CHAPTER 1

Irony and Psychoanalytic Theory

Irony, Freud said, "can be understood without any need for bring-ing in the unconscious."[1] In accord with this opinion, Freud did not devote much attention to irony in his psychological writings, and it receives only two brief discussions in his entire corpus, both occurring in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.[2] Irony, therefore, never became a category in the psychoanalytic litera-ture, and it has been passed over by most of Freud's successors, with the notable exceptions of Theodor Reik and Edmund Bergler.

This result ought to surprise us. For irony, in the sense of what is often called "verbal irony," occurs as a phenomenon of every-day behavior; and in psychoanalytic doctrine no human behavior exists solely in the plane of light, free from the influence of the unconscious. Some people, indeed, resort to irony characteristi-cally, invariably, even neurotically; we have all encountered the person who is not free *not* to speak ironically. It is in such individ-uals that we see how deeply rooted irony can be in character and, therefore, how intimate the connection is between irony and the unconscious determinants of character. Among these individuals we must surely list some of our greatest writers: Swift, Austen, Borges, Gogol, Hoffmann.

Why did Freud ignore the unconscious roots of irony? To answer this question, let us look at the major part of Freud's dis-cussion of irony:

> Its essence lies in saying the opposite of what one intends to convey to the other person, but in sparing him contradiction by making him understand—by one's tone of voice, by some accompanying gesture, or (where writing is concerned) by some small stylistic indications—that one means the opposite of what one says. Irony can only be employed when the other person is prepared to hear the opposite, so that he cannot fail to feel an inclination to contradict. As a result of this condition, irony is

exposed particularly easily to the danger of being misunderstood. It brings the person who uses it the advantage of enabling him readily to evade the difficulties of direct expression, for instance in invective. It produces comic pleasure in the hearer, probably because it stirs him into a contradictory expenditure of energy which is at once recognized as being unnecessary.[3]

What emerges from this passage is that Freud takes an essentially rhetorical view of irony—naturally enough, since the very concept comes to us from the rhetorical tradition. Freud treats irony here exactly as a traditional rhetorician might: it appears as a rationally chosen technique by which a speaker attempts to communicate an intended message to a particular audience. To the question of why choose a fancy, roundabout means of expression—one that is "marked," to use the linguistic term—Freud also gives a traditional answer. Essentially the speaker gains two advantages by using irony. From her own point of view, she is able "readily to evade the difficulties of direct expression, for instance in invectives." The difficulties Freud is speaking of here seem to be external—"real"—ones, such as those arising from political censorship. And although in one of his most famous metaphors Freud compares political censorship and the barrier erected by the ego to keep unacceptable thoughts from consciousness,[4] here Freud refuses any comparison between difficulties that might arise because of the speaker's real external situation and those that might be posed by the ego's own internal defense system—which, in its effort to repress or disavow "dangerous" ideas, will seek to deny them any kind of direct, overt expression. Freud could have followed such a path into the unconscious of the ironist, but he did not; this is, of course, precisely the approach we will try to take. As for the second advantage Freud attributes to the use of irony—its pleasurable effect on the auditor—Freud restates the traditional idea that a speaker uses irony, among other available rhetorical devices, to make what he says more striking, more memorable; but Freud unpacks this commonplace by speculating on the exact psychological mechanism by which irony achieves its pleasurable effect on the auditor.

If even Freud himself was not able to move from a rhetorical to a truly psychoanalytic understanding of irony, then we can understand how powerfully the rhetorical model dominates our idea of this phenomenon. Certainly this dominance has been evi-

dent in literary studies, as we can see from two of the standard works on irony published in the last twenty-five years, D. C. Muecke's *The Compass of Irony* and Wayne C. Booth's *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Booth's point of view is evident from the title he has chosen, and he makes explicit that he is "attempting only a rhetoric of irony—not a psychology or sociology or metaphysics or ethics of irony."[5] Working within the rhetorical model, a critic may deal with both the speaker and the auditor (and indeed, with any of the other components of linguistic communication, such as code, message, contact, or context—to list the four that Jakobson adds to "addresser" and "addressee"),[6] and we see that Freud, for example, in the passage just quoted focuses on both the producer and the consumer of irony. Booth, however, turns his particular attention to the audience: he especially wants to investigate how the reader knows that an utterance is ironic and how the reader finds her way back to the speaker's intended meaning that lies behind the rhetorical cover. Indeed, in many ways, Booth's work is a semiotic investigation of "code," and as such it remains relatively uninterested in the producer of irony—who would, of course, tend to be the focus of a psychoanalytic investigation.

