will is depraved, he is unable to help himself. Without the

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<sup>371</sup> Miller, *The New England Mind*, p. 67.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> This clearly leaves out consideration of Captain John Smith’s 1607 founding of the Jamestown colony, thirteen years prior to the Plymouth landing. I am aware of the discrepancy and here lean on the general character of the religiously inspired search for freedom as relevant to “intellectual origins,” rather than the earlier excursion to Virginia, undertaken for business and profit under the auspices of the London Company. Whereas the Massachusetts colony worked quickly to establish a viable community and centers of worship, and also included women and children in the task, the historian Alan Brinkley writes of the Jamestown effort that, “the promoters in London diverted the colonists’ energies into futile searches for gold and only slightly more successful efforts to pile up lumber, tar, pitch, and iron for export. These energies would have been better spent on growing food. The promoters also sent virtually no women to Jamestown. Hence, settlers could not establish real households and had no permanent stake in the community.” *The Unfinished Nation*, Fourth Edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004), p. 28.

power of the Holy Spirit, the “natural” man is blind and deaf to the message of the gospel. *Unconditional Election* is the doctrine of Calvinism that states God has already chosen those with whom he was pleased to bring to a knowledge of himself. This selection is not based upon any merit shown by the subject or upon who would “accept” the offer of the gospel or not. God has simply elected some for glory and others for damnation. He has done this act before the foundations of the world (Ephesians 1:4-8). This doctrine does not rule out, oddly, man’s responsibility to believe in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ (John 3:16-18). The elect are saved to do good works in the world. Although these good works will never bridge the gulf between man and God, good works are a *result* of God’s saving grace. Bearing the fruit of good works is an indication that God has sown seeds of grace properly. Man’s *choosing* to do good works in order to be saved is evidence that one is not saved, for one has exercised an already ineffectual and marred will. *Limited Atonement* is a doctrine offered in answer to the question, “for whose sins did Christ atone?”

The Calvinist answer, in coherence with the above, is that Christ died, indeed, for many people, but not for all (Matthew 26:28). Specifically, Christ died for the “invisible Church”—the sum total of all Christians. *Irresistible Grace* is thus the inward response by the elect to the call of the Holy Spirit, when the outward call is sounded by the minister. One cannot refuse grace or the call of Christ. Here again, one’s will is totally ineffectual; one is simply an agent of the Lord. Condemning Calvin’s teachings, Erasmus believed that this reduced man to the figure of a puppet. Lastly, *Perseverance of the Saints* is a doctrine that states that the saints (those whom God has saved) will remain in God’s hand until they are glorified and brought to abide with Him. Calvinists believed that Christ assured the elect that he will not lose them along the way, and that they will be glorified on the Day of Judgment (John 6:39). The Calvinist thus invests himself wholly in the Word (promise) of God and trusts in the promise that Christ will perfectly fulfill the will of God in saving all the elect according to the preordained plan laid out by God before time.

These sum total of these tenets as a body of belief, as one can easily imagine, had the effect of creating a feeling of deep spiritual loneliness, helplessness, and absolute lack of control over one’s fate—a lone, perhaps hopeful, consciousness in a sea of temptation and depravity. And it is this desperate spiritual situation provides the utmost irresistible

motivation to reach beyond the boundaries of the self and into the world through action and deed, which made—and about which there is plentifully written—for a fundamental anxiety, contradiction, and tension in the Calvinist mind. The spiritual journey of the Calvinist believer was a movement from self-concern to increasing civic union to secure and desecrate one's fate.

Through the earlier Calvinistic conception of the state of man, human agency was simultaneously both given—in that it saw beings as privately autonomous—and taken away—in one's inexorable fallen-ness. Because one could not help oneself, and no one could *ultimately* help another, the individual was utterly powerless to act towards his own salvation; to act was to exercise willfulness, further proof that one was not of the elect. “Such logic...placed a great onus on those who were convinced of their salvation,” writes McDougall in his recent opus on early Americans, *Freedom Just Around the Corner* (2004),

to demonstrate sanctification each waking hour and indeed in their dreams. It placed an even greater onus on those who had not had a wrenching conversion. They asked what they could do to escape eternal damnation, and had to answer nothing at all.<sup>374</sup>

As the First Amendment Center's Charles C. Haynes has commented:

This is the heart of the Puritan paradox: If you are a Calvinist and believe the elect have already been determined, then why should you be worried? Calvinist liberation is the idea that there is nothing you can do for your salvation. That is solely in the hands of God. But Calvinist anxiety is, if you don't appear to be saved, then you probably aren't. [This is the] Puritan anxiety: If you live up to what God requires, you will be blessed. If you fail to live up to it, you will be cursed. If you are chosen for this special mission, then you have an obligation to live up to what God requires.<sup>375</sup>

Hayne's equivocation of Calvinism with Puritanism lacks the thoroughness of historical detail—as do some of the generalizations I am making here for the sake of this present narrative about inwardness—but it is nonetheless true that the idea of the elect had practical, evidentiary confirmation in the notion of *piety*. Those who displayed piety were

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<sup>374</sup> McDougall, p. 56.

<sup>375</sup> Charles C. Haynes quoted at the nonpartisan Foundation for American Communications (FACS) website in the faith and public life link at [http://www.facsnet.org/issues/faith/Haynes\\_seattle.php](http://www.facsnet.org/issues/faith/Haynes_seattle.php)

part of the “visible church,” and they were rewarded in material fruits (“seek ye first the kingdom of God and all this shall be added unto you.”) Piety became the movement outward from saved self into the world, and was evidenced in an obligation to help others, to reach into spheres civic life, to uphold the social covenant, even though one has the knowledge that doing so may be for naught. Haynes continues,

Here, the covenant is a collective one: For a good Puritan to live up to his covenant, he must be concerned with the welfare of the community and how others are living up to the covenant. What one person does affects what others in the community doing; otherwise stated, ‘You will be punished for what I am doing.’<sup>376</sup>

The covenant was the agreement between God and man under which people agreed to abide by Christian principles and obey the “Heavenly King in return for His blessings in a Promised Land.”<sup>377</sup>

Although this Puritan reciprocating push toward community, under the aegis of the covenant, was compelling, the notion that an individual could determine religious truth solely from his own private reading of the Bible and personal feeling without the guidance of clergy and community, such as in the antinomian controversies of Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams, did gain increasing legitimacy in generations of Calvinists to come. Here, though, in the exacting Calvinism of the early generation, confirmation of one having received grace came solely by the already-elect agreeing that one’s behavior was that of someone who was saved. (Indeed those comprising the visible church were the only ones with full voting rights in the community and full membership in a Puritan congregation.) The connection between conscience and piety was that piety was outwardly visible, but conscience remained interior, implanted by God. What was invisible to others was the most visible to the believer’s inward perception. Piety is how one “displayed” conscience that played out in public. As Perry remarks,

piety proves itself not by withdrawal into a sphere of its own, but by excelling in every province of secular life. The man of God should be a braver warrior, a more enlightened ruler, a more skillful and industrious

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> McDougall, p. 59.

artisan, and a more successful tradesman because of the divine favor and appointment.<sup>378</sup>

Piety, in other words, is a sort of objectified salvation. It was evidenced in material and social rewards. Nonetheless, man should behave as though he were one of the elect, as if he were already a perfect Christian. And Reformed Christianity, particularly in the dictates of Martin Luther, fundamentally demanded from the outset that of *all* Christians; they must behave as such because they have the *ability* to have faith.

This internal discerning, of course, required quite a bit of conscientiousness of one's behaviors, because Calvin's God (not surprisingly like Calvin himself) was a righteous and severe judge, as would be the followers of his leadership.<sup>379</sup> Self-knowledge begins in knowledge of the corruption and blasphemy of one's own soul. True knowledge of God only comes by conversion. By himself alone, for the Calvinist, man is fallen, corrupted, depraved, infinitely miserable, forever unhappy, wicked, and utterly imperfect. He is blinded by self-love and greed. God's grace is required for salvation. Yet man can do nothing about grace, as his own will, his attempts to undo his state of fallen-ness, is always already corrupt in its attempts to save *itself*. To reemphasize this contradiction, the historian Ralph Barton Perry has written of this intense Calvinistic tension:

Strict Calvinism was a hard doctrine, which did violence to human nature. It confronted man with the alternatives of salvation and damnation, and filled him with the utmost anxiety for the fate of his soul, while at the same time giving him no control of the forces by that fate was governed. Now among strong-willed men *anxiety and passivity do not sit well together*, and if this incompatibility was not always manifest, it was because the will of the early reformers was largely absorbed by the struggle to prevail against their enemies within and without the church. In the degree to which this victory was assured, the Calvinist's will was released for the inner struggle to save his own soul, and protestant apologists of the late sixteenth century and

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<sup>378</sup> Perry, p. 192.

<sup>379</sup> The famed story of Calvinist retribution is here worth recounting: when the Spanish theologian Michael Servetus challenged the doctrine of the Trinity in 1553, and Calvin, in Geneva, caught word, he warned the Spanish theologian to stay away. When Servetus did not heed and visited Geneva, Calvin had him arrested. Charged with heresy and swiftly "convicted," Servetus was burned at the stake, whereby Calvin cited Deuteronomy 13, saying "God makes plain that the false prophet is to be stoned without mercy. We are to crush beneath our heel all affectations of nature when His honor is involved. The father should not spare his child, nor the brother his brother, nor the husband his own wife, or the friend who is dearer to him than life." Quoted in Greer, p. 314.

early seventeenth centuries sought to interpret Calvinism in a manner that would give meaning to this struggle.<sup>380</sup>

That is, the desire for grace is proof that one is not in its possession. Rational forethought cannot be used for redemption of one's soul. We can only open ourselves through faith to accept the gift of grace. So impossibly collapsed was the state of mankind under the Calvinist conception, and so deterministic was the fate of man, so impossible was any inclination of his will that John Milton famously wrote, "Though I may be sent to Hell for it, such a God will never command my respect."<sup>381</sup>

The relevance of mentioning these Calvinist imperatives is to address how the believer reflected upon his own private interiority, his newfound home. Early American and British writings on the troubles of this interiority, in the form of spiritual autobiographies, particularly for the noted Americanist Sacvan Bercovitch, forms of compendium of self-overcoming, of intense fascination with the self in order that the self may be obliterated. Each mention of the self in first-generation Puritan journals and autobiography, each obsessive metaphor and thematic grouping, as Bercovitch observes, turns back on itself with vehemence towards its own destruction. It is repeatedly a genial fostering of a radical subjectivity which is the necessary condition for the rejection of radical subjectivity. And it was the precisely the inward recognition of the self—presently perhaps best understood as ego—that stood in the way of one's communication with the Divine and thus of possible recognition of one's salvation.

The foundation of Puritan belief generally, according to Bercovitch, is thus the violent contrast between "personal responsibility and individualism." Though the typical Puritan was concerned with the "welfare of his own soul," they balked inwardly at the very mention of "own," according to Bercovitch. He writes,

The way of the soul, they maintained, starts with a 'holy despair in ourselves' and proceeds 'with a holy kind of violence' back to Christ; it means acknowledging the primacy of that which Another's, and receiving

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<sup>380</sup> Perry, pp. 93-94. Italics mine.

