

CHAPTER ONE

PROLOGUE

OF IRONY AND EMPIRE

One day a poor man who had only a piece of bread to eat was walking by a restaurant in the village. In front of the restaurant, barbecues were smoking away cooking mechoui for the noon meal. The poor fellow looked longingly at the lamb roasting on the grills. Famished, he held his dry bread in the smoke over the meat to give it a hint of the smell before he ate it.

The restaurant owner, furious, rushed out to demand payment for the smell of the meat. But the poor man was broke. The case was taken to Joha, acting village judge. The restaurant owner explained the theft.

After some thought, Joha took three dinars from his pocket, cupped them in his hands and jingled them together by the restaurant owner's ear.

"Case closed," said Joha.

"How do you figure that?" asked the restaurant owner.

"The smell of meat paid for by the sound of money," answered Joha. Now go back to work.

In villages across North Africa and the Middle East, Joha stories are told as families sit on the terrace on hot summer evenings or around the *kanoun* wrapped in blankets on cold winter nights. They are told in coffee shops early in the morning, and it doesn't take a great stretch of the imagination to characterize the poor man as a peasant or a worker, the restaurant owner as a

colonial official, a comprador capitalist, or a World Bank expert, and Joha as the “Arab street.” As narrative expressions of a Muslim social imaginary, these stories reflect ideas of distributive justice, offer examples of the folly of humankind, and with their ironic turns, string the audience along only to make them laugh at their own assumptions in the end. In the story of the smell of meat and the sound of money, Joha metes out a form of justice that is exactly fit to the case, using irony as an equalizer. For better or for worse, we all belong to the tribe of *Beni Adam* (Everyman).

But irony does not always inhabit the land of wisdom. In imperial hands, irony was a tool of contempt, sarcasm, or ridicule. Employed by speakers who thought they lived at a distance from this world, irony was used to target the victims of their scrutiny and abuse. The fathers of colonial ethnopsychiatry, such as Antoine Porot in North Africa and British-trained South African J. C. Carothers in Kenya, maintained that the natives were incapable of the kind of reflection upon which irony depends. “The normal African” in Carothers’ view, was a “lobotomized European” (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 302) and in Porot’s view “the native of North Africa . . . is a primitive creature whose life [is] essentially vegetative and instinctive” (300), and Joha and his Muslim tribe were found, by a subsequent generation of French experts in psychological warfare, to “[lack] a critical spirit” and to be unable to “tolerate irony” (Keller 281).¹

Negative irony, that satirical detachment associated with imperial power, is largely unironic given its lack of self-reflexivity. I argue here that irony as the trope based on dialectical relationships is able to translate the relativity of our epistemologies, and by that very fact, opens the way to new understandings. The dialectical framework used in this study is not a teleological Hegelian form based on some ultimate unity, rather it is an open system of the sort Fanon embraced. As Ato Sekyi-Otu explains in his study of Fanon’s prose, this dialectical thought process brings into question both the tropes we use and the social imaginaries² in which they occur, thus opening the way for continual reassessment and new possibilities. To the question, “What then does it mean to read Fanon’s texts as if they constituted a dialectical dramatic narrative?” Sekyi-Otu replies:

It means, first, that relationships between utterance and proposition, representation and truth, enacted practice and authorial advocacy, are rendered quite problematic. It means, furthermore, that an utterance or a representation or a practice we encounter in a text is to be considered not as a discrete and conclusive event, but rather as a strategic and self-revising act set in motion by changing circumstances and perspectives, increasingly intricate configurations of experience. (5)

Of Irony and Empire looks at how our social imaginaries—our ways of making sense of the practices of our societies—are shaped by the rhetorical figures we use. It examines the transcultural experience of modernity, both linguistic and material, as it has invented that part of contemporary Africa which includes the largely Muslim countries surrounding the Sahara desert and the people who inhabit this region.³ The histories of colonialism, resistance, nationalism, and postcolonial globalization in these countries, from 1914 to the present, provide illustrative cases of what Frantz Fanon called “sociogeny,” the social origin of things often attributed to individual invention, on the one hand, or natural causes, on the other. The social imaginary of this region is grounded in Muslim codes of behavior and conduct, as Jean Déjeux explained in his study *Le Sentiment religieux dans la littérature maghrébine de langue française*:

Most Maghrebian writers, born into Muslim families, consider themselves Muslim in this sense of (shared) “Islamness,” without this having any eventual bearing on their possible faith in a transcendent God, in their indifference to or their involvement in religious practice. Their unconscious mind and imagination were steeped and formed in a Maghrebian cultural context that is Islamic and not French or otherwise. (27)⁴

Muslim social imaginaries, while varied across this region of Africa, for example, provide a reservoir of beliefs that shapes attitudes at an unspoken level, gives legitimacy to certain ways of thinking about and assigning legitimacy to things, and is tied to historical developments, in the same ways a Western social imaginary anchored in a Protestant work ethic might be. In explaining the title of his recent book *Muslim Narratives and the Discourses of English*, Amin Malak provides the following useful insight into how a social imaginary provides the background (what Kenneth Burke has called the “scene” as we shall see later in this chapter) in a way that is quite distinct from this or that practice of religion by an individual or religious group.