Muecke's book is more wide ranging, but when he takes up verbal irony, he, too, stays within a rhetorical perspective: "Verbal Irony implies an ironist, someone consciously and intentionally employing a technique," he says, and adds that "talking about Verbal Irony means talking about the ironist's techniques and strategies."[7] Muecke also gives an essentially rhetorical view when he explains why someone might resort to irony in the first place:

> Irony may be used as a rhetorical device to enforce one's meaning. It may be used . . . as a satiric device to attack a point of view or to expose folly, hypocrisy, or vanity. It may be used as an heuristic device to lead one's readers to see that things are not so simple or certain as they seem, or perhaps not so complex or doubtful as they seem. It is probable that most irony is rhetorical, satirical, or heuristic.[8]

The rhetorical model on which Muecke and Booth base their discussions of irony is, it goes without saying, fruitful in a great many ways; but it also obscures important aspects of verbal irony. The reason is evident enough. In this rhetorical model, an ironic utterance is essentially viewed as the transformation of another, more primary statement. The irony is a kind of added step—a

technique or strategy—by which the "original" statement is converted into its negative or (in more artful forms of irony) into some statement that more or less contradicts the original meaning. But this assumption about verbal irony, implicit in the traditional rhetorical model, contradicts an important aspect of irony as we encounter it in everyday speech. Most ironic utterances—I would venture to say—strike us not as a transformation of another remark but rather as original or primary utterances that also admit of a secondary and contradictory interpretation and, indeed, insist that we focus on this secondary interpretation. To be sure, in analyzing irony, one is naturally tempted to assume that the production and the reception of irony are two mirror-image processes—much as the cryptographic encoding and decoding of a pregiven message (to use a metaphor from some linguistic models) appear as symmetrically reversed procedures. Such a model helps us to deal with the contradictoriness of verbal irony by breaking it into two distinct moments; and of course such a model might be necessary if one actually wanted to demonstrate to another person how to produce an ironic statement. But (except perhaps in the most obvious sarcasms) do we not sense, in encountering verbal irony, that the contradictoriness, often so difficult to analyze neatly into its components, has existed from the very moment of inception of the ironic utterance? If we do, then we cannot be satisfied with a rhetorical model that views irony as a kind of secondary transformation; such a model will have missed the true origin of irony.

The rhetorical model, after all, is not constructed so as to account for contradictory human intentions. It assumes on the part of the speaker a pregiven intention (or a set of prereconciled intentions) that the speaker then carries out by means of certain linguistic and rhetorical operations. Thus, a rhetorical phenomenon like verbal irony must be analyzed in such a way that it correlates with some form of unitary intention, and if irony seems to produce two more or less contradictory meanings (and thus intentions), then the meanings must be separated into two different moments and placed in some kind of hierarchy, so that one intention is clearly primary and the other ultimately derivable from the primary one. The speaker cannot have started out (i.e., entered into the rhetorical model) with self-contradictory intentions.

One obvious result of this kind of analysis is that a speaker cannot "really mean" everything that she is saying. The literal

level of the ironic statement must be explained away as a transformation of the original, underlying utterance, so that one of the meanings that actually emerges from the ironic statement must be subsequently denied as constituting an intended meaning of the utterance. Psychoanalysis invariably takes a quite different point of view. By appealing to the unconscious, it finds meaning even where no consciously intended meaning is evident. And indeed, its suspicions are particularly aroused when the existence of intended meaning is denied with respect to anything that a human being says or does. So the very fact that in encountering irony, in trying to resolve the confusion it presents us with, we tend to look through the surface meaning, as if we were trying to render it transparent—this very fact, which indeed is reflected in the rhetorical model of irony, will make the psychoanalytically minded critic insist all the more that this surface or literal meaning is just as much intended by the ironist as is the meaning "concealed" by the irony. By assuming that a person means everything that she says, psychoanalysis can stay open to meanings that tend to be lost in a rhetorical analysis.

Psychoanalysis, moreover, in dealing with the contradictory intentions represented by the opposed meanings of an ironic statement, does not need to rationalize them into some unitary intention, with the various distortions that such a rationalization is bound to entail. On the contrary, psychoanalysis insists that human phenomena are invariably the product of contradictory impulses and that careful analysis of the product will reveal the opposing elements that entered into its making. Irony is obviously a phenomenon that exhibits contradictory elements in its makeup, and one could suppose that it would best be served by a method of analysis that expects and can account for such contradictoriness.

As a final reason for turning from a rhetorical to a psychoanalytic view of irony, we can surely suppose that if indeed verbal irony appears in some human beings as a deep-rooted, characteristic mode of behavior, then the purposes it serves can in no way be limited to traditional rhetorical ones like those exemplified in the above passages by Muecke and even by Freud. Those purposes are realistically oriented toward the audience of the ironic statement, but there are doubtless other purposes that are aimed not at the ironist's real environment but rather at internal conflicts that the ironist wishes somehow to solve. Psychoanalysis, with its

powerful analytic concept of the unconscious, can help us better understand the genesis and meaning of verbal irony by exposing those other, internal purposes that irony is meant to serve.