<sup>381</sup> Quoted in Weber., p. 58.

the ability to respond. Hence the advantage of self-knowledge: the terror it brings may exorcise our individuality.<sup>382</sup>

This sense of alienation within the world was a shared characteristic of a stage of the Calvinist mind. Horror at one's subjectivity forces repent. Further, it instructs each believer that to concentrate on oneself alone and to forget the lives of neighbors is to set up the extreme dichotomy between the evil of self-concern and the good of concern for others. The self for the Puritan mind was, per Bercovitch's textual samplings, "the great snare," the "false Christ," "a spider's webbe [spun out of] of our bowels," a "figure or type of hell." Not to attempt to rid one's being of this sort of self was to enable the growth of "rebels against the commone good, all [of them] private respects of mens selves."<sup>383</sup>

In an attempt to purge the personal and therefore social body of this inherent tendency towards self-rumination, a variety of self-monitoring was in constant effect. It is the internal behavior of the Calvinist who is not assured of his salvation or state of grace, who attempts to root the "Devil's poison and venome or infection"<sup>384</sup> from one's being by giving his interiority over to Christ. Of this tendency and unceasing internal scanning and practice, philosopher Charles Taylor observes that self-exploration

was part of the discipline of both Jesuits and Puritans, among others....The Puritan was encouraged to scrutinize his inner life continually, both to descry the signs of grace and election and to bring his thoughts and feelings into line with the grace-given dispositions of praise and gratitude to God.... the Protestant culture of introspection becomes secularized as a form of confessional autobiography.<sup>385</sup>

Even saying "secularized" here seems to miss the mark, as writing of one's internal life and thus putting it in the world is not quite "secularization," as the material world for the Puritan autobiographer was as well as part of God's massive and totalizing domain. Beyond accounting of this variety of worried inward searching, however, there is connected tendency in the Puritan literature that deserves mention with regards to an interpolation of other meanings in interpreting the world, a hermeneutical strategy of

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<sup>382</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins of the American Self*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 17-18.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>385</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, p. 184.



inversion. In Bercovitch's noteworthy *American Jeremiad* (1978) he writes of this hermeneutical approach:

The errand [for Perry Miller] is either for oneself or for someone else; the jeremiads either discourage or encourage. Clearly, this stems from a 'paradoxical realization' that somehow the errand functioned both ways, and that the jeremiads included both threat and hope. But for Miller the realization is an ironic one—it lies in the reader's capacity to see conflicting elements at work in the same act. The Puritans' sense of a failed errand, he claimed, led them to make the errand their own. Their 'cry for repentance' furthered the community's 'heinous conduct.' And the reader's ironic awareness, in turn, builds upon a series of static oppositions: content versus form, social progress versus catalogues of denunciation, psychology versus theology, the march of settlements versus the ideal of theocracy, and summarily 'the American experience'...versus the Puritan lament, a 'mounting wail of sinfulness' that issues in a self-defeating ritual of purgation. Methodologically, this implies the dichotomy of fact and rhetoric.<sup>386</sup>

Here Bercovitch notes that for Perry Miller the errand and its function in the jeremiad—the key mode of fostering the Calvinist vision of an unfinished world, a world that needed order put into it by Christians—has a dual function: it is both for oneself and for the other. The jeremiad is both hope and threat. In this dual valence, as Bercovitch alludes to, Miller is suggesting that the Puritan mind was inadvertently interpreting that which was not said, and it often was the opposite of what was said. To claim that the errand had gone awry was to suggest the furthering of the errand ways the necessitated the jeremiad.

In doing so, the particular form of the address—keeping in mind that “self” was to be overcome in favor of the godly “social”—condemned individuals for their lack of contribution to the larger work of the *incipient identity* of the *Americanus*, an identity desired by God for the religious pilgrims to form. Thus to err was to do harm to the identity being created, to the transposition of secular into religious identity. This tendency, Bercovitch notes, as part of the general Puritan orthodoxy instituted

a rhetoric of inversion....The interchangeability of private, corporal, historical, and prophetic meaning....The Puritans used this approach consistently, comprehensively, as a means of transforming secular into sacred identity. Thus they personified the New World as America

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<sup>386</sup> Perry Miller in Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, pp. 9-10.

*microchrista*. Thus also they combined the genres of political and spiritual exhortation, and equated public with personal welfare.<sup>387</sup>

In this interpretation of the Puritan mind and in the notion of the errand, one can interpose the seeds of the current opposition between the earnestly engaged citizen and the ironist, who has been described as rejecting the implicit social contract—the covenant. By extension, to be saved one must take the errand to heart, to have it be for someone else; but the reiterations of the exhortations of the errand only come when the agent has spent time not doing it. To be for oneself triggers the reminder (the jeremiad) that the errand is for others. To invest in the other becomes an indicator of salvation. The movement to do so began with an inner detection of the holy.

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<sup>387</sup> Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, p. 114.

## Chapter Five: Irony and the American Mind

*Wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affection, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluties, for the supply of others necessities, wee must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meekness, gentlenes, patience and liberality, wee must delight in eache other, make others Conditions our owne reioyce together, mourne together, labour, and suffer together, allwayes before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body, soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace, the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us...for we must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us.*

- John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630)

*What is most frightening to man is absolute loneliness. But Idealism is the very system in which the mind is completely isolated, bereft of everything that relates him to the ordinary world, so that it stands alone and completely deprived.*

- Friedrich Schlegel on Fichte's philosophy (1798)

*Each person, withdrawn into himself, behaves as though he is a stranger to the destiny of all the others. His children and his good friends constitute for him the whole of the human species. As for his transactions with his fellow citizens, he may mix among them, but he sees them not; he touches them, but he does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone. And if one these terms there remains in his mind a sense of family, there no longer remains a sense of society....Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart.*

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835)

*Insofar as irony becomes conscious of the fact that existence has no reality, thereby expressing the same thesis as the pious disposition, it might seem that irony were a species of religious devotion.*

- Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* (1841)

*In perfect solitude, the American spirit leans against its absolute isolation as a spark of God in a sea of space....the divine shall seek out each spirit only in total isolation.*

- Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (1992)

*In the ironic view, each individual is essentially alone.*

- Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things* (1999)

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This excursus brings us finally to the mindset of the earliest ideology to take root in the “American mind”—Protestant Christianity in its many emanations—and thus, circuitously, back to the contemporary consideration of irony and civic trust in America.<sup>388</sup> The above quotations, indeed the above chapters, take two seemingly disparate mindsets—Protestant religious devotion and the ironic worldview—and point them towards similar tendencies: consciousness directed toward inner life, a protection of this inwardness against exteriorities imagined as contaminants; a sense of absolute loneliness; the self—as the vessel of inwardness—imagined in a sea of social space.

Indeed, the Christian tradition is the great inescapable fact of American intellectual history. Introduced by the first arrivals to the new land, it was reinforced by generations to come as the dominant force in American life; it was the chief foundation of unifier of early American society. As the Americanist Merle Curti has written:

No intellectual interest served so effectively as Christian thought to bring some degree of unity to the different classes, regions, and ethnic groups.

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<sup>388</sup> Two points of note on the clichéd myth of American foundings: Andrew Delbanco opens chapter one of his book *The Real American Dream* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999)—originally delivered as the respected William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization at Harvard University in 1998—with both a poignant self-critique and overcoming: “Let me begin by proposing to do something that the historian Alan Taylor has recently described as ‘quaint.’ ‘What could be more quaint,’ he asks, ‘than to seek [the roots of American identity] in colonial New England, the land of Puritans, Salem witches, the *Mayflower*, and Plymouth Rock?’ Of course, he’s right. Anyone who has been even half-awake in the last twenty years or so knows it is no longer safe to assume, as Tocqueville did, that there is ‘not an opinion, not a custom, not a law’ that the New England origin of American civilization does not explain. Nevertheless, that is where I shall look for some clues to understanding our culture as it was first established and as it has since evolved” (p. 15). Additionally, the philosopher Jacob Needleman, anticipating the accusation of sentimentalism in his look to the Puritan heritage, remarks, “It is quite wrong to think of the origins of America only in economic or political terms without acknowledging the fundamental place of the inner search in the minds and hearts of the early colonists. It is true that over the years the religious motivation of the early colonists has been sentimentalized—to the point of absurdity and unreality. Scholarship and common sense have done much to correct this sentimentalized picture by pointing out the economic, political, and military factors involved in the movements of peoples from England and Europe to America and the westward expansion of the United States. But all this scholarship leads to an equally false and, in its way, equally absurd picture of the forces behind the origins of America when the power of authentic spiritual need and practice is not recognized. Among those who came first to the Northeast from England, Germany, and Holland were very many who brought with them plans for a life of interiority, even to the point of various forms of monastic communitarianism” *The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2002), p. 101. I take both Delbanco’s and Needleman’s points to heart, recognize the possible sentimentality involved, and follow the same impulse as driving the investigation of this essay.

Whatever differences in ways of life and whatever conflicts of interest separated the country gentry and great merchants from the frontiersmen, poor farmers, artisans, and small shopkeepers, all nominally subscribed to Christian tenets and as least in theory accepted Christianity as their guide.<sup>389</sup>

Moreover, the combination early on of vast Christian linguistic and cultural groups throughout the colonies of the eighteenth century—French Huguenots, Dutch and German Calvinists, Swedish and German Lutherans, Swiss Baptists, English Calvinists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Quakers, Mennonites, Anglicans, Baptists, and Catholics—made for a complex society forced into geographical and political cohesion that was rife with conflicting interests and ideas at a very early stage in American life. Yet,

However widely these social and ethnic groups differed in doctrine and form of worship, they all, with certain notable exceptions, shared a common Christian conception of human nature, of social relationships, and of the nature of knowledge and beauty; and all were substantially agreed on the supernatural origin and destiny of man and the supernatural origin of the universe itself.<sup>390</sup>

Christians in the dissenting tradition shared as well the fundamental agreement that though attentive and sincere reading of the Bible and belief in personal salvation there existed the possibility, the inwardly “direct, subjective communication of every individual with the Holy Spirit as the authentic way of arriving at the truth.”<sup>391</sup> The ultimate valuation of subjective detection of divinity was the outcome of the original Protestant revolution of the sixteenth century and remained the great theme and binding element of disparate factions—so long as they were not Romist, Papalists, Jewish, or otherwise Catholic. The idea that the individual might determine and descry religious truth without the aide of authority was the outgrowth of these original, yet long tempered, leanings. In Quakerism, of course and for example, the deification of subjective feeling itself would find early expression. As the great Quaker reformer John Woolman wrote, “The mind was moved by an inward principle to love God as an invisible, incomprehensible being, [and] by the same principle it was moved to love Him and all His manifestations in the

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<sup>389</sup> Curti, p. 3.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

visible world.”<sup>392</sup> Slowly, this principle would continue to erode the “importance of tradition, a trained clergy, and ecclesiastical authority,”<sup>393</sup> in America.

To be sure, American spirituality of the Protestant varieties would increasingly see this subjective detection of faith as the only indicator of a relationship with God. The emphasis, historically speaking, on “religious feelings and intuitions as a means of illuminating the meaning of Scripture, made inroads on churches [and...eventually] no mediation was necessary, either for salvation or for right conduct.”<sup>394</sup> In the mid-eighteenth century this would find its full expression in the Great Awakening that would see Jonathan Edwards’ sermons in New England, German Pietism’s influence on the Lutheran and German Reformed churches of the middle colonies, the Presbyterian stress on emotional fervency in the middle and southern colonies, and the Methodist George Whitefield make his case for personal feeling in religion all over the eastern seaboard.<sup>395</sup> To lean inward for religious experience and proof of God’s personal love was to become an American way of life.