Muslim is derived from the Arabic word that denotes the *person* who espouses the religion of Islam or is shaped by its cultural impact, irrespective of being secular, agnostic, or practicing believer. The term *Islamic* emphasizes the *faith* of Islam. It denotes thoughts, rituals, activities, and institutions specifically proclaimed and sanctioned by Islam or directly associated with its theological traditions. Such a crucial distinction is often missed or ignored, particularly in mediocre writing, sensational reporting, or calumnious descriptions. (5–6)

Of Irony and Empire explores the dynamics of the transcultural invention of Muslim Africa. As a tool of imperial expansion in which one social

imaginary attempts to wipe out another, the invention of Muslim Africa was the outcome of a unilateral deployment of the imagination. Irony, the trope based on dialectical thinking, provides a way of understanding how competing social imaginaries interacted to create transcultural inventions of Muslim Africa. Irony, as we shall see, is double-edged: while it has often been the weapon of exclusion, derision, and humiliation, it also has, when used as a corrective to imperial instincts, the power to protect and the potential to transform.

Empire and *irony* are strange bedfellows. *Empire* is about domination based on “a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another people. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social or cultural dependence. Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire” (Doyle 45). When Edward Said built on this definition in the early 1990s, colonialism and imperialism seemed relatively discrete chronologically [whereas for us today in 2006, they are unfortunately once again superimposed]: “In our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism . . . lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic and social practices (Said, *Culture* 45). *Irony* is much more wedded to the ideas of revolution and transformation. It is affirmation through denial. It demystifies. Through mockery, it unmasks petty error and encourages analysis of the scheme of things. Yet through paradox and reconciliation, irony at its best affirms by opening our structuring of the world to transformation. In his study *L'Ironie*, Vladimir Jankélévitch finds irony to be the very basis of good conscience: “True revolution is not found in the violence of detail or excess of language or clothing, but in the profound conversion of a will refusing the traditional order” (128). Throughout *Of Irony and Empire*, the trope of irony provides a lens that valorizes the dialectical, reciprocal, and empathetic open systems over closed system analyses.⁵ It asks how Muslim African self-representation is refracted through the detour of the other, and how Western self-representation is refracted through the mirror of other social imaginaries. Irony is the figurative trope that focuses our attention on the suspicious, subversive, creative distortions that occur in the gap between our intentional acts, linguistic and otherwise, and the world in which they take place. Irony gives the lie to the closed system of empire, to the system that relegates to the margins all input that challenges its world vision. Irony turns our attention rather to the open system of alternative social imaginaries operating within a shared environment. “Irony, then, saves what’s worth saving. Wisdom begins where the cynicism [associated with] analysis no longer denies us the simple pleasure of synthesis” (Jankélévitch 194). Granted, any synthesis in an open system is

temporary and will be subject to further ironic investigation, but irony, as the trope most linked to moral perception and dialectical analysis, is also linked to therapeutic and empathetic outcomes.

In this prologue, I begin with a close look at stable and unstable forms of irony and their connections to empire. Next I consider the particular ironies involved in the “provincialization” of Western modernity in the section on “Alternative Modernities and Transcultural Invention.” I analyze the role of transcultural experience in bringing about a focus on irony as central to discourse in the section “The Linguistic, Spatial, and Social Turns/Modernity and its Malcontents.” At the end of the chapter, I return to the insights of Kenneth Burke and Frantz Fanon on the apotropaic (protective) and therapeutic (curative) potentials they saw in irony. In the section “Human Rights, Secularism, and Recognition: the Importance of Being Ironic,” I consider irony for its potential to give us insights into how competing social imaginaries have shaped human rights discourse and how irony might open this arena to a more productive transcultural invention.

In the subsequent chapters of the book, I examine the comparative poetics that shape Western and Muslim African social imaginaries. Chapters 2 through 5 apply the theories set forth in the prologue to particular cases that illustrate how social imaginaries compete. “African Conscripts/European Conflicts: Race, Memory, and the Lessons of War” illustrates the dissonance between European and African social imaginaries as clear situational ironies emerge around the conscription of the colonized (both Muslim and non-Muslim Africans) and their insertion into the metropole during the period of the two World Wars. In both wars, intra-European hatred seemed, at the time, irreversible and irremediable, yet these European enemies have managed, time and again, to reunite and turn on the perennial enemy: the cultural and racial Other from Africa. Moving on to the era of independence, I do a close reading of Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s semi-autobiographical novel *Ambiguous Adventure*, focusing on the competing cultural understandings that the literary conventions used in this novel encourage. “*Heimlich un-Heimlich: Of Home as Heterotopia*” looks at how Tayeb Salih (Sudan), Mustapha Tlili (Tunisia), and Malika Mokeddem (Algeria) each negotiate the particulars of their postcolonial identities as expatriate authors working in transnational contexts. This study of “home as heterotopia” in the postcolonial novel investigates the uncanny ways falsehood and truth, the *heimlich* (at-homeness) and the *unheimlich* (exile at home), cohabit in these aesthetic and political transcultural inventions of Muslim Africa. “The Ends of Irony,” the epilogue to *Of Irony and Empire*, argues for the continuing value of irony in a post-9/11 world. There is a need for a new humanism that offers a transfigurative vision

to replace our current landscape of war and terror. The active engagement of public intellectuals such as the writers studied in this book has become more pressing than ever in the struggle to counter the humorless and self-important global plans of ideologues. By discussing international agreements based on a just recognition of the rights of individuals to be protected from violence, public intellectuals speak for and defend the rights of peoples to manage their resources and express their cultures.