So long as rhetoric assumes an essentially linguistic model of communication, it is bound to ignore those aspects of ironic speech that result, at least in part, from unconscious motives having little to do with rational purposes of communication. This limitation would certainly characterize, for example, Paolo Valesio's attempt to rethink the theory of rhetoric, because he essentially views rhetoric as the science that describes the "functional, discursive structure" of any utterance and, therefore, as a kind of higher-order linguistics (or as a component of "general linguistics").[9] There may, of course, be other ways to conceive rhetoric. For example, the term sometimes seems to refer simply to a study of tropes and figures, in which case the traditional "rhetorical" approach (based on the model of a speaker trying to persuade an audience) might be only one of several approaches actually brought to bear on the subject.

The work of Group μ (Jacques Dubois et al.) could be assimilated to a rhetoric defined in this manner; and indeed, among theoreticians of rhetoric, the members of Group μ have been the most successful in avoiding the difficulties that I have claimed inhere in a rhetorical approach to irony. For example, in their discussion of irony and related tropes, they bring up the Freudian concept of 'negation' (whereby, for instance, a patient says *sua sponte*, "Of course, I don't hate my father," but unconsciously means that he *does* hate his father—the negation being irrelevant to the unconscious, while serving to disguise the unconscious meaning from the patient's conscious awareness); and indeed, they posit the existence of "a rhetoric of the unconscious," "a rhetoric that escapes the speaker."[10] Yet other than to classify Freudian negation with irony, the members of Group μ do not try to explain what inherent, causal connections these two phenomena might have, nor do they otherwise exploit their insight.

This same stopping short can also be seen in a later work by the same group in which they take a critical commonplace about metaphor and perceptively transfer it to irony as well. The commonplace, in Paul Ricoeur's elegant and uncommon formulation, is that "the impossible literal interpretation is not simply abolished by the metaphorical interpretation but submits to it while resisting."[11] Of irony, Group μ writes: "Let us make clear first of

all that the encoder, when he states *x*, does not give up the idea of making us understand *x* as well as *not-x*. To neglect this polysemous intention, this wish to assume two isotopies at the same time, would lead us to confuse rhetoric and simple transcoding (with a cryptographic function, for example) and to fall back into the idea that the 'figurative sense' is only an ornamental translation of the 'proper sense.'"[12] This point has more readily been made about metaphor than about irony because we are not particularly troubled by the idea that a statement can mean two different (but not contradictory) things. Group μ takes the next step, and yet the authors don't fully acknowledge the radicalness of their move—as if it doesn't matter whether "polysemous" refers to merely different or to contradictory meanings. As with traditional rhetorical models, they simply accept as a given the intention with which a speaker enters the rhetorical situation, even when they imply that this "intention" can be two contradictory intentions. They critique the model of coding and decoding, and yet the language of that model is still the language they use.

Several recent discussions of irony within the field of linguistics (or within the neighboring field of the philosophy of language) have attempted to extend the analysis of irony offered by rhetoric proper, and in some cases they have produced notable insights. But as with rhetorical analyses that rely on an essentially linguistic model of communication, linguistics ultimately butts up against the limitations of its methods and assumptions: in focusing on communication, which at least in the ideal requires univocal meaning, linguistics looks past any ambivalence on the part of the speaker—although, as I hope to make clear, this ambivalence has tremendous influence on the linguistic product we designate as irony.

Of these linguistic discussions, two stand out. The first is a 1981 article by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, "Irony and the Use-Mention Distinction."[13] Sperber and Wilson recall the logical distinction between "use" and "mention" ("USE of an expression involves reference to what the expression refers to; MENTION of an expression involves reference to the expression itself" [303]) and then argue that an ironical proposition is not actually being "used" by the speaker but only "mentioned." Ironical utterances, therefore, are "semantically distinguishable from cases where the same proposition is used in order to make an assertion, ask a question, and so on" (316). Of course, what makes these cases of

mention *ironical* is the fact that they "are interpreted as echoing a remark or opinion that the speaker wants to characterize as ludicrously inappropriate or irrelevant" (310).

At the simplest level, mention is indicated in writing by the use of quotation marks: if I want to refer to a word *as a word*— and not to the thing it stands for—I can put it in quotation marks (e.g., if I wanted to discuss the history of the word "irony"); or if I want to refer to an entire statement that someone else has made, and at the same time wish to make clear that I am not myself making this statement, I can put it in quotation marks, generally with a "he said" tag of some kind. Sperber and Wilson claim that irony involves precisely this kind of mention, except that the mention is generally implicit rather than explicit; in other words, it is not accompanied by any formal sign that the statement is being mentioned rather than used. According to their theory, the following exchange from *Pride and Prejudice*, cited by the authors, would be paradigmatic of all irony; the speakers here are Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet:

> "You take an eager interest in that gentleman's concerns," said Darcy in a less tranquil tone, and with a heightened colour.
> "Who that knows what his misfortunes have been, can help feeling an interest in him?"
> "His misfortunes!" repeated Darcy contemptuously; "yes, his misfortunes have been great indeed."[14]

Sperber and Wilson do not, of course, believe that all examples of irony involve so obvious a case of mention; as they explain, "some are immediate echoes, and others delayed; some have their source in actual utterances, others in thoughts and opinions; some have a real source, others an imagined one; some are traceable back to a particular individual, whereas others have a vaguer origin" (309–10).