So both strands of these inward-leaning tendencies I have been discussing—the religious magnetism of Protestant inwardness and the Romantic ironic recourse to subjectivity—result in a feeling of inner liberation—experienced as freedom—and of an isolated and hermetic interior dwelling—experienced as a sense of aloneness or a sense of detachment. Importantly, this sort of inward turn in the narrative of the American identity, and thus as the fundament of the American myth, is directed towards the Protestant-derived *location of freedom* in the individual inner self—which, contends Harold Bloom in *The American Religion*, “is the preparation without which God will not allow

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<sup>392</sup> John Woolman in Amelia M. Gummere (ed.), *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman* (New York: MacMillan, 1922), p. 156.

<sup>393</sup> Curti, p. 9.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

<sup>395</sup> In his passion to convert and spread the word, George Whitefield made fifteen tours of Scotland, three tours of Ireland, and seven tours of the entire colonial territory, visiting each more than once, particularly his adopted home of Georgia. Even that wry skeptic Benjamin Franklin professed to be so moved by Whitefield when he visited Philadelphia that he “emptied his pockets into the collection plate.” McDougall, p. 132.

himself to be revealed in the self. . . . The spark or spirit must know itself to be free both of other selves and of the created world.”<sup>396</sup>

Bloom’s account of the idea of subjective freedom in the American mind is a state of being both guaranteed by God and made possible by the conditions provided by outward political arrangements, namely and eventually, American-style democracy. As freedom in this sense is something with dual valence—religious and secular—there is a tension between the outer component of freedom—that is, politics—and the inner location of personal freedom though joining with God, that is, its private religious tenor. In this vein, the philosopher Jacob Needleman has openly wondered:

Without a doubt, every hero of the American pantheon is a representative of the idea of freedom. Are we limited to conceiving that freedom only in external, political terms? Or are we obliged to return as well to the inner meaning of freedom as a relationship between parts of oneself? What, after all, could be the ultimate value of outer freedom, of liberty in the external sense of the term, if inwardly we are and must remain enslaved and tyrannized? For, let us emphasize again, the deepest spiritual source of the early colonists’ rejection of political and religious tyranny was that such tyranny prevented them from searching for *inner* freedom.<sup>397</sup>

Though Needleman crucially notes the dangers of sentimentality of looking to this spark of the original European emigration, he proceeds nevertheless convincingly with the idea of freedom as a driving inner narrative in the American mind, nourished by religious and philosophical victuals. And this dialectical friction between freedom’s *inward* leaning and its subsequent *outward* requirements leads Bloom to insightfully ask a question that has been the central concern of this essay throughout its twists and turns: “How are we to understand, and judge, an American spirituality that, to be authentic, seems always fated to make the believer, ultimately, a worse citizen?”<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 32. Relevantly, the January 20, 2005 Presidential Inaugural Address by George W. Bush mentioned the word *freedom* twenty-seven times; his conception, repeated several times, was that “each individual has the seed of freedom planted within him by the Creator.” Repetition, as Kierkegaard observed, destroys meaning. Moreover, it emasculates once vivacious concepts. The mention of *freedom* now in political speech is met either as a placeholder synecdoche for “what America stands for,” or as a hokey catch-phrase. The word, when used without regard for concretizing the *inward sense of what it feels like*, loses the meaning, the sense that it is alive.

<sup>397</sup> Needleman, p. 101.

<sup>398</sup> Bloom, *American Religion*, p. 32.

This question points directly to the crux of the contemporary debate over irony and its relation to civic trust, when irony—a worldview that seeks a feeling of inward freedom through detachment—was vehemently cast as an anti-civic stance that should be eradicated in favor of “sincerity, patriotism, and earnestness.” The mounting concerns over civic engagement in the 1990s were the precursors to this outburst of anti-irony sentiment. But the historical underpinnings of both of these positions, as I’ve tried to argue, are the Protestant notions of inner dependence, salvation through faith alone, and the implied duty of helping to cohere the social body by one’s own actions and endeavors. As such, as other and more capable scholars than I have argued, Romantic irony—irony generalized as a worldview, as a widely shared understanding of an ambivalent and ineffable universe, a confidence in the inward self as the source of authenticity—is the secular continuation of the Protestant push towards the fulfillment of inner freedom.<sup>399</sup>

We continue to live today with both the push of Romanticism, witnessed in the production and consumption of ironic sentiment in popular culture, the arts, and in everyday communication and assumptions about politics, power, and motivation, as well as with the echoes of the demands of the Protestant-based (English) social contract, which extended the individual’s moral duty and salvation outwardly throughout society.<sup>400</sup> But what we now call ironic detachment can also be called Romanticism (as Kierkegaard maintained)—an inward leaning with Protestant beginnings, a tendency to protect the sacredness of the individual self, a totalized worldview. Indeed, as the sociologist Harvie Ferguson has straightforwardly put it, “Selfhood...is simply religious reality within capitalist society.”<sup>401</sup> And what we now call civic engagement can be seen as the

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<sup>399</sup> Harold Bloom notes in *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) that the Romantics have roots in Protestantism; Bercovitch says that the link between Puritan and Romantic is “obvious enough,” (p. 164, *Puritan Origins*) and the little-remembered German literary historian Fritz Brüggemann has connected them in *Die Ironie als entwicklungsgeschichtliches Moment* (Dissertation from University of Jena, 1909). I have unfortunately not been able to read Brüggemann in either German or English. He is noted, however, in D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* as having spoken of “the growth of religious introspection, not confining oneself to English Protestantism or German Pietism (which later Brüggemann sees as leading up to Romantic Irony) (p. 189).”

<sup>400</sup> If we take this split broadly to mean the division of faith and citizenship, some of the specific contemporary issues (women’s rights, religion and the Supreme Court, pluralism) that come in to conflict in these dual responsibilities are covered in Nancy L. Rosenblum, *The Obligations of Citizenship and the Demands of Faith*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>401</sup> Ferguson, *End of Happiness*, p. 138.



extension of the demands and assumptions of the social contract that lie historically deep in our expectations of citizenship. Though each attitude shares the same foundings in Protestant conception of the world, they appear in the contemporary debate as vigorous opposites—and, on the neoconservative side, for figures such as Himmelfarb, Rosenblatt, and Bork, irony has often been cast as Hegel had cast it, as a sort of moral evil, as vanity, and as a radically self-absorbed subjectivity. On the communitarian side, for figures such as Bellah, Etzioni, and Lerner, this sort of disengaged personality can be seen as a person who willingly shirks his or her civic responsibilities to the public of which they are a part, in favor of self-styling, close-knit circles, and narrow interests.

I would like, then, to discuss briefly the social contract tradition, and then compare the shared Romantic and Protestant notions of inwardness and the individual's situation within society that I've already addressed. Both take their starting point from the notion of individual salvation and self-possession discussed in the last chapter. Yet where the social contract as conceived by the Puritan's demands that salvation can only come through one's relations with others, Romantics are convinced, as Rousseau was, that we must circumvent society altogether in order to be authentic, sincere, and to be in touch with the divine through nature. In the first instance, society becomes a key to salvation, in the Romantic vein, a hindrance.

### *5.1 Social Contract*

Social contract theory—originating in Stoic philosophy (which conceived of humanity as solitary wanderers) and medieval theory of rights (which extended certain privileges to subjects through divine, rather than human, permission)—arises in the modern world out of the conception of disengaged reason of Descartes and the Lockean “punctual self,” resulting in a view of the human being as a reasoning and self-possessed entity existing atomically within the social body, held together by a series of agreements. Theorists in the seventeenth century, such as Grotius and Pufendorf helped to further this view.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, p. 193.

Influenced by the radical energy of the Reformation's stress on individual commitment, the social contract was something entered into with individual commitment, rather than something assumed given or natural. As the American historian Richard Mosier has claimed, this sort of covenant "made possible...the binding of God to treat with His creatures as with rational and autonomous beings who by their voluntary consent enter into His mortgage or bond."<sup>403</sup> The ultimate purpose of such a bond was to glue together a Christian community, agree on the source of legitimacy and power, and to enable oneself the further possibility of salvation through an association of the saved.

This is why, prior to Descartes, Pufendorf, and Locke, the social contract could only come about when it was clear that *full personal commitment* was required of all that were entering into the contract. As such, this was particularly important for Calvinist societies, and it led to an idea of an association of the saved, of a community of like souls after whom one should look. This association, as something gravely serious, would always trump familial and traditional relationships. In doing so, Puritanism degraded the natural familial relationships into which a person found him or herself born. Setting up a perfectly Christian society had to be entered into with the adult's full will, as well as with the idea of individual consent. This notion is akin to Anabaptist ritual of baptism being meaningful only if the individual had *willfully* decided to partake in it, that is, as an adult exercising his individual willfulness towards his future.

This sort of consent was only achievable once there was a conception of the individual as a self-possessed being able to direct his own will *toward* the social good with sacred commitment. Yet Protestantism's crucial and history-altering claim that true salvation was located only in the interior self and to be given by God alone—in a justification by faith alone (*sola fides*)—created at once a sort of distancing within the self and from the social that allowed and encouraged subjects to cultivate interiority. The transformation of originally English Calvinist social thought as regards a person's proper relationship to society slowly exteriorized in America the transfer of man's covenant with God to that of his bond with society.

Without doubt earlier Puritan reformers gave great importance to the idea of this

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<sup>403</sup> Richard B. Mosier, *The American Temper: Patterns of Our Intellectual Heritage*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), p. 25.

covenant (the Federal Theology). Crucially for them it took on the character of the sacred: given a godly community fully committed to salvation and their own private relationships to God, one's moral duty was to be extended to caring for one's neighbor as well. Individuals not fully honoring the covenant created social problems and mistrust. "The first duty of the people," writes historian Thomas A. Ferguson, "is acceptance of God's will; the second is constant vigilance in His name, protecting the covenant against transgression." The relationship between individuals, therefore, at the very founding of America's quasi-mythic beginning was such that, as Taylor has written,

the covenant, the agreement between God and his people, begins to develop into an understanding of society as based on a covenant between its members. In a godly community founded on personal commitment, the two could be seen as facets of one and the same covenant.<sup>404</sup>

That is, the bond between Puritans was a transfer of the covenant between God and each member, and at the same time founded on it. Historically, as I've intimated in the brief discussion above with regards to the development of social contract, such a transfer of this sacred bond could only come about when it was clear that personal commitment was required of all that were entering into the covenant. And this was, as Taylor contends, "especially important for Calvinist, particularly Puritan, societies."<sup>405</sup>

But since no one's ultimate fate was to be wholly separated from the fate of all others—the spiritual force behind Congregationalism—responsibility for social "order" did not stop at one's own inward self, at the "inner man." And this extended the circle of ethical responsibility by radiating outwardly, and with the force of moral obligation, into other realms. Mosier writes in *The American Temper* (albeit in 1952) that "the consequences of this social-contract theory for setting up God's commonwealth in New England...were momentous."<sup>406</sup> Thus, as maintained by Delbanco, extending to God *through others* is tantamount to the arrival of social and personal hope; and while salvation can never be earned, "engagement with others" who are alike in behavior and piety "is a sign that it

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<sup>404</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, p. 194.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Mosier, p. 27.

may be granted.”<sup>407</sup> The social contract—indeed, in English political philosophy, the intellectual harbinger to modern democratic governance—reflects this idea of personal salvation through the healthy state of social cohesion, that is, as something devoid of serious conflict within the group conceived of as the social body. The Puritan roots of this dichotomy between inward salvation and outward care for one’s fellows were made clear in the American historian John Demos insofar as those entering into the social contract

formally bound themselves together into a “Civil Body Politic” and agreed to be ruled by laws “most meet and convenient for the general good.”....[But] there were also in the first group a number of “strangers”—people not primarily committed to religious aims and values....In subsequent years there came others to be known as “particulars.”...Some individual “strangers” and “particulars” became trusted and valued citizens, but others continued to seem different and more or less suspect.<sup>408</sup>

That is to say, to have one’s identity bound to those within the association of the contract also created those who do not abide by the contract. To be outside of this association, to opt out of participation resulted in being ostracized. And not to be committed to “religious aims and values” was to be a “stranger,” to be untrustworthy. If these duties seemed stringent, it was there was implicit recognition that those engaged also understood that God could do much for a Godly people.