FROM STABLE TO UNSTABLE IRONY:
THE LINKS BETWEEN IRONY AND EMPIRE

As an over-all ironic formula here, and one that has a quality of inevitability, we could lay it down that “what goes forth as A returns as non-A.” This is the basic pattern that places the essence of drama and dialectic in the irony of the “peripety,” the strategic moment of reversal.

—Kenneth Burke, “Four Master Tropes,” *A Grammar of Motives*

It will be seen that the black man’s alienation is not an individual question. Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny . . . let us say this is a question of sociodiagnostics.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

The essays that make up *Of Irony and Empire* are illustrative rather than definitive; they investigate the power of irony to cure and to transform. For this reason, the title begins with “of.” Just as Shakespeare’s *Touchstone* in *As You Like It* appreciated the rhetorical flexibility of “if” in human relations—“Your If is the only peacemaker; much virtue in If” (5.4.96–97), much virtue is found in “of” for its ambiguity, for its insistence on dialectic. As Adam Smith noted in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres—Considerations concerning the First Formation of Languages*:

Ask any man of common acuteness, What relation is expressed by the preposition *above*? He will readily answer, that of *superiority*. By the preposition *below*? He will as quickly reply, that of *inferiority*. But ask him, what relation is expressed by the preposition *of*, and, if he has not beforehand employed his thoughts a good deal upon these subjects, you may safely allow him a week to consider of his answer. . . . The preposition *of*, denotes relation in general, considered in concrete with the correlative object. . . . We often apply it, therefore, to express the most opposite relations; because, the most opposite relations agree so far that each

of them comprehends in it the general idea or nature of a relation. . . . The word *of*, however, serves very well to denote all those relations, because in itself it denotes no particular relation, but only relation in general; and so far as any particular relation is collected from such expressions, it is inferred by the mind, not from the preposition itself. (Smith)

Of and *irony* both turn our attention to the question of relationship. The preposition *of* and the trope *irony* encourage us to decide how what is implied by the writer connects to what is then inferred by the audience. Wayne Booth has noted that stable irony is built on four traits (5–6), and by extrapolating a bit for this study, we might explain them as follows: *intentionality* (the author has in mind a particular audience), *slippage* (the overt surface meaning gives way to a covert, submerged meaning), *commonality* (intelligibility is based on a set of shared attitudes and expectations), and *legitimacy* (the reconstructed, hidden meaning leaves us finally on a solid intellectual footing). Stable ironies happen in closed systems. Unstable ironies imply open systems, alternative social imaginaries, dialectical relationships. In such open systems, the four traits of stable irony are all called into question: authorship no longer means authority over the text, slippage is continuous rather than limited, commonality is cross-cut by difference, and legitimacy depends upon a particular frame of reference rather than upon some universal or transcendent ethical measure. Unstable ironies are the stuff of decolonization because they challenge authority, undercut stability, insist on the local and the particular, and demystify false claims to legitimacy.

“We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for, I don’t know” (Auden). This observation, which leftist poet and social critic W.H. Auden was fond of repeating,⁶ has been traced to a 1923 recording, “The Parson Addresses His Flock,” by the English music-hall and radio comedian John Foster Hall (1867–1945), popularly known as the Revd. Vivian Foster, the Vicar of Mirth (Mendelson). The Vicar of Mirth’s remark contains the doubled features that define irony, a rhetorical figure that “say[s] one thing and mean[s] the opposite” (Booth 34). Appearance gives way to a putative reality as the audience senses the dissonance between the universal moral imperative the Vicar parrots, and the Vicar’s self-centered, unreflective gloss on this law of morality. The required “peripety” or drama of reversal as abstracted in Kenneth Burke’s formula for irony is there: what goes forth as A (the obligation to help others) returns as non-A (an ethnocentric dismissal of “others”—be they the Victorian workhouse poor or those another Burke [Edmund] referred to as the “great unwashed masses of humanity”). Mirroring the stolid mentality of the Victorian period, the Vicar’s words mark the end of the long nineteenth century (1789–1914). During this period, the

colonial officials of Britain and France, sharing the “white man’s burden” to carry out their “civilizing mission” in Africa, found no ironic dissonance between the “rights of man” and the establishment of colonial empires, rather they thought of the combination as “progress.”

World War I and its aftermath bring us into the highly ironic context of our contemporary age (1914 to the present). Today, irony exercises “its imperialistic wanderings through the whole of man’s discourse” (Booth 33). “Ours joins just about every other century in wanting to call itself the ‘age of irony,’” as postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon pointed out in 1994, “and the recurrence of that historical claim in itself might well support the contention of contemporary theorists from Jacques Derrida to Kenneth Burke that irony is inherent in signification, in its deferrals and in its negations” (9). Yet the irony that permeates contemporary issues of personal identity, interpersonal relations, and cross-cultural exchange differs significantly from eighteenth-century wit delivered from under powdered wigs in elegant salons, and from nineteenth-century romantic irony with its infinite ideal forever escaping the lyric poet’s finite embrace. Language and experience shape the world as they describe and inscribe it. We have entered the era of unstable ironies in which transcendent meaning has become one discursive regime among others.