The insight that the ironist is echoing the words or thoughts of another person is an exceptionally fruitful one, and in fact, it was enunciated many years ago by the analyst Theodor Reik. But the linguistic version of this insight, as Sperber and Wilson expound it, is deficient in at least one regard. If I wanted to "mention" someone else's words (in order to indicate that I find them irrelevant, inappropriate, or foolish), why would I resort to *implicit* rather than explicit mention? Why would I leave ambiguous the issue of whether I was actually using the proposition or

simply mentioning it? This is the problem that Sperber and Wilson's theory cannot really deal with. The problem can be seen in a particularly interesting form in literary irony that is associated with free indirect discourse, as literary irony often is. Sperber and Wilson claim that their theory will help to explain this association, since free indirect discourse involves precisely the mention of another person's words or thoughts. But again, the authors ignore a critical aspect of their example, that in free indirect discourse the author purposely obscures the fact that the narrative utterance does not really belong to the narrator.

Sperber and Wilson are attempting to evade the logical difficulties that arise when we say that a statement either figuratively means, or else conversationally implicates (to use the formulation of H. P. Grice),[15] the opposite of what it literally says. But ultimately they resort to the same maneuver that rhetoric has always used in trying to solve this problem: the ironist does not really mean what she is saying—she is, in Sperber and Wilson's formulation, only "mentioning" the proposition. Yet the very fact that irony is so often misunderstood suggests that ironists themselves do not always issue an unambiguous disclaimer. The question is, why not? And unless one simply wants to remain with the practical response that ironists are trying to say what could not be said publicly, only psychoanalysis can satisfactorily deal with this question.[16]

The linguist whose work on irony shows the most subtle appreciation of its nuances, probably because of her attention to the literal level of the ironic statement, is Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni; and her two articles on irony constitute the other important linguistic discussion that requires some comment here.[17] Kerbrat-Orecchioni, for example, recognizes more fully than do Sperber and Wilson and most traditional analyses that "ambiguity is distinctively constitutive of irony."[18] And in expanding this point, she takes a position reminiscent of Group μ's: "That is why an ironic sequence is never equivalent to its literal translation. In this regard, irony is related to the trope, whose smooth functioning implies, similarly, the recognition of two superposed semantic levels, neither of which must obscure the other."[19] Unfortunately, in trying to account for the fact that "irony is justified only to the extent that it remains at least partially ambiguous," Kerbrat-Orecchioni resorts to a bland rhetorical explanation: "what advantage would there be in speaking ironically if we are only

going to immediately correct the range and specify what we *really* want to say?"[20]

Nevertheless, by insisting that the literal level of an ironic statement does not simply disappear, Kerbrat-Orecchioni is able to pay more attention to it than it usually receives. She notes, for example, that irony effects "a reversal of the usual hierarchy of semantic levels: as soon as it is identified, the derived value finds itself promoted to the rank of denotative value, while the literal sense finds itself degraded in the form of a connoted trace."[21] And she observes an interesting aspect of the literal level in "citational irony" (she believes that only some cases of irony involve the echoic mention that Sperber and Wilson find typical of all irony): just as irony often allows the ironist to evade moral or political censure and say things that can not be said openly, "in citational irony we can see a similar transgressive aspect, except that here it is the literal sense, and not the insinuated sense, which for the speaker is affected by a certain taboo: the perverse pleasure of using a feint to appropriate words that at the same time one violently impugns, and thereby of being able to say things that one forbids oneself from saying."[22] It must be added, however, that Kerbrat-Orecchioni does not develop either of these significant insights in any systematic way; as is particularly evident in the case of the second observation (but as we will see, is also true of the first), she would need a psychological framework in order to do so.

It is precisely this shift in framework that the present study will undertake. Obviously, it cannot do without the insights of rhetoric and linguistics—on the contrary. But it will attempt to demonstrate that only by bringing in the findings, and indeed the fundamental point of view, of psychoanalysis can we reach a fully adequate understanding of verbal irony.

In speaking about irony, we have so far been using the term to describe a phenomenon that is often labeled more narrowly as "verbal irony" or "rhetorical irony." If we consider the history of the term *irony*, we will see why, for the purposes of the present investigation, it is necessary to restrict our use of the term to this most traditional meaning and to leave out of consideration some of the extensions that the term has undergone during the last two centuries.