From this view of salvation as being connected to the salvation of others, grace was also transferred from being received solely alone to being hinged to the association with others in receipt of grace. “But whether it came suddenly or slowly,” writes Delbanco, “the process of growth in grace culminated in the recognition that without connectedness to others, the self is lost.”<sup>409</sup> That is to say, the idea that one should only be concerned with one’s own salvation gave way to a conception of salvation that occurs only by immersion within a community of like-believers, for one’s upright behavior could be displayed and confirmed therein. The social world was beginning to be conceived of as essential to one’s private salvation.

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<sup>407</sup> Delbanco, *Real American Dream*, p. 43.

<sup>408</sup> John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 5-6.

<sup>409</sup> Delbanco, *Real American Dream*, p. 28.

Furthermore, more abstractly, this sort of connectedness, be it conceived “nationally” or “socially,” should result, ideally, in the construction of social order. Speaking broadly, for the Calvinist of the seventeenth century disorder was to be corrected with an outward activism dedicated to putting the world back in order by the elect. As the philosopher Michael Walzer has observed: “Calvinist and especially Puritan brand of reformation [had as a driving motivation] horror at disorder...at a social disorder.”<sup>410</sup> This further solidified the legitimation of an association of the saved, such that

the social order formed by such individuals is more and more seen as based properly on contract. For it is an order of those who have taken on a discipline by personal commitment and who have chosen their walk of life in the same way. In is an order of those who rule themselves in their own personal lives.<sup>411</sup>

And the combination of the desire for outward order, coupled with the ordering of one’s private internal life freely given to the work of God on earth, would result in, finally, as indicated by Ferguson, “a life, calm, well-ordered, obedient to secular authority, the disturbing passions contained and controlled by marriage and domestic responsibility, mindful of public duty and above all guided by private conscience, should be the realistic religious goal of every individual.”<sup>412</sup>

The divine bond among individuals within a community permits a shift to a modern conception of what binds the society of the saved together, from metaphysical to secular, which indeed would eventually occur during the Enlightenment. This bond was now made possible through the reconstruction of how grace occurred, a redescription of metaphysical accounts of how beings were bound together, and would result in the secularization of the divine union, as indicated earlier, from God-to-man to man-to-man. The historian of religion and economics at Boston University Adam B. Seligman recounts this historical redescription in *The Problem of Trust* (1997):

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<sup>410</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, p. 229; Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 213.

<sup>411</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, p. 229.

<sup>412</sup> Ferguson, *End of Happiness*, p. 127.

Ultimately, the introjection of grace within the individual believer and within the orders of mundane existence led to the loss of its transcendent locus. The *deus absconditus* of Calvinist religiosity increasingly lost all relevance to the world of man. As grace became secularized into such ideals as the romantic imagination and national virtue, otherness lost its transcendent properties. Faith could no longer be supported by the armature of a transcendent God nor could it provide the nexus for interpersonal relations. What took its place was, in the broadest terms, *a search for trust*. In fact...the process of secularization and the replacement of godly by human attributes also implied the *replacement of faith by trust* (or rather, the search for faith with the search for trust).<sup>413</sup>

That is to say, for Seligman—making a forward leap now—*trust* as a social glue is the replacement for faith in an transcendent order that guaranteed the bond between beings. The call of modernity “instituted a process of secularization and the replacement of godly by human attributes [that] also implied the replacement of faith by trust.”<sup>414</sup>

To fit this claim to the particularly American situation—in admittedly broad strokes—the originally religious covenant of the Calvinist founders becomes increasingly secularized in America over the course of the eighteenth century, and specifically in the decades leading up to the Revolution, due to an increasing conflation of personal salvation with a burgeoning “national” feeling found primarily in sermons of the time. “During the eighteenth century,” writes the eminent Americanist Merle Curti, “a group consciousness developed...[and] the idea of union found expression.”<sup>415</sup> Concurrent with this slow growth, revolutionary sentiment in the colonies is stirred to new heights; the political fate of all trumps purely personal salvation, however much revivalism attempted to reassert the primacy of personal piety. “The eighteenth century did not ‘revive’ some old-time religion,” notes historian Walter McDougall, “so much as create a marketplace of new or adapted Protestant sects.”<sup>416</sup> This is not at all to downplay the enormous reception of revivalist speakers such as George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, Samuel Davies, or Samuel Finley. But according to the historian Robert A. Ferguson, at this time,

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<sup>413</sup> Adam B. Seligman, *The Problem of Trust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 49. Aside from the Latin phraseology, italics mine.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

<sup>415</sup> Curti, p. 73.

<sup>416</sup> McDougall, p. 127.

The struggling Christian has but one comfort in this moment of extremities, but it is one filled with later social and political implications. The necessity between an immediate choice between heaven and hell is suddenly communal in its stress upon the present moment. For unlike most earlier forms of Christian exhortation, revivalism provides the assurance that no decision need ever be made alone. Its thrust toward immediate conversion within the listening group is one more sign of the desirable possibilities in union and, beyond, of a far more glorious opportunity for all.<sup>417</sup>

The influence of Enlightenment rationality and political philosophy, and, importantly, a sense of shared destiny set against publicized British affronts, had taken slow root in the minds of intellectuals in the colonies, leavening Calvinist religiosity of prior generations with the tempered Deism of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Salvation had become a national concern; social trust is more palpable; and the revolutionary cause becomes supported and justified by the very God that a century prior was concerned foremost with individual redemption.

Even so, revivalism was influential primarily in the colonies of Virginia, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, and it was indeed a significant intellectual force on the national stage; these colonies were the most influential in determining the sense of unity in the mid-eighteenth century. But oddly because of the revivalism's influence, moreover and slowly, the salvation of the individual is "nationalized" to the salvation of the whole of those wishing to detach from colonial authority of England. God's selection of a person is thus exteriorized to the selection of a people in the sermons and religious writings and speeches of the time. That is to say, revivalism paradoxically brought about only further erosion of old-school Calvinist tenets.

In 1762, for example, we find pastor Abraham Williams of Boston able to tenably equivocate the "voice of the people," with the "voice of God," or Jonathan Mayhew, a year later in *Observations on the Charter and Conduct of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel*, praising the American people as "philosophers and divines in comparison of the common people in England," or Charles Chauncy in *Observations on the Charter and Conduct of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel* (1766), a sermon delivered on Thanksgiving Day, able to twist the will of the people into something *divinely* inspired: "It was under God's all-

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<sup>417</sup> Robert A. Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment 1750-1820*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 51.

wise, overruling influence that a spirit was raised in all the colonies nobly to assert their freedom as men and English-born subjects.”<sup>418</sup> This sentiment seemed to spread, regardless of religious affiliation. As Ferguson writes,

Glory out of crisis, optimism from revolutionary change...deliverance through America, the value placed upon union, the miracle of sudden nationality...all of these concepts transpose easily to the political debates of the 1760s and 1770s....Salvation, the original source of that rhetoric, thus enters into a sense of general well-being that all citizens share irrespective of their religious state of mind or preference.<sup>419</sup>

The original voices of religious liberty come to be infused in political speech by “insisting that faith and liberty are inextricably intertwined.”<sup>420</sup> Political liberty in the sermons and speeches of many a Protestant preacher becomes possible only through that liberty being the will of the people, something now divinely inspired. Though there were hot disagreements, to be sure, between “Old Lights,” and “New Lights” during the sweep of revivalism, in the fury of theological exchange the debates shift from God’s strictures to problems in individual and community life. Elisha Williams, rector of Yale College in 1744, writes in *The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants* that “the Rights of *Conscience and private Judgment* in Matters of Religion [in biblical, legal, and philosophical traditions] are unalterably the same.”<sup>421</sup> Protestantism’s original anti-authoritarian impulses finds a settled home in this sort of rhetoric, and, we should remember that “radical Protestantism favors the spoken word, so the courage of revolutionary action depends upon the immediacy of speech.”<sup>422</sup>

Another way to address this is to say that people began to talk much differently about their inner lives and about salvation, their notions of how to obtain inner freedom, and their inherent bond to society; language changes from addressing a purely personal salvation to that of addressing the salvation of Americans generally. Colonial Americans, that is, use their laments against episcopacy to recognize each other across

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid, pp. 53-62.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid., p. 60.



denominational lines. To reiterate, the search for a sacred bond with society, from person to person, replaced with the idea of faith that humans—particularly Americans—were *always already* bound. In short, as Seligman’s excerpt alludes, with the entry into modernity, basic existential longings did not (and will not) recede; instead, they become redescribed. Like Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, an interior need remained while the outside changes to accommodate alteration in the social and cultural realities around it.

## 5.2 *An American Religion?*

The idea that these longings have remained similar, that we retain the religiously serious intonations of civic trust, and that similarities, more specifically now, in Americans’ moral views—and the stories that legitimate those views—have remained relatively coherent despite dissimilar outward historical emanations, is supported by several sources. The esteemed sociologist of religion and American morality Alan Wolfe writes in his survey of Americans’ collective moral views, often taken to be a hodgepodge of perspectives, that

when it comes to fundamental questions about human nature, the formation of character, qualities of good and evil, and the sources of moral authority...there is a common American moral philosophy, and it is broad and inclusive enough to incorporate people whose views of the actual issues of the day are at loggerheads.<sup>423</sup>

This view is repeatedly shared among some contemporary critics and surveyors of the American religious and moral landscape. As we’ve already seen, however (such as in Himmelfarb, Goldfarb, Lerner, Bork, and Bennett) the view that a moral union of disparate America is not entirely common, that it is in fact deeply divided, has been the source of much lament and ire. Some less-politically-driven others see it differently. As Harold Bloom writes,

I find two characteristics invariably present in every authentic version of the American Religion, whether it be Pentecostal or Southern Baptist or

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<sup>423</sup> Alan Wolfe, *Moral Freedom: The Impossible Idea That Defines the Way We Live Now*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 168.