Irony demystifies discourse. Working through a dialectic that has no totalizing end point, the unstable irony of our age gives the lie, on a linguistic level, to the ontological bad faith that did not distinguish between an unreachable reality and our representation of that reality. Thus, as Paul de Man has commented in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” from his *Blindness and Insight*, the value of irony is its instability: “Curiously enough, it seems to be only in describing a mode of language which does not mean what it says that one can actually say what one means” (211). *Of Irony and Empire* takes this discussion of irony’s new importance beyond the frame of European cultural and literary history addressed by de Man in *Blindness and Insight* and Hayden White in *Tropics of Discourse* and *Metahistory* to look at what part colonial and postcolonial relations played in identifying destabilizing irony as the major philosophical and epistemological mode of figuring the world.

Up through the nineteenth century, intellectual locations were strongly associated with rhetorical analysis:

From Aristotle until the nineteenth century, treatises on rhetoric as the art of persuasion always included an account of the intellectual “locations” that could provide such points of agreement. Once found, these locations—what the Greeks called *topoi*, the Latins *loci*, and the English *places*—were used almost literally as platforms on which speaker and listener could securely stand while conducting an argument. (Booth 34)

The trope of stable irony, Booth explains, requires two platforms: “the reader is asked simply to move from one platform, on which the speaker pretends to stand, to another one, on which he [sic] really stands—one that is somehow ‘opposite,’ across the street, as it were. But perhaps the implied intellectual motion is really ‘downward,’ ‘going beneath the surface’ to something solidier or more profound; we rip up a rotten platform and probe to a solid one” (34–35). By the early twentieth century, the epistemological platform upon which speaker and listener “could securely stand” has been undermined. Instability arises not only from the recognition of the role of intentionality in language, but also from the absence of a shared cultural location, a shared social imaginary. Competing social imaginaries and alternative experiences of modernity lead to instability. The formula in stable irony, moving from false to true, from rotten to solid, becomes dialectical in unstable irony, a movement from same to other and back.

Unstable irony is a trope keenly aware of its own figurative distortions. As Hayden White notes in *Metahistory*:

Irony represents a stage of consciousness in which the problematical nature of language itself has become recognized. . . . The trope of irony . . . provides a linguistic paradigm of a mode of thought that is radically self-critical with respect not only to a given characterization of the world of experience but also to the very effort to capture adequately the truth of things in language. It is, in short, a model of the linguistic protocol in which skepticism in thought and relativism in ethics are conventionally expressed. (37–38)

Postcolonial irony, like postcolonial empire, sometimes seems like a descent into the bottomless pit of infinite regressions and pointless dialectic. While some would like to return to a world of stable ironies, and thus think of empire as “the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets” (Porter 31), contemporary American imperialism has rather given us Paul Bremer running around Iraq in suits and combat boots, and the toastmaster of cognitive litotes, Donald Rumsfeld declaiming, on the one hand, the “known unknowns and unknown knowns” and on the other that, “We don’t do empire.” The irony in our time is unstable in that it allows us no purchase on an agreed-upon reality. Abstract debates over the discursive nature of truth and the rule of law fill the halls of justice while violations of human rights are pressed into the flesh around the world in jails like Abu Ghraib. Theories envisioning a “clash of civilizations” ratchet Manicheism up to a global level. But these binary views are challenged by dialectical theories positing “alternative modernities,” which provincialize Western modernity.⁷

Without gainsaying the violence of empire or the epistemological instability of human knowledge, *Of Irony and Empire* argues that we must also keep in the mix the more comic notion of irony's powers to create more just interactions among peoples. And although irony is certainly "transideological," serving both liberal and conservative causes, Hayden White's assertion that "as a basis of a world view, irony tends to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions" (*Metahistory* 38) is a claim that needs careful scrutiny if it is to be applied to the colonial and postcolonial experience. By the same token, so does Paul de Man's provisional conclusion to "the Rhetoric of Temporality," which claims that

irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the inauthentic. It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it. It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world. It dissolves in the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from meaning, and it can find no escape from this spiral. (222)

The work of social critics and cultural studies founders such as Kenneth Burke, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said reassures us that irony, while oppositional, is not merely destructive. Fanon, for example, questions the way language is used to shape and create the colonial environment, peopling it with actors, attitudes, and relationships. By dramatizing and revealing its performative aspect, Fanon challenges the normative and descriptive role rhetoric is traditionally assigned. In this spirit, for example, Fanon shows how it is that the settler creates the native, first by displacing him, and then by attributing his own fear of displacement to the hostile mentality of the native: "Their first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together—that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler—was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons. . . . In fact, the settler is right when he speaks of knowing 'them' well. For it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence. The settler owes the fact of his very existence, that is to say, his property, to the colonial system" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 36). Having brought the native into being through displacement, the settler must deal with the social inequalities he has instituted: "The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, 'They want to take our place'" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 39). The ironic peripety this kind of dramatization depends upon is best captured in the Arab proverb: "He hit me

and he cried, then ran ahead and complained.” By mimicking the colonial perspective, Fanon demonstrates that the native and his desire are not brute facts of nature; they are a result of the colonial relationship—they are made not born. As Hussein Abdulahi Bulhan noted in his study, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*, the first step toward ending oppression is to locate its sociogenesis:

Basic concepts such as freedom, responsibility, violence, madness, and death lose much of their crucial import if not placed in a historical and social context. For to conceive of freedom only as the absence of restraint, responsibility simply as the avoidance of punishment, violence merely as the personal intent to harm, madness as only the private travails of an individual, or death merely as physical mortality limits our understanding of oppression and serves to narrow our vision of human possibilities. The social foundation of violence, madness, death, and liberty require further consideration.