From at least the writings of Quintilian until around the middle of the eighteenth century, the term *irony* seems to have been

used in Europe in predominantly one basic sense: saying the opposite of what one means, usually in order to blame through praise or to praise through blame.[23] Quintilian, for example, in his most extended discussion of irony, says that in irony "contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est" [we understand something which is the opposite of what is actually said].[24] This sense of the word *irony* persists in major European languages such as English, German, French, and Russian, though it is now joined by a number of other meanings as well.[25] We may think of it as the basic rhetorical sense of the concept.[26]

Beginning in the latter part of the eighteenth century, however, this basic sense was extended in a number of different directions. The German romantics, especially, went far beyond any rhetorical definition, relying in part on the Greek use of the term *eirōneia* to describe Socrates' pretense of ignorance in the dialogues (a use that is actually older than the rhetorical sense of the word). Friedrich Schlegel, in one of his *Lyceum* fragments, writes:

> Die Philosophie ist die eigentliche Heimat der Ironie, welche man logische Schönheit definieren möchte . . . Freilich gibts auch eine rhetorische Ironie, welche sparsam gebraucht vortreffliche Wirking tut, besonders im Polemischen; doch ist sie gegen die erhabne Urbanität der sokratischen Muse, was die Pracht der glänzendsten Kunstrede gegen eine alte Tragödie in hohem Styl.
>
> [Philosophy is the true home of irony, which might be defined as logical beauty . . . It is true, there is also a rhetorical irony which, if sparingly used, performs a very excellent function, especially in polemics, but compared to the lofty urbanity of the Socratic muse, rhetorical irony is like the splendor of the most brilliant oratory compared to ancient high tragedy.][27]

As this passage illustrates, irony in Schlegel's hands could easily be made to exceed its rhetorical brief and to become instead a more highly charged, but much vaguer, term of general approbation ("logical beauty"). This trend has continued into our own century, for example, in the New Critical use of the term *irony,* and thus we find Cleanth Brooks claiming that "irony is our most general term for indicating that recognition of incongruities— which, again, pervades all poetry to a degree far beyond what our conventional criticism has been heretofore willing to allow."[28]

In *The Concept of Irony,* Kierkegaard joined Schlegel in rejecting a merely rhetorical understanding of irony, but he

extended the term in a somewhat different, and much more specific, direction than did Schlegel. In discussing the *Phaedo*, for example, Kierkegaard tells us that the "ironic ornamentations scattered throughout the dialogue . . . are able to be at most only a hint of the ultimate view that permeates the entire dialogue,"[29] and it is this ultimate view—rather than the "ornamentations" (i.e., the concrete instances of irony)—that Kierkegaard wishes to define as irony in the true sense, or as he calls it, irony "*sensu eminentiori*" (254). At this most fundamental level, irony "is directed not against this or that particular existing entity but against the entire given actuality at a certain time and under certain conditions" (254). Irony becomes a kind of existential stance or position, which Kierkegaard—picking up on a suggestion by Hegel—labels as "infinite absolute negativity" (254). The advantage to the ironist is freedom: "In irony, the subject is continually retreating, talking every phenomenon out of its reality in order to save itself—that is, in order to preserve itself in negative independence of everything" (257).

Unlike Schlegel and his New Critical descendants, Kierkegaard does not regard irony as the highest value. He is enough of a Hegelian to believe in a higher stage, in this case one in which irony is controlled or mastered and the ironist achieves a new relation to actuality; "what doubt is to science," Kierkegaard writes, "irony is to personal life" (326).

For all of its suggestiveness, Kierkegaard's philosophical elaboration of the "concept" of irony has severe limitations. The main problem is that in focusing on irony as negativity, he flattens out the doubleness that is surely the most salient and characteristic feature of irony. Thus, for example, he downplays the importance of dissimulation in irony (255–56); he is much more interested in the subjective pleasure that the ironist derives from her negative freedom than he is in the veiled and apparently contradictory manner in which she "asserts" this freedom. Indeed, Kierkegaard denies any real significance to the specifically ironic aspect of an ironic statement: "The ironic figure of speech cancels itself . . . inasmuch as the one who is speaking assumes that his hearers understand him" (248). This is a good observation, of course, insofar as it highlights the problem with the traditional understanding of rhetorical irony—the problem of explaining why someone would bother to use irony in the first place. But even if logic seems to suggest that the ironic statement cancels itself out,

surely our intuition suggests that something remains; and the point is to investigate exactly what this remnant is.[30]

In addition to the kinds of philosophical extension that may be seen in the work of Schlegel, Kierkegaard, and others, the term *irony* has also been much extended through various analogical developments; here we might place such terms as *dramatic irony* or the *irony of fate* (the latter of which lies behind the the popular usage: "it's ironic that . . ."). And as a result of both the philosophical and the analogical extensions, more than one critic has concluded, to quote Jonathan Tittler: "Irony has meant and means so many different things to different people that rarely is there a meeting of minds as to its particular sense on a given occasion."[31] There have, of course, been attempts to reintroduce a unified definition, as well as to enumerate the various senses that have been employed. Muecke's attempt at a definition—the most successful, in my view—is instructive:

> In the first place irony is a double-layered or two-storey phenomenon . . . In the second place there is always some kind of opposition between the two levels, an opposition that may take the form of contradiction, incongruity, or incompatibility . . . In the third place there is in irony an element of "innocence" . . . [32]

Muecke has been able to generalize a definition from the various uses of the term *irony* by removing the personal subject from his formulation—an effect that I have exaggerated by quoting only the first part of each of his three "essential elements" of irony. But if, in this investigation, we are going to look at irony as a form of behavior that can be analyzed in psychoanalytic terms, then we will need to put the personal subject back so that we can have an actor, an ironist to go with the ironic behavior. And when we put the ironist back into Muecke's formulation, we see that, essentially, we are back to the rhetorical model of irony (with the useful addition of the requirement that the ironist be, or pretend to be, innocent)—from which Muecke obviously had to abstract in the first place.

In other words, not only is verbal irony—the irony of the rhetorical tradition—the *historical* point of departure for various other definitions of irony, but it remains the conceptual model for them as well. It therefore has a certain claim to being the focus of any investigation of irony. In addition, as compared to the analogical extensions of the term *irony*, verbal irony gives us by far the

best chance to relate the phenomenon of irony to some concrete ironist (human ironist, I should say, given the concept of the 'irony of fate'). Only the philosophical extensions of the term offer a similar opportunity, but here too, for the purposes of this study, there are reasons for preferring a focus on verbal irony. For one thing, verbal irony is much easier to identify than are the more philosophical brands of irony, and therefore it is much easier to treat as a discrete, analyzable phenomenon of behavior. If the philosophical conceptions of irony actually stand for the cumulative effect of numerous smaller ironies, then we might as well start with an analysis of the smaller units, presumably the concrete verbal ironies. If they don't, if they refer instead to some kind of irreducible, overall view of life and art—as both Schlegel's and Kierkegaard's conceptions of irony seem to do—then we may find it hard to agree on what exactly characterizes this view; one example of this difficulty would be Kierkegaard's questionable focus on negativity rather than on doubleness in his account of irony (in his conception, irony is closer to doubt than, say, to lying). Then, too, in some philosophical conceptions irony becomes a kind of accolade that would apply so broadly—to all great writers, for example—that we would hardly know what it is we were trying to study (creativity, perhaps). Insofar as we are treating irony as a form of verbal behavior, we would surely do better to avoid the vaguer philosophical conceptions and restrict ourselves to the more carefully delimited phenomenon of verbal irony.

In addition to settling on a definition of irony to be used in the present study, we need to consider briefly the relation between irony as it appears in literature and irony that is used in ordinary speech. In the simplest case, such as the Austen passage given above, where literary dialogue simply imitates the irony of everyday speech, there is obviously no need to make a distinction. And even in more complicated instances, we will take the position here that there is no essential difference between ironic statements that occur in the two contexts. There are, however, heuristic reasons for focusing first on one context and then on the other.

In some respects, literary irony might seem to offer a clearer model for analysis. All verbal irony demands a split in the way that the speaker represents himself, but in literature this split often seems to be reified in the distinction we make between author and character: in an ironic statement, the character means

one thing and the author means something else. As we will see, however, the state of affairs is actually more complicated than this model would suggest. Indeed, since our approach demands that irony be related to a concrete ironist, as soon as we look at irony in literature we are immediately involved in the intricate and theoretically difficult problem of how the mediations—and pseudo-mediations—of fictional characters and fictional authors affect the relationship between author and work. (Muecke catches this problem nicely when he writes, "There are ... difficult cases, as in the *Canterbury Tales* for example, where we never know when the author is ironically feigning naïveté or when he is interposing between himself and us a naïve, ironized narrator."[33]) In addition, the question of treating all or part of a literary work as the verbal behavior of an author is so vexed that we must approach it in as cautious and well prepared a manner as possible. In these respects, we would do better to tackle the complexities of literary examples only after we have developed concepts and frames of reference based on simpler, "everyday" examples of verbal irony. I therefore begin, in the next section, with three instances of ordinary verbal irony (one perhaps controversially so) that will serve as paradigms for our analysis of irony.

On the other hand, the ultimate focus of this study will be on literary irony, for there is much that this kind of irony can teach us about the phenomenon of irony generally. The rich fantasies, conscious and unconscious, out of which all literary works are elaborated provide an abundance of information about the mind that has created the literary work; and if we proceed tactfully, we can usefully correlate the fantasies to be found in a work and the verbal irony that is a similar emanation of the mind of the author and that results, at least in part, from similar unconscious determinants. This procedure must find its justification in the insights it provides; I do, however, attempt some theoretical justification for it in chapter 2.