Mormon....The American finds God in herself or himself, but only after finding the freedom to know God by experiencing a total inward solitude. Freedom, in a very special sense, is the preparation without which God will not allow himself to be revealed in the self. And this freedom is in itself double; the spark or spirit must know itself to be both free of other selves and of the created world. In perfect solitude, the American spirit learns again its absolute isolation as a spark of God in a sea of space....the divine shall seek out each spirit only in total isolation.<sup>424</sup>

It is convincing enough that ideas generated in past philosophy and religious interpretations of salvation and duty have made it into the present. As Delbanco offers in *The Real American Dream*, wherein he makes the case that the American narrative has shifted its main valuations and motivations, from its earliest constructions, from God, then to Nation, to, today, Self, each successive era retains residual values and expectations from the past:

‘All previous philosophy leaves stratified deposits in popular philosophy [Gramsci].’ The deposited ideas of Christianity and civil religion are still the bedrock of our culture, whatever intellectuals may think of them. And the history of ideas is usually better understood as a process of incorporation and transformation than as a series of successive movements discrete and distinct from one another.<sup>425</sup>

That is to say, in the chorus of Bloom, Wolfe, and Delbanco, that the sense of isolation and finding God within oneself had its earliest migration via the worldview of the Puritans who formed the basis of a new social structure when they arrived on New England shores. And, adding to the melody, the Calvinist and Puritan influence on later American thought and habits of mind is great, according to the influential sociologist Daniel Bell in his *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976):

The thought of Puritan theocracy is the great influential fact in the history of the American mind. In the mid-eighteenth century, America’s leading intellectuals were clergymen and their thoughts were about theology. For more than 100 years, their thought dominated all speculative philosophy in America. And even when the theology was gone [its influence on the]

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<sup>424</sup> Bloom, *American Religion*, p. 32.

<sup>425</sup> Delbanco, *Real American Dream*, p. 112.

American character lay imprinted and almost ineradicable for another century.<sup>426</sup>

This is all to say that when we consider the current debate over irony and civic trust, that these notions play a crucial role in the assumptions about what it means to be a good citizen, about the seriousness of the social bond, as well as the kinds of things we conceive of as corrosive to the coherence of the social body.

There are, of course, *many* separate historical narratives that went into composing this particularly American version of the dichotomy between the “skeptical individuality” of irony and the public spiritedness necessary for a democratic situation to function well. Yet, for Delbanco, this Puritan idea of salvation conceived as a contradictory mechanism that happens through both the social union and a radically private impulsion is a “deeply paradoxical faith [that] is still alive in one form or another in America.”<sup>427</sup> Our age is no different; we still live with these philosophical and religious ghosts and attempt to navigate their waters.

These narratives, big and small, have helped foster the American identity and have instructed the American narrative and those living within its sway how to rely upon an “internal compass” and to shun that which does not point in the direction of that compass. The mythic American story—the abstracted narrative sewn from political tales that resonate with recognition in the minds of even the most removed of ironists—is filled with episodes of the individual’s strong will, the location of certitude and ultimate truth in the individual self’s mysterious inner recesses.

With a mighty “yawp” we learn from the philosopher Jacob Needleman—no stranger to constructing heroic narratives—that George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Walt Whitman all possessed an inward force that when unleashed resulted in political and social transformation. This inner cauldron, Needleman attests, found its nourishment in religious and philosophical springs. From the

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<sup>426</sup> Bell, p. 56. Americanist Bettina Friedl of the University of Hamburg crucially notes Bell’s oversight in this instance: to claim that the influence of Puritan “theocracy” on successive thought is to confuse the influence of Puritan *thinkers* and the influence social structure of political theocracy. The latter did not, in fact, and with intention, rule or overly influence Puritan New England. The exception, of course, was New Haven, which was run as a literal theocracy. All other colonies ran political structures with the explicit intent of keeping church and state separate entities, where the fear ran opposite of today: that the state would influence the church.

<sup>427</sup> Delbanco, *Real American Dream*, p. 43.

Calvinist conviction of the battle between good and evil taking place inwardly, presided over by the conscience, to the Quaker notion of Inner Light, and the secularized concept of “conscience as guide,” the American political narrative had long determined that moving forward was to be done so not out of strict adherence to external rules and regulations, but rather out of a sense of *inward* conviction of right.

### 5.3 *Redescription*

This obsessive fascination with the self, with private life—practiced in the form of spiritual autobiographies and whose later effects were foreseen by Tocqueville—has continued to ripple throughout the latter half of the twentieth century according to many contemporary social critics discussed, such as Lasch, Bellah, Kaplan, and Delbanco. The super-narrative of Self has surpassed prior guiding narratives of God and Nation. The notion of salvation in an intellectual and literary culture with waning credible belief in Christian metaphysics, as today holds sway over much of Europe and a significant portion of influential sectors of the American population, longings of Christian foundings result in changes in terminology, what Richard Rorty calls redescription. Philosophy fits itself to the contemporary environment or risks annihilation. Redescription carries with it the concerns of past language, though it dresses, like Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, in different garb. Thoughtful people foster new phraseology that becomes believable once the old is no longer credible. As political philosopher Charles W. Anderson aptly and helpfully illustrates,

I have no idea what some people mean by a “personal savior,” nor do I know what Quakers mean by the “inner light” or how they know when they are in its presence. Our experiences, and our interpretations of the human spirit, are radically different; often they are mutually incomprehensible. Are we then talking about different aspects or expressions of the same phenomenon? Or are we perhaps talking about entirely different things?...We really do need to say *something* collectively, publicly, about this vision of human nature that, as a core value in our liberal political philosophy, may be our strongest common bond.<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> Anderson, *Deeper Freedom*, pp. 56-57.

Redescriptions of original urges for wholeness or connection come, like Carlyle's tailor, to remake the outside of the world while retaining its important contents.

Of course these digressions on Puritanism, Emerson, and the fundamentals of the American religious mind are stretches far back into the past, and they are admittedly tenuous. But these foundations remain undoubtedly strong. Given the (albeit shrinking) percentage of Americans who today claim Protestantism as their religious affiliation (currently accounting for fifty-two percent of the American population) one can safely assume the influence that these deeply held notions of social duty, of "brotherly affections," have had on the construction of individual personality and, by extension, shared ideas and sentiments that have become institutionalized, legalized, and reified.<sup>429</sup>

Indeed, in the contemporary American climate, such religiously informed notions of the person's ethical relationship to the community must have residual sway and influence: 94% of Americans believe in God; nearly half of Americans believe that their country has special protection from Him; 68% believe in a literal Devil (even among those with

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<sup>429</sup> According to a 2004 survey by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, between 1993 and 2002 the percentage of Americans who claimed they were Protestant dropped from 63% to 52%, after years of generally sustained levels. According to Rachel Zoll of the Associated Press, "Respondents were defined as Protestant if they said they were members of a Protestant denomination, such as Episcopal Church or Southern Baptist Convention. The category included members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and members of independent Protestant churches.... The study was based on three decades of religious identification questions in the General Social Survey, which the opinion center conducts to measure public trends." Catholics numbered 25% of the population; Jewish, 2%; and other faiths, such as Islam, Orthodox Christianity, or Eastern religions, increased from 3% to 7%. The study also controversially concludes that in the coming years the United States will no longer be a predominantly Protestant nation.

This has some pundits and scholars up in arms. A debate about the fundamentally Protestant character of the United States has flared up again with the publication of Samuel Huntington's *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). Huntington claims that America remains a resolutely Protestant nation by virtue of the fact that the structures set up by the British colonialists are the ones that guided the country into existence. Among those defining traits are "the English language, Christianity, religious commitment, English concepts of the rule of law, the rights of individuals, Protestant values of individualism, work, and the belief that individuals have a shared duty to create a heaven on earth, a 'city upon a hill.'" (Quoted in *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2004 [v. 83, n. 5], p. 156). Among the challenges Huntington perceives is (primarily Catholic) immigration from Mexico, with which Alan Wolfe, in his criticism of Huntington, takes issue in *Foreign Affairs*' July-August 2004 issue. Perturbed, Huntington responded to Wolfe in the September-October issue, which also printed a reply from Wolfe and another response from Huntington. This sort of back-and-forth is highly unorthodox for a national publication, and speaks to the troubled situation of national identity and its crucial intertwining with personal identity—and thus guarded with teeth bared.

college and post-graduate degrees: 68% and 55%, respectively); 40% that the earth will end in Armageddon and a battle between Jesus and the Antichrist; 45% believe that Jesus will return to Earth in their lifetime; and 82% of Americans believe in a literal Heaven, to which 63% believe they're headed. Only 1% believe they're going to Hell.

Importantly for the topic of irony, which undercuts literal meanings for sport, more than one-third of Americans believe that the Bible is the direct and exact word of God, not "just" a collection of parables or ethical instructions. To be sure, Americans are the most devoutly religious people in the advanced industrial world.<sup>430</sup> Yet, for the scientifically and secularly inclined, it is an unsettling reality that Americans' religious beliefs most accurately compare not to those of European and other industrialized nations, but to those of third-world developing countries.<sup>431</sup>

#### *5.4 Irony in Opposition: The Wake of Romanticism*

In contrast to this devout vision of the world, the weight of the social contract and its religious tenor and all the seriousness it implies, the ironic worldview stands, ostensibly, in direct opposition to this civic feeling in the American mind. And it is because of these deep philosophical roots that the contemporary ironist receives such disdain. Where the ironic worldview recoils from collective understanding in favor of the "hidden truth of inwardness," the civic-minded subject is transparent to the others in his community. He speaks, like Aristotle's virtuous citizen, plainly; he does not boast or underestimate his capabilities. And "to speak plainly," writes Bercovitch of the Puritan emphasis on clarity of communication, of the perfect registration between avowal and meaning, "was not

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<sup>430</sup> Statistical information culled from Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2004), p. 19; Rifkin's sources include Gallup Organization ([www.gallup.org](http://www.gallup.org)), the Pew Research Center for People and the Press ([www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org)) and *The Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard Survey Project* ([www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org)).

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21. Compared with Europe: while six of ten Americans say that religion is very important in their daily lives, it is barely so in most European nations, even in Catholic Italy and Poland. In Germany "only 21% say that religion is very important to them, while the percentage in Great Britain drops to 16 % and in France to 14%, and in the Czech Republic, it's 11%. In Sweden, the numbers are even lower, 10 %, and in Denmark, 9%. In Korea, only 25% of the population considers religion to be very important in their lives, and in Japan only 12% consider themselves to be very religious" (pp. 20-21).

primarily to speak simply, and not at all to speak artlessly. It meant speaking the Word—making language itself, as self-expression, an *imitatio Christi* because it conformed to scripture.”<sup>432</sup>

Though this interpretation of speaking clearly and directly is obviously not explicit today, can we doubt that such an idea plays into our own interpretation of the *moral* value of speaking clearly? If so, then irony, as that mode which assumes clarity of linguistic expression to be insufficient to express the hidden self and the complexities and moral ambivalence stands in clear opposition, becomes worthy of moral condemnation.

Which brings us again to Romanticism. What of these two seemingly polar oppositions joining in historical assumptions? What of the conflict between irony and trust? It is crucial at this point to solidify and argue the connection between the Reformation’s ethical directives, its view of the subject, and how these notions were played upon by the dominant logic of Romanticism as a worldview that encouraged ironic display and detachment, the argument that I have attempted to put forward. This connection will allow for the similarities between irony and the Christian inward turn to be seen more clearly and convincingly.