We must find a way of placing biography in history, the crisis of personal identity in communal uprooting, clinical symptoms in relational systems. (13–14)

Fanon highlights the ironic context of the colonial project by dramatizing the discourse of the colonizer. Performance, which is always on the epistemological fence between individual speech (a doing/a subject) and the typical discourse that defines a given role (a thing done/an object), provides Fanon with a way to place the unironic monologue in a highly ironic world.

Often through the use of indirect free discourse, the narrative device that allows a character to say one thing in a scene where the author implies the opposite, Fanon lets the settler dramatize the hypocrisy and pathology of the colonial arrangements. The lack of irony found in the colonial period suggests not just a simple investment in the “reality” of the grand narrative of colonialism (progress, evolutionary history, etc.) but a substantial dose of bad faith and denial. The colonial system is “an order of absolute difference and radical irreciprocity which is fixed, made manifest in *space*” (Sekyi-Otu 72). This spatialized colonial relation is antidialectical: “The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity” (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 38). Rather, a manichean allegory is at work in the settler’s psyche that, as Abdul JanMohamed put it, transforms “racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference” (80), as human interactions are reified into a relationship of superior to inferior. The act of decolonization, then, is also a return to dialectic, and an opening for reciprocal, rather than exclusionary, human relationships in Fanon’s view:

Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the "thing" which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself. (*The Wretched of the Earth* 36–37)

Fanon is no fool about the rapidity with which human relations can become reified again and the same old farces of unequal power and nonrecognition be replayed. In "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" from *The Wretched of the Earth*, he notes that following a revolution, the middle class, instead of putting its technical and intellectual capital in the service of the people and breaking out of the old channels of inequality set up by the colonial system, apes the behavior of the former colonial masters:

But unhappily we shall see that very often the national middle class does not follow this heroic, positive, fruitful, and just path; rather, it disappears with its soul set at peace into the shocking ways—shocking because anti-national—of a traditional bourgeoisie, of a bourgeoisie which is stupidly, contemptibly, cynically bourgeois.

. . . this incapability to seek out new systems of management will be equally manifested by the bogging down of the national middle class in the methods of agricultural production which were characteristic of the colonial period.

The national economy of the period of independence is not set on a new footing. It is still concerned with the groundnut harvest, with the cocoa crop and the olive yield. In the same way there is no change in the marketing of basic products, and not a single industry is set up in the country. We go on sending out raw materials; we go on being Europe's small farmers, who specialize in unfinished products.

. . . To them, nationalization quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period. (150–152)

Fanon insisted on the centrality of dialectical recognition between people and groups. He did not frame it in Hegel's ideal sense where recognition is not grounded in lived experience. Nor did he imagine it within the frame of Sartre's Hobbesian universe of negative human relations where we each try to make the other an object. Rather Fanon invested recognition with comic possibilities but recognized the tragic or farcical potential of human interaction as well. To challenge conventional social and institutional practices by staging

them, is to hope to transform them. Irony is strongly associated with freedom because of its liberating potentials—not the least of which is laughter. Irony is apotropaic; through mockery, it helps the oppressed resist internalizing the evils of injustice: “when the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts.”⁸ Irony is also therapeutic as its dialectical tensions prevent reification. In “West Indians and Africans,” Fanon calls irony a form of good conscience because it keeps the oppressed from replacing the dishonesty of colonization with self-serving mystifications. “A West Indian, in particular an intellectual who is no longer on the level of irony, discovers his Negritude,” Fanon observed in reference to followers of the theories of his Martinican teacher, the poet Aimé Césaire (*Toward the African Revolution* 19); “It is thus that the West Indian, after the great white error, is now living in the great black mirage” (27). A healthy sense of irony would have saved him from this misrecognition.

In thinking through what universal traits connect the self (ontogeny) to others (phylogeny), Frantz Fanon focused on sociogeny as playing a crucial, if often submerged, role. Sociogeny describes the process of how we develop our unspoken assumptions and how our surrounding cultures inculcate within us the social imaginary we are immersed in from birth. Bulhan attributes Fanon’s break from Eurocentric psychology to his focus on the social roots of oppression, thus of potential freedom as well. Freud’s social imaginary was particular to the Europe of his time: “Freud’s theorizing emerged out of a nuclear, patriarchal, and bourgeois family context and within a sexually repressive Victorian Europe. . . . Although he challenged the Victorian mores of his day, Freud was essentially an apologist for the status quo within the bourgeois family and the larger capitalist society” (71). Fanon also criticized Jung’s collective unconscious, not for what it revealed about the European social imaginary, but because it was mystified and universalized: “Jung locates the collective unconscious in the inherited cerebral matter. But the collective unconscious, without our having to fall back on the genes, is purely and simply the sum of prejudices, myths, collective attitudes of a given group,” Fanon points out in *Black Skin, White Masks* (188); “He wanted to go back to the childhood of the world, but he made a remarkable mistake: He went back only to the childhood of Europe” (190). As Bulhan makes clear, Fanon’s critique had to do with the assumption that “bourgeois psychology” was synonymous with the human condition:

The fragmenting effect of ontogenetic perspective and the ossifying consequences of phylogenetic explanations obscured a fundamental dimension of the human psyche. Because of their conservative thrust, both ontogeny and phylogeny negate man’s vocation as a subject of history and

thus dash any hopes of social change. Ontogeny reveals man the individual—the helpless, hopeless, and isolated object of a repressive and overpowering social structure. Phylogeny points to the futility of man's resistance against a curse that is embedded in an irretrievable past. As consistently argued throughout his writings, it was Fanon's unwavering conviction that the fundamental cause of alienation is first socioeconomic and second the internalization of societal inequity as well as violence. (80)

Fanon critiqued theories like the Oedipus Complex that not only made the mistake of presenting the particular as the universal, but also reduced human reality to the psychic modalities of individual deviations from the norm, and a suspect norm at that.

Sociogeny provided a perspective that focused on the dialectic of individual and group as mutually constructing. Through an examination of the paradoxes of his own social construction and its ironic basis in a European social imaginary that excluded him, Fanon learned to put recognition at the heart of his humanism:

As a schoolboy, I had many occasions to spend whole hours talking about the supposed customs of the savage Senegalese. In what was said there was a lack of awareness that was at the very least paradoxical. Because the Antillean does not think of himself as a black man; he thinks of himself as an Antillean. The Negro lives in Africa. Subjectively, intellectually, the Antillean conducts himself like a white man. But he is a Negro. That he will learn once he goes to Europe; and when he hears Negroes mentioned he will recognize that the word included himself as well as the Senegalese. (*Black Skin, White Masks* 148)⁹

Fanon, then, hardly bought into the European social imaginary,¹⁰ rather he recognized the dangers of naturalizing the contents of the social imaginary and the benefits of exploring its tensions and ambiguities.

Turning away from reified, essentialist, atomistic, antidialectical notions of who we are as individuals and how we interact and are acted upon as participants in society and across cultures, Burke, like Fanon, used irony as a hermeneutic because its operation as a trope required inclusion of the contextual and the dramatic. Burke's theory of "dramatism" attempted to identify the universal traits we all share, and he called the result his "grammar of motives":

What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it? [*A Grammar of Motives*] is concerned with the basic forms of thought which, in accordance with the nature of the world as all men necessarily experience it, are exemplified in the attributing of motives. These forms of thought can be embodied profoundly or trivially, truth-

fully or falsely. They are equally present in systematically elaborated metaphysical structures, in legal judgments, in poetry and fiction, in political and scientific works, in news and in bits of gossip offered at random. . . . Any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose). (xv)

Burke's pentad gives us a set of principles to apply in order to understand actual statements of motives—what he calls philosophies, or fragments of philosophies. Thus, for example, scene is a blanket term for the background in which agents and acts are placed: “and we move into matters of ‘philosophy’ when we note that one thinker uses ‘God’ as his term for the ultimate ground or scene of human action, another uses ‘nature,’ a third uses ‘environment,’ or ‘history,’ or ‘means of production,’ etc.” (xvi–xvii). Philosophical idioms will differ, and the question of judging which idiom is right, or more right than the next, will always demand further investigation in Burke's view, but a universal grammar of motives sets the common ground for cross-cultural comparison.

At first, Burke tells us, he planned to write a treatise on human relations based on a theory of comedy: “Feeling that competitive ambition is a drastically over-developed motive in the modern world, we thought this motive might be transcended if men devoted themselves not so much to ‘excoriating’ it as to ‘appreciating’ it” (xvii). This examination of the basic stratagems we use to outwit each other grew into a more general grammar of motives that retained traces of its “comic” origin, the ironic return to a source with transformational, although not necessarily transcendental, potential:

A perfectionist might seek to evolve terms free of ambiguity and inconsistency (as with the terministic ideals of symbolic logic and logical positivism) . . . we take it for granted that, insofar as men cannot themselves create the universe, there must remain something essentially enigmatic about the problem of motives, and that this underlying enigma will manifest itself in inevitable ambiguities and inconsistencies among the terms for motives. Accordingly, what we want is *not terms that avoid ambiguity*, but *terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise*. (xviii)

Burke does not aim to “dispose of” ambiguity but rather to “study and clarify the resources of ambiguity” because “it is in the areas of ambiguity that transformations take place.” Imagining that “distinctions . . . arise out of a great central moltenness, where all is merged,” Burke sees distinctions as matter “thrown from the liquid center to the surface, where they have congealed.”