As for the particular literary works to be considered, I have chosen two: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Franz Kafka's *Der Prozess (The Trial)*. *Gulliver's Travels* is an obvious enough choice in that Swift is the acknowledged supreme master of traditional, rhetorical forms of verbal irony, and *Gulliver's Travels* is widely considered to be his greatest work. But *Gulliver's Travels* is appropriate for another reason, too: it is a work in which the infantile fantasies that help determine its shape are almost com-

pletely out in the open—in fact, they force themselves on us. What remains for us to do is to delineate the fantasies carefully and then try to connect them with the verbal irony that is an equally significant feature of the book. Kafka's *Trial*, on the other hand, is here because it is a hard case, a borderline example of the verbal irony we are analyzing; in showing how its irony diverges from the classical model of verbal irony exhibited in *Gulliver's Travels*, and why it might do so, we will attempt to extend the conclusions worked out in the chapter on Swift. Needless to say, *The Trial* is also here because the generality of our analysis of irony is well tested by the obvious differences between a work written by an Anglo-Irish clergyman and published in 1726 and one composed by a Jewish intellectual living in the German and Czech city of Prague in the first quarter of the twentieth century. And yet we will find that the impulse to irony found in *Gulliver's Travels* and *The Trial* correlates with important similarities between the fantasies present in the two books and between the plots in which those fantasies are elaborated.

THREE PARADIGMS OF IRONY

We begin this investigation by analyzing from our particular point of view two fairly ordinary instances of irony and a third example that can be interpreted to represent something that from a rhetorical point of view is impossible—unconscious irony. Here, then, is the first case: You walk into a colleague's office and glance down at the draft of a lecture he is writing; the handwriting looks like chicken scratches. "Why, I didn't know you knew shorthand!" you say.

When we think about what makes a statement ironic, we reach first for the formula, "saying the opposite of what one means." And second, we think of the paradigmatic instance of this reversal: seeming to praise, when one means to blame. Our first case illustrates, roughly, both of these formulas. But notice that your statement is not precisely the opposite of what you mean. If you mean to say, "You have an ugly, illegible handwriting," then the opposite would be a simpler statement than the one you have actually made: "Why, what a beautiful, legible handwriting you have!" Certainly we would also have classified this latter statement as ironic, but we would have labeled it as "sarcas-

tic" as well. What is the relationship between these two categories? When one is speaking sarcastically, then one generally does say exactly the opposite of what one means, and one also leaves absolutely no doubt—not even for the slightest moment—about what one means. On the other hand, ironic statements are usually more artful, in both senses of the word. As in our first example, they do not exist as one of two opposite poles; their exact location on the spectrum that includes, at one end, the "meaning that one actually intended" and, at the other, the opposite of this meaning is somewhat vague. In the second place, ironic statements generally do leave the listener with a momentary confusion about the precise meaning that the speaker intended. As we have seen, Freud emphasized, in his brief discussion of irony, precisely this tendency on the part of the auditor to misinterpret for an instant the speaker's true meaning. So, while we do not want to exclude sarcasm from the realm of irony, we need to see it as a limiting case on the very border of the ironic. It tends to lack that slight indeterminacy with which most ironic statements escape the easy formulation of saying the opposite of what one means.

How, then, *does* our example escape this easy formulation? Primarily by existing on several levels at once, on each one of which the truth value of the statement is somewhat different. Notice, for example, that at the most literal level, the statement you have made to your colleague is perfectly true: You did not know that he knew shorthand, and indeed you *could* not have known it, since—as you are perfectly aware—he doesn't know the first mark in the any shorthand system. But of course, your statement naturally suggests the extension, But I see now that you do know shorthand. This statement—one that is virtually included in the words you actually uttered—is false. But on the level of this statement, you are still not criticizing your colleague or his handwriting. You have credited him with an accomplishment that he does not possess; but on the other hand you do not mean to fault him for not having learned this skill. You have fabricated a lie, a fiction, whose denial would leave you in a zero position. You do not mean the opposite of what you have (virtually) said, and in the present context you would never have bothered to assert the opposite, true statement that, from what you can see, your colleague does not know shorthand. At this level, your statement seems to be a kind of gratuitous fiction that can be denied but whose denial would not really constitute any kind of relevant

assertion. Only at a third level do we find a real opposition between what you have said and what we may take you to mean. To get to this level, we need to take your statement one step backwards: I see that you know shorthand because I am looking at your draft and the marks there resemble shorthand strokes. Even at this level, the observation that lies at the heart of your exclamation is absolutely true: the marks on your colleague's draft *do* look like shorthand strokes. But you have drawn the "wrong" conclusion from this observation. The ordinary conclusion would be that your colleague has an illegible handwriting and merits at least some faint disapproval on account of his penmanship. You, however, have chosen a possible, but unlikely, interpretation of the evidence before your eyes. Here, at last, you are saying the opposite of what you mean. Of two possible conclusions you might draw, one would redound to your colleague's credit and the other to his discredit. The conclusions are in a sense opposites, since one logically excludes the other, and you have expressed the one that does not reflect your true opinion.