As mentioned at the outset of this essay, both the Protestant mind and the Romantic ironist stress the need for consciousness to be focused on inner direction for the hope of salvation and in the belief in inner sacredness. Harold Bloom has noted in his volume about Romantic poetry, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), that indeed the Romantic worldview has its roots in the Reformation. In chorus, Bercovitch writes of the sanctification of inward individuality, of self in the world:

As Professor Bloom indicates, the Romantic view has its roots in the Reformation. The displacement begins in England as early as the seventeenth century, with the Puritan “vulgar prophets” who claimed the prerogatives of Christ, with the Quaker doctrine of the inner light, with the Diggers who used (or discarded) scripture insofar as it provided a viable metaphor for the soul, with John Milton’s *De Doctrina Christiana* which announced that all believers are, no less than Jesus, sons of God. We can trace this line forward to the Romantics of our own time....the link between Romantic and Puritan is obvious enough.<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, p. 29.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

Romanticism runs a strain of the Reformation's conception of the inner way to freedom, aims to further remove all mediations (society, Church, language) between the self and God, between man and Nature, between the sacred interiority and the immediacy of primal experience. It aims, by implication, to complete the *project* of the Reformation. The historian Peter Heltzel importantly contends much the same when he writes about German Pietism, a crucial vein of Lutheran reform which indeed influenced German Romanticism as well as American:

A case could be made that with Pietism's "inward turn" much of modern American individualism was anticipated and mediated through Protestant thought....The American expression of this Pietist theme (the heartfelt character of true religion) is Jonathan Edward's concept of "religious affections." This "inward emphasis" of Protestant theology would have a big influence on mid-nineteenth century Transcendentalism (Emerson and Thoreau). Therefore, one can argue persuasively that Protestant thought in America was an important tributary feeding the river of American Romanticism. Moreover, the inward turn of the subject was an essential move in the evolution of modern subjectivism.<sup>434</sup>

Heltzel indeed connects Reformed Lutheran thought with the urge towards inwardness seen in American Romanticism. Moreover and a century earlier, German Pietism had a considerable influence on the colonial era, mainly brought in through figures such as Theodorus J. Frelinghuysen and Henry Melchior Mühlenburg in the middle colonies. Francis Daniel Pastorius, founder of Germantown, Pennsylvania, was known throughout all the colonies, too, the original contact between Cotton Mather and the University of Halle Pietist leader A. H. Francke having proved theologically and intellectually

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<sup>434</sup> Peter Heltzel, "Philipp Jakob Spener and the Rise of Pietism in Germany," from the Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Modern Western Theology at <http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/Wesley.html>. Pietism, the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century movement within German Protestantism, aimed to replace the emphasis on institutions and dogmatic teaching in then-orthodox Protestant circles by concentrating on the everyday "practice of piety," which they held was ultimately rooted in inner experience and which was expressed in a life of religious commitment. Clearly this movement held great importance for the German Romantic movement, the stress on inward experience, and, as such, forms an important bridge between Romanticism in the United States and the push of Protestant directives towards inwardness as an escape. As mentioned, the German literary historian Fritz Brüggenmann has connected, as well, the ironic *Weltanschauung* to the Pietist revival in German Romanticism, as noted in Muecke. See note 383 above for reference to Brüggenmann's *Die Ironie als entwicklungsgeschichtliches Moment* (1909).



influential on the American side.<sup>435</sup> Pietism was appealing in the changing religious environment of eighteenth-century America because it was in a sense a reaction against the formalism and intellectualism of dwindling Calvinist sentiments; it emphasized the subordination of doctrinal methods and theology to a religion of the heart and personal Christian piety, a mode to be wildly extolled by John Edwards in his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746).<sup>436</sup> German Pietism, to be sure, influenced American evangelicalism in many ways, helping, in fact, pave the way for the Great Awakening and for American Romanticism.<sup>437</sup>

Though similar in their urge for transcendence of self, a Puritan sense of selfhood was qualitatively different than that of this American Romanticism, influenced as it was by the *feeling* of religion, of inner deity. Here the recess of the private, cultivated self is not the *enemy* as it was for Calvinists; the self now, in the Romantic imagination and for Emerson, is the binding element and vessel with which we achieve salvation, primarily with what the self chooses to do, to imagine itself to be. It is the last remaining sanctity in a world divested of spiritual importance.<sup>438</sup> It is here worth citing Bercovitch on this similarity and nuanced difference on the actions of self-construction and mediation in both the Reformer and Romantic mind:

We have seen that the Reformers, having unleashed the individual, doctrinally, through the principle of *sola fides*, found their defense against subjectivism in the concept of *exemplum fidei*. They restricted spiritual meaning of all facts, especially the fact of the self, to the external model of Christ's life and the figural patterns of scripture. Fundamentally, Romantic symbolism differs from Puritan exegesis not because it substitutes nature for the Bible, and not because it treats of secular events. For the Reformer,

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<sup>435</sup> Curti, p. 36.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

<sup>438</sup> For an update on this logical progression in the Germanic vein of the Romantic ideology, of course, see Theodor W. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Routledge, 1973) and *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott. (London: Verso, 1984). In the latter, Adorno contends that "There is no way out of entanglement. The only responsible course is to deny oneself the ideological misuse of one's own existence, and for the rest to conduct oneself in private as modestly, unobtrusively and unpretentiously as required, no longer by good upbringing, but by the shame of still having air to breathe, in hell" (p. 26). Commenting on this passage, Timothy Bewes notes that it seems to "reaffirm the position of the inner emigrant in the very process of disinterring it, and thereby lifts its inner emigration itself on to a new ironic plane of existential solitude" (*Cynicism and Postmodernity*, p. 173).

too, after all, nature was the book of God, and figuralism extended to the full range of human experience. *The basic difference in the Romantic outlook is that it reverses the Reformed equation for personal identity.* The Romantics subsumed the concept of *exemplum fidei* in the doctrine of *sola fides*. Their model of selfhood was the inspired perceiver. In effect they freed the individual to choose (or invent) his identity, and then to impose his own patterns upon experience, including his experience of history, nature, the Bible, Christ Himself.<sup>439</sup>

Where the creation of identity for the Reformers was run along the model of others who have done the same, the Romantics, for the most part, divested themselves of models insofar as they were hindrances to the creation of free individuality, snares to authentic development. As Reformers subsumed their own identities into the *imitatio*—that is, concurrently into historical time—the Romantic, whether German or American, yearned for the *future* creation of himself, pure potentiality, and thus, freedom in self-creation. In this way, Nietzsche is the chief European proponent for shuttling this view of identity, of self-creation, and for advocating its continuance into the twentieth century; Emerson did so in America. This undoubtedly continues to be a hyperactive view of identity in our time. It is undoubtedly the view sponsored by Rorty.

But there is stability of complaint here as regards the limitations placed on subjectivity to construct its own identity. Remember that both Kierkegaard and Hegel, the latter especially, were dissatisfied with Romantic irony insofar as it had no master; there were no limits, no transcendental reach as they conceived it; it disallowed the limitation of its own identity, believing it was totally free. Much the same is said here: the Romantics, according in this instance to Bercovitch, did not subsume their attempt at personal identity under the Reformed notion of *exemplum fidei*, that is, the historical community of believers on which one could model one's own journey of faith. The Reformers unleashed the individual through the principle of *sola fides*; he had to subsume his own predilections and desires under the principle of *exemplum fidei*, or, Christ (*imitatio*).

For the Romantics, however, the individuated self was able to choose his identity, not just imitate the outlines of the life of another. In doing so, the Romantic enacted his imaginative powers to create and engage the world. Whereas the Puritans' Calvinist theological perspective imagined a human self that was both vile and insufficient, in

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<sup>439</sup> Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, p. 164. Excluding the Latin phraseology, italics mine.

Emerson, for example, the self was already the repository of the Divine, and therefore supremely powerful. Thus this fusion between the self and the divine—the overcoming of self-concern—happens for Emerson because of a religious sense that one feels when he goes into the simple sublimity of nature. Accordingly, in the essay “Nature,” published in 1836, Emerson’s opinion about nature’s teleology is made most clearly: “The noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it.”<sup>440</sup>

Thus Romantic irony has been subject to the accusation—as is the contemporary ironist—of being solely concerned with private self-construction, of being vain. Recall that Rorty spun the contemporary ironist as someone who is primarily concerned with this activity, as a sort of practice of self-identification and alteration by reading literature, and who is consequently aware of the non-finality of all self-constructions. That is, he is self-conscious of his own constructedness. Of this matter, D. C. Muecke writes in *The Compass of Irony* that in Romantic irony

there was the growth of self-awareness, the increasing extent to which men become conscious of being conscious, and this was of immense importance to the development of Romantic Irony. What I have in mind is not simply self-awareness as a mental activity and not only self-consciousness as an inhibiting or embarrassed state of mind but principally the *awareness of the self as a ‘permanent subject of successive and varying states of consciousness’* in which sense the word ‘self’ seems first to have been used in 1674 (“self-consciousness” was first used in 1690 by Locke). Upon this topic, the mind’s turning in upon itself, a great deal might be said without becoming irrelevant. One might, for example, speak of the growth of religious introspection, not confining oneself to English Protestantism or German Pietism (which later Brüggemann sees as leading up to Romantic Irony). Certainly no less relevant would be the epistemological emphasis in philosophy from Descartes to beyond Kant, Descartes finding his initial certainty in his own mind, Berkeley holding that no object exists apart from Mind (ours or God’s), Fichte holding that the ego is the only ultimate reality.<sup>441</sup>

And because of this recurring self-reflection and estranged identity found throughout the Romantic literature and philosophical writings, the historian Morse Peckham contends, the

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<sup>440</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p. 41.

<sup>441</sup> Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, p. 189. Emphasis mine.

Romantic experienced a sense of profound isolation within the world and an equally terrifying alienation from society. These two experiences, metaphysical isolation and social alienation—they are of course two different modes of the same perception—were the distinguishing signs of the Romantic, and they are to this day.<sup>442</sup>

Recall just briefly the quintessentially Romantic (and now stereotyped, caricatured) image of Caspar David Friedrich's *The Wanderer Above the Mist* (1818) to put into visual terms the ambivalent situation of both freedom from external restraint, the imaginative creation of individuality, and the uncertainty of what exactly should be constructed.<sup>443</sup> In this sense the Romantic continued the Protestant adventure into subjectivity. As Taylor describes this attempt at description of a new sense of being in the world:

Friedrich too is seeking a subtler language; he is trying to say something for which no adequate terms exist and whose meaning has to be sought in his works rather than in a pre-existing lexicon of references. He builds on the late eighteenth-century sense of the affinity between our feeling and natural scenes, but in an attempt to articulate more than a subjective reaction. [As Friedrich wrote,]“Feeling can never be contrary to nature, is always consistent with nature.”<sup>444</sup>

Additional similarities between the Reformed mentality and that of the Romantic are skepticism towards authority and skepticism towards rationality. As mentioned at the outset of this essay, the philosopher Ernst Behler saw Romantic irony as an implicit critique of the rationality and attempted coherence of Enlightenment thought such that

performative self-referential contradiction necessarily implied [a] totalized critique of reason and philosophy....The ironic discourse itself, because of its highly self-reflective character, practices critical, deprecating observations of a self-referential nature as a constantly recurring technique.<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> Peckham, p. 19.