Ambiguities and ironies cause us to return to this “alchemic center” to emerge with new distinctions: “So that A may become non-A. But not merely by a leap from one state to the other. Rather, we must take A back into the ground of its existence, the logical substance that is its causal ancestor, and on to a point where it is consubstantial with non-A; then may we return, this time emerging with non-A instead” (xix). To investigate that “ground,” Burke, like Paul de Man, Hayden White, and Edward Said after him, returned to Vico’s description of the source of poetics as being the unhappy marriage between the instability of language and the necessity of explaining ourselves.

In Appendix D to *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke examines the “Four Master Tropes”; Burke takes as his starting point Giambattista Vico’s idea in his *New Science* (sections 404–409) that all figurative thought can be reduced to four tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (116–119). Vico claimed (section 34) that the “master key of the Science” is an understanding of the “poetic nature of [the] first men” and that the “sources of all poetic locution” are to be found in two: “poverty of language and necessity to explain and make oneself understood” (19). Whereas Vico privileged metaphor that asserted similitude as the most important trope, contemporary critics privilege irony, defined by Vico (section 408) as being “fashioned by falsehood by dint of a reflection which wears the mask of truth” (118). Citing Vico’s observation, deconstructive critics such as Hayden White and Paul de Man see irony as giving rise to endless series of subversive interpretations and slippages that condemn us to a world of scepticism. Burke, on the other hand, aims to trace the master tropes to understand their “role in the discovery and description of ‘the truth’” (503). He connects the four master tropes to their literal or “realistic” applications: *metaphor*, seeing something in terms of something else, is equated to *perspective*; *metonymy*, substituting the tangible for the intangible, is equated to *reduction*; *synecdoche*, representing the whole by a part, is equated to *representation*; and *irony*, reversing the meaning so A comes back as non-A, is equated to *dialectic*. Contemporary feminist theory as well as postcolonial and cultural studies have added to Burke’s dictum a variation on this theme in the critique of binarism. Thus in binary pairings such as male/female or colonizer/colonized, we discover that the first term has a “positive” value, and the second term exists as a spectral image, like a photographic negative, existing not in its own right but rather to valorize the first. Irony is not simply the rhetorical form that translates exclusion and domination (as in Edward Said’s orientalism) or that captures ambiguity (as in Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial mimicry), it is also a mode of representation and invention that can protect against the violations of empire (as in James Scott’s hidden transcripts) and can engender the new forms of recognition (as in Frantz Fanon’s revolutionary humanism).

Vico himself in the early eighteenth century struggled against the closed-system thinking of abstract binaries and cause-and-effect reasoning that were becoming prevalent in his time; he defended “the ‘copious’ methods of traditional rhetoric . . . against the sterile practices of the Cartesians, then so fashionable in the north”: “To introduce geometrical method into practical life . . . is ‘like trying to go mad with the rules of reason’ [Terence, *Eunuch*, 62–63], attempting to proceed by a straight line among the tortuosities of life, as though human affairs were not ruled by capriciousness, temerity, opportunity, and chance.”¹¹ Vico, whose perspectives would be echoed by Burke, Fanon, and Said, valued the messy unpredictable open system in which human interactions take place, and valued the very messiness of the system as an antidote for reductive imperial thinking. Vico gave empathy the central role on the rhetorical stage: “Humanity is the affection of one man helping another. This is done most effectively through speech—by counseling, warning, exhorting, consoling, reproving—and this is the reason I think that studies of languages are called “humanities” [*studia humanitas*], the more so since it is through languages that humanity is most strongly bound together.”¹² Disdain, superiority, and detachment rather than empathy, as we shall see, are features of the stable, colonial brand of irony.

“Irony in the Victorian Age was a pretty rare commodity,” according to Paul Fussell (“Initial Shock”). The authors of Western imperial expansion during the long nineteenth century (1789–1914) believed in positivist reasoning, secular institutions, “progressive” outlooks, and instrumental individualism. Their hegemonic beliefs were buttressed by the social transformations that institutionalized industrial market economies, bureaucratically administered states, modes of popular government, and a vastly expanded public sphere.¹³ Antipathetic to the scepticism, ironic distance, and mechanistic design with which the Enlightenment thinkers apprehended the world, nineteenth-century Positivists involved in the colonial project (1830–1870) insisted on a “realistic” comprehension of social reality, as Hayden White argued:

To be a “realist” meant both to see things clearly, as they *really* were, and to draw appropriate conclusions from this clear apprehension of reality for the living of a possible life on its basis. As thus envisaged, claims to an essential “realism” were at once epistemological and ethical. . . .

From our vantage point in the eighth decade of the twentieth century, we can now see that most of the important theoretical and ideological disputes that developed in Europe between the French Revolution and World War I were in reality disputes over which group might claim the right to determine of what a “realistic” position might consist . . . what

is most interesting about this whole period, considering it as a finished drama of inquiry and expression, is the general authority which the notion of "realism" itself commanded. (*Metahistory* 46)

The colonizers of Africa engaged in a number of critical appropriations: they saw the land and the people through the lens of their own myths of origin, established their political and representational hegemony, and left a legacy of false universalism, which still impacts the production and reception of African texts today.