Notice, then, that this single piece of irony blends fact, fiction, and falsehood. At the deepest level you have spoken falsely: you have implied your belief in an opinion that you do not hold and that you do not expect anyone else to hold either. But you have uttered a statement that a legalist of the word could not indict as false. You have preserved what, in political life, we have learned to call "deniability." And whereas the ordinary observer would think of only one possible conclusion about your colleague's handwriting, you have invented an alternate explanation, a fiction, a possible world—and logically, this alternate explanation has just as much chance of being true as does the commonsense conclusion.

Indeed, suppose that your colleague answers, "Why, yes, as a matter of fact I do know shorthand. I learned it while I was working as a reporter for the *Times* of London. Most English journalists are required to use shorthand, you know." You have been caught in your irony, but you still have a modicum of protection. After all, your literal statement tended to affirm, rather than to deny, that your acquaintance knew shorthand; and he himself cannot actually contradict what you have said at the most literal levels. Your literal meanings have served to defend you against a frontal counterattack, since you can always claim, "What I (literally) said is what I meant." On the other hand, you also have

available an even more thoroughgoing defense, one that contradicts this first defense. For if, *in some sense* you did not mean what you said, and if your listener chooses to interpret your remark as if, in this sense, you did not mean what you said, then you can always claim not to have meant what you said in other senses as well: "Oh, I didn't really mean it. Actually, you have a very nice handwriting; it just struck me as unusual, that's all." In other words, once you and your listener have both admitted the principle that you might not have meant exactly what you said, then you may feel free to apply this principle in any way you want.

Both of these contradictory defenses are, of course, absolutely specious. Wayne Booth spends much of his book on the rhetoric of irony demonstrating that, in the case of what he calls "stable irony," we don't have any trouble at all interpreting exactly what the ironist intended to say, and certainly our present example would be an instance of stable irony. Yet as we will see, the presence of these possible defenses, however theoretical, and however specious from the point of view of commonsense linguistic experience, makes up an important part of the psychological structure of irony. At the unconscious level, the ironist is trying to have it both ways—in a manner explained quite clearly by Pechorin, Lermontov's super-self-conscious "hero of our time": "I never disclose my secrets myself, but I am awfully fond of having them divined, because that way I can always repudiate them if necessary."[34]

The last thing to notice about this first example of irony is that, in your exclamation to your colleague, you have presented yourself as a kind of naïf. To some extent, this naïf is aware of his ignorance. He is surprised to learn something that he didn't know, and at the moment of his enlightenment he is even a little surprised at his previous ignorance; he probably should have been aware that his colleague knew shorthand. But of course the naïf is much more benighted than he realizes. He has such a simple, unquestioning faith in his colleague's potency and accomplishments that he perverts the evidence of his eyes and strains to reach a conclusion that might credit, rather than criticize, his acquaintance. The naïve speaker is, of course, a staple of literary irony; Lemuel Gulliver comes to mind as a prime example. But in literature the naïve speaker ordinarily becomes a character in his or her own right. Even when the naïve speaker is not a well-defined character, as readers we want to distinguish this speaker from the knowing author, and we will do what we can to visualize this speaker as

someone different from the author. In the present case, no such easy distinction is possible. In everyday life, we do not ordinarily distinguish different people within a single speaking voice. On the other hand, if we take this everyday instance of irony as paradigmatic, then we can see that literature, when it creates naïve speakers, develops in extreme form a tendency that characterizes irony generally. In the case we are examining, we seemed to have a simple instance of one person using ironic indirection to criticize, to attack if you will, another person. But even here the ironic critique turns out to depend on the speaker's pose of naïveté. This feature, in fact, tends to characterize irony generally.

Why should a person who speaks ironically tend to cast himself as a naïf? Surely considerations of self-defense play a role here, as they did when we looked at the curious mixture of truth and falsehood in an ironic statement. In the present example, the need for defense is obvious—more obvious, indeed, than in most instances of irony. You have attacked your colleague without any mediation except what your irony itself provides. In *The Compass of Irony*, Muecke distinguishes between the "object of irony"—the person or institution that the ironist is actually attacking—and the "victim of irony"—the person who hears or reads the ironic remark and who might conceivably be taken in by it.[35] But in the present case, the object and the victim are the same person, and the object of your attack cannot fail to hear your criticism, unless he misinterprets your irony. There is no three-part structure here, as, for example, Freud discerned in the structure of tendentious jokes. According to Freud, when a person tells a dirty joke, his immediate audience is the innocent bystander who will derive pleasure from it; but for its effect the joke requires also an ultimate, though absent, audience—namely, the woman at whose expense the joke is being told.[36] This three-part structure would certainly be typical of much irony as well, especially literary irony; the person or type of person being attacked might well read an ironic work, but the irony does not depend on anyone's empirical knowledge that this person has actually received the poison-pen letter that the ironist has sent. On the other hand, this person certainly belongs necessarily to the structure of the irony, and in some respects the ironist certainly wants her message to get through to this person. It is this fact that the present case makes clear. Irony can dispense with the innocent bystander; it can show only a two-part structure, consisting of the ironist and the person