<sup>443</sup> This painting is located at the Hamburg Kunsthalle in Hamburg, Germany. I find it irresistible to make a connection between the “gathering mist” comment that D. J. Enright made about trying to aptly define irony and the Friedrich painting as a paragon of Romanticism. Something misty going on.

<sup>444</sup> Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 86.

<sup>445</sup> Behler, p. 112.

Where the Reformer, whether sixteenth-century Lutheran or seventeenth-century Calvinist, painstakingly argued against the authority and theology of the dominant church, the Romantic was concerned with the generalized authority over aesthetic production (the Academy) as well as authority over the control of the inward, moral life—that is to say, bourgeois morality—and eventually, law.

True inwardness and authenticity thus for Romantics circumvented the authority of society and was reconnected to nature outside of society, which was a concept now seen as confining and limiting. Reformers connected this inner life initially around society (and later, through it) to the Divine. Innocence and natural spontaneity—in the Reformed view the expression of piety, and in the Romantic mind the expression of internal freedom from social constraint—become the opposite of the dishonesty of society. In short, the unrestrained liberty, inner freedom, and liberation from outward confines becomes in Romanticism what the Reformation had done in its time. Yet through the process of the Reformation’s moving from internal justification to outward evidence of justification and eventually into bourgeois morality, this initial inward freedom becomes confined by, as Rousseau would contend, “conscience”—that is, the initial freedom of the moral self being codified within society through law and institutions.

Romanticism thus reignites this feeling of, and yearning towards, freedom from authority over the individual, leading him into greater sincerity and authenticity of being. It pierces the sheath of conventional morality, urging that the social world negates authentic selfhood. And for both the Reformers and the Romantics, the value of sincerity reigned supreme. So much so that, as mentioned earlier, the historian J. M. Roberts contends that

Romanticism’s positive roots lay...in the Reformation’s displacement of so many traditional values by the one supreme value of sincerity; it was not entirely wrong to see Romanticism as some Catholic critics saw it, as a secularized Protestantism, for above all it sought authenticity, self-realization, honesty, moral exaltation.<sup>446</sup>

If Romanticism is in some ways the continuation of the Protestant project, and irony is the scrim through which many Romantics saw the world, we may associate them and

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<sup>446</sup> Roberts, p. 553.

contend that with the force of historical influence, they continue to do battle in our conceptions of what counts as a good citizen, what sincerity is, and how to obtain authenticity. These values, as intimated earlier, play the underlying role in the contemporary debate over irony and civic trust in the American mind.

### 5.5 *The Current Debate Recast*

It we accept the similarity of the directness of consciousness in both Romantic irony and Calvinistic insistence on hyper-self-vigilance, then the turn inward that *results in* distancing and ironic detachment is, in the religious sense, then, a search to descry salvation. Yet, now devoid of a outwardly credulous religious belief in a God that unifies all beings—Kant’s transcendental subjectivity and the aim of much modern philosophy generally, up to Habermas’s yearning for philosophy to “hang things together”—the contemporary ironist is conceived of as not contributing to society, of being uncommitted because of his refusal to join with the now-metaphorical social contract, of having no faith because he has no trust. The ironist is thus left with himself alone when he turns inward, which only reaffirms his separation, which again leads to detachment (the existentialist stance). And such a description befits the American spiritual situation insofar as, as Bloom writes,

what the American self has found, since about 1800, is its own freedom—from the world, from time, from other selves. But this freedom is a very expensive torso, because of what it is obliged to leave out: society, temporality, the other. What remains, for it, is solitude and the abyss.<sup>447</sup>

The cyclical nature of this inward turn and outward confirmation of his belief leads to a further battering down of subjectivity into itself. Unable to sense the connectedness with others through a shared metaphysical story or an inward feeling of social alliance, the contemporary Romantic ironic consciousness attempts then to connect with others through, on one hand, outward associations and, more solidly, through irony itself. Where the latter means retains the belief in a core self; the former manner gives way to a “relational self” that throws into doubt the solidity of identity.

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<sup>447</sup> Bloom, *American Religion*, p. 37.

Either way, as the idea of the guarantee of social coherence through God is eroded (that is, becomes less convincing) the search for this trust is essentially, as Seligman alluded to earlier, the search for faith. As ironists are often seen as disengaging from this search in their social dealings and the resonance of this older search remains, the contemporary ironist—the figure lambasted during the trials of civic trust in the 1990s and the gravitas of 9/11—is tinged with the association of someone who displays no faith; he therefore is untrustworthy for he does not participate in the collective search for social coherence. He breaks the deepest sacred assumptions of the social contract.

Given this caricature of the ultimate solitary character of the American in his relation to the universe and to his perceived creator, and considering the ironists' ultimate loneliness as seen, for example, by Kierkegaard and, more recently, by Jedediah Purdy, we may also understand ironic posturing as the individual inward search for grace, an end to melancholic loneliness through a reception of divine favor, though the ironist explicitly “believes” in neither. Though he enacts the search; he speaks of it not. Beyond that, the subject attempts, through what was called piety—but we may now call “cool”—to indicate to others that he has been favored, that his inner life is calm. But finding nothing in modernity's abyss, finding no credible voice of the divine, no confidence in his inward solidity, the ironist is forced back outward in disdain for himself and the world. And some have contended that this existential movement is characteristic of modernity (and post-) more overarchingly. Sloterdijk observes of the wider inward turn as a search for home within the context of modernity:

Modern self-reflection, in spite of all its “turnings back,” thus can no longer “arrive home”.... The subjects do not know themselves “at home with themselves” either in themselves or in their environments. For radical thinking in modernity, at the self pole, emptiness exposes itself, and at the world pole, estrangement. How an emptiness is supposed to recognize “itself” in a stranger cannot be imagined by our reason no matter how hard we try.<sup>448</sup>

Yet, while the ironist, the modernized consciousness, the Romantic mind bereft, would like to come to a different conclusion, he must admit that in order to be *sincere*—in order to openly say, “this is my predicament,” to maintain the Protestant values that he cannot

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<sup>448</sup> Sloterdijk, p. 538.

shed—is to harbor *private* melancholy as the only sincere way to be in the world. For the ironist, then, the only way to maintain integrity of private personality, to be honest about the world and self, to live up to the Protestant–Romantic demand of authenticity, is to live within the ironic worldview because it guards, ultimately, against spiritual and social pain impressed upon him. Melancholy and irony thus form the twin poles of the modern mood. Or, as Ferguson has called them, respectively: the “depth of modern life” and the “romance of distance.” The latter is an attempt to cure the former.

And thus in the narrative of the specifically American theatrics of being—in the contentious roar that is the debate over the American identity—the ironist is thrown into consideration in the 1990s because he represents both the religiously inspired, ultimately, Calvinist sensibility, *and* the individual who breaks the unspoken social contract, who rejects the search for a now-transposed secular faith. That is, he is both hyper-vigilant internally (self-conscious and aware), which points to his inwardness and the care for his inner life, or, in older language, concern for the state of his soul. Simultaneously, however, he is outwardly relaxed—through clothing and attitude—*appearing* not to be concerned with the dynamics of his inner life; he projects the appearance of ease and composure, for such was the state of someone who had received grace. He is cool. He is detached; he stands inwardly apart from the broad conception of the social and attempts entry into smaller, local “social contracts,” through ironic connection with others like him.

This is because the reception of one’s state of grace, in Calvinism, was to be confirmed by one’s fellows, and so, as Delbanco professes, “the only way to know if one has been saved is to see if one lives in a new kind of reciprocal relation with other people.”<sup>449</sup> If nothing else, and for all the complaints about it as a social corrosive, ironic activity among those who “get it” does essentially that by going around the routines of language and expectation. It urges a connection to others by alternative means, by showing what is true by avoiding the display of it through language, through the dominant social constructions and forms given. Irony is how he navigates his attempts at salvation.

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<sup>449</sup> Delbanco, *Real American Dream*, p. 36.



As such, both Romantic irony and the social contract have their intellectual roots in the Reformation's stress on inwardness, salvation by faith alone, and a detachment from the social body. The social contract set the model for citizenship based on Reformation's ideals of total commitment, willfulness, and Calvinistic notions of salvation through joining with others through the covenant (as the bond that went from God-to-man to man-to-man). Romantic irony, while leaning on the inwardness of Protestantism and the removal of intermediaries between man and God/nature, rejects the social contract because he cannot see his spiritual course being run within society—something he now conceives, since the “fall of public man” as filled with “mere” roles, not with the authenticity of personality, and certainly not as he sees it being run by others with power. This distinction is continued in the debates insofar as the Romantic ironist believes that he needs to achieve salvation alone and connect with something outside of what he perceives as a deadening and vicious social world, and the more “serious” and intellectuals, who believe that the social contract provides not only the model of good citizenship, but also the means of salvation through collective agreement and social “coherence.”

Thus the heated disagreement over irony come down not to uses of “whatever,” or a like or dislike of “Seinfeld,” but over a second-level disagreement about how man achieves salvation. Calls for civic renewal are essentially saying the Romantic ironist has it wrong: man needs to achieve salvation (happiness) through others, through subsuming his will to the common good, not by or for himself. The first-level agreement, however, is that in order to do so, one must value the sacredness of the inward self, that the individual conscience is the seat of all that is valuable. Both retain the essentially Christian conception of personhood.

The hyper-introspection originating in the religious precepts of Reformed Christianity (though not out of self-love, but rather, contempt for *self*) brings in tow now, I argue, what can now be seen to form the basis of ironic posturing in the American mind—a position that is simultaneously destructive of civic trust and preserving of the Christian valuation of inwardness that allows civic trust to flourish. The ironist mindset, seen in this tradition, can be described as a encouraged by the American Puritan introspective sensibility, by the Protestant encouragement of the “inner man,”

but—through modernity and metaphysical skepticism borne of the postmodern destruction of metanarratives (more simply: big stories becoming unbelievable)—one that does not discover God while turned inward; that is to say, there is no credible narrative for the ironist with which to contextualize inner experience. Thus in the face of secular and technological change—in the postmodern condition—the religious sense, a sense of authentic being in the world, the search for a sense of connection, of Emersonian self-identity through resistance, of purpose larger than self, remains present even as it escapes inwardly and battens down the hatches against the winds of perceived inauthenticity, corruption, and moral vacuity in the society in which it finds itself. It attempts to “survive” the current environment. It dwells internally until true outwardness can flourish. It arms itself with ironic detachment. Paradoxically drawing on past styles and cultural forms, the contemporary American ironist is nonetheless always forward looking, even if his attempts for the future are couched in the language of the immediate past—often in a cultural environment in which he was more innocent, in which he was a child. Nostalgia for the recent past translates into a wish to return to pre-self-consciousness and entry into the severity of the social environment.

In this way, the ironist of the contemporary debate stands, on one level, in direct contrast to the religious assumptions behind the social contract that in part formed the values within the debate about civic trust. That is to say, the ironist seems to willfully choose individuality—chooses to focus on and construct personal identity—insists on his separateness from the whole, seems uncommitted to public betterment, and he then condemns and judges the whole—conceived of in this case to represent the “mass” of middle-class American taste. By his choosing individuality, he values the self and its unique composition, its style; he aestheticizes his life and language. He, for the later Kierkegaard and for Hegel, “moves away from the Absolute.” To traditional religious moralists, this sort of position cuts off the ironist from any chance of personal salvation, for instead of ridding the self through absorption into the whole, into Christ (as they would conceive it), which would rid the ironist of his sense of alienation, the ironist denies the stories told by the traditional moralists—whether liberal communitarians or Born Again Christians.