Modernity is defined here as beginning with World War I, in part because this is the point when colonial subjects were conscripted to take on the duties of citizens but denied the rights of citizenship. The debacle of World War I embodied the situational irony that undermined the myth of the civilizing mission. For Europeans themselves, World War I brought an end to the certainties upon which realism was based and called civilization itself into question; as Ezra Pound put it: "There died a myriad,/And of the best, among them,/For an old bitch gone in the teeth,//For a botched civilization" (64). Paul Fussell noted in *The Great War and Modern Memory*: "Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends. . . . But the Great War was more ironic than any before or since. . . . It reversed the Idea of Progress" (7–8).

For many people in North Africa and the Middle East, the war was a different kind of wake-up call. Among Arab intellectuals, it is generally agreed that "modernity's shock" began with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, but modernity has mainly been associated with events connected with the two World Wars: first, the World War I-era Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) and Balfour Declaration (1917), which paved the way for "imperialist-installed structures" of dominance that displaced the hope of true self-determination for the Arabs; and second, the post-World War II creation of Israel on Palestinian land in 1948 (Nusseibeh). These events, and the rhetoric that accompanied them, in the context of the sacrifices that had been extracted from the colonized during the two World Wars, heralded a movement among colonized peoples toward renewed resistance to oppression and renewed efforts to claim a more just world. In January 1918, Woodrow Wilson delivered his 14 Point Program to the U.S. Congress, a program that affirmed the principle of self-determination for all peoples:

We entered this war because violations of right had occurred which touched us to the quick and made the life of our own people impossible unless they were corrected and the world secured once for all against their

recurrence. What we demand in this war, therefore, is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us. (Wilson)

In the context of Wilson's promises to foster national sovereignty and to extend "the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak," Africans had every reason to expect justice at home and in the region. Muslim Africa had a long history of resistance to the colonial powers, a resistance fueled precisely by their experiences, which demonstrated that Western "rules of law" did not result in justice being done. For this reason, political dissidents have challenged the universality of secular Western law and its applicability to their own societies: "They believe that justice, when it is real, is fair, substantive, and equitable rather than procedurally formal. They argue that foreign legal and political systems simply do not fit within the moral order of Islam. They claim that these systems apply the law mechanistically and that they do not achieve substantive justice. They allege that these systems tolerate high levels of inequality, with prevalent racial, ethnic, and economic discrimination" (Laremont 2). While the injustices of the Western system of justice in Africa are well documented in colonial archives, it is their peculiar displacement of moral responsibility that finally brings them under unstable irony's lens. During the heyday of colonialism (1870–1914), the French passed the Warnier Law, which systematically displaced Algerian people from their land, and then passed subsequent laws that held Algerians financially "responsible for the administrative costs of their displacement from their own lands" (43). During World War I, conscription from Algeria alone had sent 120,000 troops to Europe to fight for France, about 25,000 of whom ended up dead or missing; however, these same Muslim conscripts did not enjoy the basic rights of citizenship. The era of unstable irony came about not only because the World War's "means [were] so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends" but because its actual ends were so devastatingly disproportionate to its presumed ends.

The aftermath of World War II repeated the gross inequities that followed World War I—the clear violation of human rights, the double standard applied to Muslims, the appropriation of land. The counter-narratives of liberation written by Africans from World War I to the present foreground issues

of recognition and social justice, and challenge the doxa of the Western social imaginary. In “Doxa and Common Life,” Pierre Bourdieu observes: “We have spoken too much about consciousness, too much in terms of representation. The social world doesn’t work in terms of practices, mechanisms, and so forth” (Bourdieu and Eagleton 268). Rather, the social imaginary is based on all sorts of beliefs that *go without saying*. In speaking of this naturalization of ideas, Bourdieu uses the term *doxa* rather than the much used and abused term *ideology*. A repository of cultural appropriations that could be thought of as those things we assume to be true, doxa operates at a level beneath conscious understanding. Doxa involves *symbolic domination*; that is, the selection of a set of ways of representing reality that conceals other possible representations, thus hiding parts of the same reality. Doxa shapes our experience of the real; it is the imaginative metaphysics by which appropriation happens as we project our needs, interests, and desires on the world around us. Of course, we don’t all share the same doxa, but this is often only revealed through transcultural encounters that reveal the cultural specificity of our representational appropriations. We discover doxa through paradox, when what goes without saying is contradicted by another perspective.

ALTERNATIVE MODERNITIES AND TRANSCULTURAL INVENTION

The uncertainty, unverifiability, and relativity associated with the making of meaning are translated on the textual level, by what Booth termed unstable irony. In the “post” modern, “post” colonial twenty-first century, we discover that modernity did not die out when the certainties that spawned it were given the lie: “to announce the general end of modernity, even as an epoch, much less as an attitude or an ethos, seems premature, if not patently ethnocentric, at a time when non-Western peoples everywhere begin to engage critically their own hybrid modernities,” Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar argues in *Alternative Modernities* (14). Rather, the “provincialization” of Western modernity has been accompanied by the investigation of alternative modernities:

To think in terms of “alternative modernities” is to admit that modernity is inescapable and to desist from speculations about the end of modernity. Born in and of the West some centuries ago under relatively specific sociohistoric conditions, modernity is now everywhere. It has arrived not suddenly but slowly, bit by bit, over the *longue durée*—awakened by contact; transported through commerce; administered by empires, bearing colonial inscriptions; propelled by nationalism; and now increasingly steered by global media, migration, and capital. And it continues to