To rebel against the order and rationality imposed upon him by the otherwise

Protestant world of order was the recipe for how one's individuality came into existence, was made apparent. But this situation puts the ironist, now a general social character, in a state of constant conflict: he longs for self-confidence, traditionally conceived of as the sign of grace, but he remains internally uncertain since he lacks any credible belief in an absolute God or moral code that would lend that confidence. He is uncertain, but cannot display his dismay at the uncertainty, because to do so would be to sacrifice the illusion of autonomy and self-possession.

But I would like to reiterate, in closing, that the current complaints about irony as a worldview reflects a position that has limited the understanding of irony to its surface—to its literal emanation historically understood as dishonesty, as the misregistration between avowal and meaning—the opposite of sincerity as it was historically conceived. Detractors have failed to see the deeper commitment and trust that irony entails by its sacrificing of its own overtness in order to foster a more complex and nuanced understanding of the modern predicament, a silent understanding that says more by implication than by words alone. Ironists pay an internally high price for holding on to the difficult maintenance of authenticity. And in religiously oriented parts of American society, where the values of literalness and overtness hold sway, ironic understanding is interpreted as elitist, selective, dodgy, uncommitted. But these kinds of critics of contemporary irony have failed to see that irony ultimately values moral commitment and consistency, at times more profoundly and religiously than anyone else. Distracted by its methodology of dissembling exteriorities and undercutting (exposing) dominant forms of representation, irony's detractors fail to see the impetus behind its use. They fail to see behind the mask, the *use* of exteriority to other means. They concentrate on Carlyle's *Sartor*, ignoring the call for, and attempts at, *Resartus*.

This is why attempts to pull these two elements apart, to *oppose* “irony” and “earnestness,” “sincerity,” or “moral values”—as the debate over the “end of irony” attempts to do—will never work (that is, will never seem convincing to ironists): because each party shares the same valuation of inwardness, the same attempts at the feeling of inward freedom. The ironically disengaged person longs for connection, commitment, and belonging to a *better* civic body and culture. The ironist holds “a conviction so

deep...an emotion so strong, as to be able to command itself, and to suppress its natural tone, in order to vent itself with greater force.”<sup>450</sup> And, importantly, he finds a real connection to others *through* irony, with those who understand what is meant without having to say it, with those who also question the saccharine quality of contemporary commercial culture. This he sees as doing an injustice to the depth of human possibility and the complexity of human feeling, the power of the imagination over all forms of potential constraint. Conversely, those lamenting the dissolution of civic trust due to cynicism or irony hold the same valuation of inwardness that cynicism and irony help to *protect*, particularly in a culture widely perceived to be dense with superficiality, crass consumerism, incivility, and ubiquitous political spin. Ironists, above all else, are certain that we must live in this world. So, “we are forced to operate to some degree according to the demands of modern rationality,” writes Charles Taylor, “whether or not it suits our own moral outlook. The only alternative seems to be a kind of inner exile.”<sup>451</sup> Ironic detachment is exactly this sort of inner exile, maintained with a smile and some degree of hope.

Both the contemporary ironist and the critics who lambaste the stance, then, aim to achieve the same end: an honest society and commitment to the common good, a better America, one that will not embarrass them. The younger contemporary figures mentioned, from Dave Eggers to Jedediah Purdy, who “both want a vibrant public life, and both seem frustrated by how a culture of passivity would preclude it,” as Elise Harris has written, to Jon Stewart, the *Simpsons*, and Robin Williams, are not attempting to wreck the social fabric, but to prod it into betterment, to push it further into a vision of what counts as the good society.

But whereas the ironist sees the “present age” as something not measuring up to his ideas of what social life and culture could be (that is, he is most often a progressive), the critic of irony sees it as *the cause of* the uneasiness in social life (that is, he is conservative insofar as he wants to retain the models and forms of citizenship of the past). The latter believes that without the ironist character, we would “no longer fail to take things seriously.” For the ironist who is committed to social and political change through satire

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<sup>450</sup> C. Thirwall, p. 434.

<sup>451</sup> Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 97.

and Diogenes-like critique, taking things “seriously,” in a culture widely perceived to be corrupted by insincerity, power, egoism, and greed, can only be done (as Oscar Wilde believed) through irony—the last of the Romantic weapons in his arsenal.

This, he believes, is the irrevocable device he retains to avoid sacrificing the integrity of individual judgment and setting oneself up to be “taken for a sucker.” It will help him avoid, as Adorno asserted, “having one’s existence used” by a social world that seems often to espouse the logic of selfish individualism and survival at all costs. The ironist, far from being the evidentiary being that willfully corrodes society, in fact, withholds his trust from a society undeserving of it. He holds dearly and implicitly the ultimately Protestant values of sincerity and authenticity. Yet in a world that seems to value the opposite, he must express these values oppositely, through irony and satire. He takes inward recourse from the social world. And as he traverses inward, he takes his trust with him.

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- Ronald Jay Magill, Jr., 17/10/2006



# Ronald Jay Magill, Jr.

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## **Lebenslauf**

### **Persönliches**

Ronald Jay Magill, Jr.  
M.A. Art History and Criticism  
z.Zt. Promotionsstudium im Fachbereich Sprache, Literatur und Kultur Nordamerikas, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Hamburg; freiberuflicher Autor, Illustrator, Redakteur  
geboren am 2.1.1972 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (PA), USA  
ledig

### **Schulbildung**

1977-80 Grundschole Pine Road Elementary in Huntington Valley, PA  
1980-83 Grundschole Woodlawn Elementary in Willow Grove, PA  
1983-86 Upper Moreland Middle School, Willow Grove, PA  
1986-90 Upper Moreland High School mit Abschluß des Baccalaureate, Willow Grove, PA

### **Studium**

1990-94 Studium Fine Arts and Philosophy an der Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A.)  
1995-97 Studium Art History and Criticism an der State University of New York at Stony Brook, Master of Arts (M.A.)  
2002-heute Promotionsstudium im Fachbereich SLuK Nordamerikas, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Hamburg, Dissertationsthema: Romantic Irony and Civic Trust in the American Mind

### **Berufliche Vita**

2/1995-2/1997 Künstler und PR Assistent, Borders Buchhandlung, Stony Brook, NY  
9/1999-1/2002 Lektor und Redakteur, *DoubleTake* Magazine, Somerville, Massachusetts (MA)  
9/2000-2/2001 Lehrbeauftragter, "Literature of Social Reflection," Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Preisträger: Derek Bok Award for Distinction in Teaching  
1/2002-1/2005 Chefredakteur und Lektor, *DoubleTake* Magazine, Somerville, MA  
2005-heute freiberuflicher Autor, Illustrator, und Redakteur

### **Lehrerfahrung**

9/1992-5/1993 Tutor in Logik und Philosophie, Kutztown University  
1989-1993 Junior Teaching Assistant in Philosophie, Cape May Institute  
1/1997-5/1997 Teaching Assistant, Kunstgeschichte 102, SUNY-Stony Brook  
3/1999-7/1999 Lehrbeauftragter an der Universität Lüneburg (Deutschland), Fremdsprachenzentrum, Seminare für Grund- und Hauptstudium: *American Art since 1945*, *Political Topics*, *Basic English Conversation*  
9/2000-1/2001 Teaching Fellow für Dr. Robert Coles, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; *Derek Bok Award for Distinction in Teaching*  
9/2001 Lecturer, "How to Use Reflection in Volunteer Work," Harvard University Public Service Leadership Summit

## Sonstiges

Sommer 1994 Bibliotheksassistent, Yale University Medical Library, New Haven, CT  
Sommer 1995 Dissertationsassistent, SUNY-Stony Brook, NY

## Fremdsprachen

Deutsch

## Ernennungen

9/1991-5/1993 Präsident, Kutztown University Philosophy Association  
9/1996-5/1997 Staff Cartoonist, *Stony Brook Statesman* (Zeitung)  
9/1996-5/1997 Präsident, Art History and Criticism Lecture series (SUNY)  
9/1996-5/1997 Managing Editor, *Art Criticism* (Herausgeber: Prof. Dr. Donald Kuspit)

## Vorträge

4/2005 "Working in Alternative Publishing," Emerson College, Boston, MA  
3/2004 "Documentary Work and the Magazine," University of Michigan  
3/2004 "Doing Documentary Work in Publishing," Antioch New England  
2/1997 "Symbolism and Post-Impressionism," SUNY-Stony Brook  
4/1997 "Signs of Subjectivity," National Zephyrus Conference for Medieval Art  
6/1997 "Andrea Zittel/Bad Irony," Universität Lüneburg (Deutschland)

## Veröffentlichungen

*Bücher:* *Chic Ironic Bitterness: The Intellectual History of A Fashionable American Attitude*  
(University of Michigan Press, Herbst 2007)

### *Magazin Artikel:*

1/2007 "Thievery Corporation," *Print Magazine*, January 2007  
10/2006 politische Cartoons, *The American Interest*, October-November 2006  
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9/2001 "Drawing Connections," *The American Prospect*, Vol. 12, Issue 17  
1999-2004 Buch- und Filmkritiken für *DoubleTake Magazine* und DoubleTake online  
2000 Essays, politische Cartoons für *The Saucepot Review*, (Web site)  
2000 politische Cartoons für Center for Popular Economics Web site  
4/2000 politische Cartoons für *The Ultimate Field Guide to the U.S. Economy* (New Press) von Professor Nancy Folbre, MacArthur Preisträger  
10/1998 Editorials, politische Cartoons, Universität Lüneburg Zeitschrift *Univativ*  
10/1998 Übersetzung für Kunstausstellungskatalog, *Liquid Beauty*, Lüneburger Kunstverein  
9/1998 politische Cartoons für *Laughing Stock*, United for a Fair Economy  
1998 politische Cartoons, *Stuff Magazine*, Boston, MA  
1998-2000 politische Cartoons, *Z magazine*. Woods Hole, MA  
7/1997 Cartoons, Universität Lüneburg Zeitung, *Univativ* (Deutschland)  
9/1996-5/1997 Wöchentliche editoriale cartoons, *Stony Brook Statesman*, SUNY  
9/1996 National cartoon Schilder für Borders Books and Music, Inc.  
9/1995-1/1997 Designs und Cartoons für Borders Books and Music, Stony Brook, NY

### **Interviews/Artikel**

- 6/2005            *Afterimage* (University of Rochester), Interview als ehemaliger Chefredakteur des *DoubleTake* Magazine
- 1/2005            *Print Magazine*, als Chefredakteur/Editorial zur Neuerscheinung des *DoubleTake*
- 5/2004            *Poets & Writers Magazine*, als Chefredakteur *DoubleTake*
- 5/2004            *Harvard Crimson* (June 7<sup>th</sup> Commencement Edition), als Chefredakteur *DoubleTake*

### **Website**

[www.rjaymagill.com](http://www.rjaymagill.com)  
[www.directoryofillustration.com/rjaymagill](http://www.directoryofillustration.com/rjaymagill)