

- **Cleanth Brooks, Irony as a Principle of Structure**
- One can sum up modern poetic technique by calling it the rediscovery of metaphor and the full commitment to metaphor
 - The poet can legitimately step out into the universal only by first going through the narrow door of the particular
 - The poet does not select an abstract theme and then embellish it with concrete details – on the contrary he must embellish the details, must abide by the details, and through his realization of the details attain to whatever general meaning he can attain
 - The meaning must issue from the particulars – it must not seem to be arbitrarily forced upon the particulars
 - In poetry it is the tail that wags the dog, or put another way it is the tail of the kite (the particulars) that makes the kite (the universal) fly
 - The tail of the kite, it is true, seems to negate the kite’s function: it weighs down something made to rise – and in the same way the concrete particulars with which the poet loads herself seem to deny the universal to which she aspires
 - The poet wants to “say” something – why then does she not say it directly and forthrightly
 - Why is she willing to say it only through her metaphors?
 - Through her metaphors she risks saying it partially and obscurely, and even not saying it at all
 - But this risk must be taken, for direct statement leads to abstraction and threatens to take us out of poetry altogether
- The commitment to metaphor thus implies, with respect to general theme, a principle of indirection
 - And metaphor, with respect to particular images and statement, implies a principle of organic relationship
 - This is to say that a poem is not merely a collection of beautiful or “poetic” images
 - If there really existed objects which were intrinsically “poetic” still their mere assemblage would not give us a poem
 - For if this were the case one might arrange bouquets of these poetic images and thus create poems by formula
- The poem is like a little drama – the total effect proceeds from all the elements in the drama, and in a good poem, as in a good drama, there is no wasted motion and no superfluous parts
 - In coming to see that the parts of a poem are related organically, and related to the total theme indirectly, we have come to see the importance of context
 - The memorable verses in poetry – even those which seem somehow intrinsically “poetic” – show on inspection that they derive their poetic quality from their relation to a particular context

- Even the “meaning” of any particular item is modified by the context
 - The context endows the particular word or image or statement with significance – the part is modified by the pressure of the context
- There is an obvious warping of a statement by the context we characterize as “ironical”
 - For example: “This is a fine state of affairs” – a statement that in certain contexts means quite the opposite of what it purports to say literally
 - This is sarcasm – the obvious kind of irony
 - Here a complete reversal of meaning is effected: effected by the context and pointed, probably, by the tone of voice
 - The tone of irony can be effected by the skillful disposition of the context
 - In Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* we find the following passage:
 - Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour’s voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flatt’ry soothe the dull cold ear of death?
 - In this context, the questions Gray is asking are obviously rhetorical – the answer has been implied in the characterization of the breath as fleeting and of the ear of death as dull and cold
 - The form is that of a question, but the manner in which the question has been asked shows that it is no true question at all
- Irony, even in its obvious and conventionally recognized forms, comprises a wider variety of modes: tragic irony, self-irony, playful, arch, mocking, gentle irony, etc.
 - What indeed would be a statement wholly devoid of an ironic potential – a statement that did not show any qualification of the context?
 - Perhaps only a statement like “two plus two equals four” would suffice
 - This is a statement that is true in any possible context
- Connotations are important in poetry and do significantly enter into the structure of meaning which is the poem
 - Any statement made in the poem bears the pressure of the context and has its meaning modified by the context
 - The statements made in a poem, their relevance, their propriety, their rhetorical force, even their meaning, cannot be divorced from the context in which they are imbedded
- From Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach”
 - The world, “which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams...hath really neither joy nor love nor light...”
 - For some readers this statement will seem an obvious truism; for other readers, however, the statement will seem false, or at least highly questionable

- And if we try to “prove” the proposition, we shall raise some very perplexing metaphysical questions and certainly move away from the problems of the poem
- For the lines are to be justified in the poem in terms of the context: the speaker is standing beside his loved one, looking out of the window on the calm sea, listening to the long withdrawing roar of the ebbing tide, and aware of the beautiful delusion of moonlight which “blanches” the whole scene
 - The truth of the poem will be validated not by a report by sociologists, or a poll of readers
 - The statement by Arnold will perhaps be best validated by T. S. Eliot’s test: does the statement seem to be that which the mind of the reader can accept as coherent, mature, and founded on the facts of experience?
 - And yet when we ask this question we must consider whether the speaker in the poem seems carried away with his own emotions, does he oversimplify his emotions, or oversimplify the situation
 - In other words we must ask whether the statement grows properly out of a context, whether it acknowledges the pressures of the context; whether it is ironical or merely callow, glib, and sentimental
- Brooks suggests that the poetry which meets Eliot’s test comes to the same thing as I. A. Richards’ “poetry of synthesis” – that is a poetry which does not leave out what is apparently hostile to its dominant tone
 - And a poem that is able to fuse the irrelevant and discordant has come to terms with itself and is invulnerable to irony
 - Invulnerability to irony is the stability of a context in which the internal pressures balance and mutually support each other – the stability here being like that of an arch (the forces which have calculated to drag the stones to the ground actually provide the principle of support
- Another case of irony is where the pressures of context emerge as obvious ironies
 - For example in one of Shakespeare’s songs:
 - Who is Silvia? what is she,
That all our swains commend her?
Holy, fair, and wise is she;
The heaven such grace did lend her,
That she might admirèd be.
 - Is she kind as she is fair?
For beauty lives with kindness.
Love doth to her eyes repair,
To help him of his blindness;

And, being helped, inhabits there.

Then to Silvia let us sing,
That Silvia is excelling;
She excels each mortal thing
Upon the dull earth dwelling;
To her let us garlands bring

- The first irony is that at the outset Shakespeare phrases the song as a question, where the speaker seeks to know about Silvia – and then the song goes on to list her many attributes that would obviate the need to ask “Who is Silvia”
- Here Shakespeare mentions the Christian idea of “grace” in the first stanza
 - Although “grace” could be taken to mean simple charms and elegance, its Christian overtones would have been palpable to Shakespeare’s audience
- And in the next stanza he refers to Love as the pagan god Cupid, who is blind, and says it is Cupid himself that dwells in Silvia’s eyes
 - This mingling of Christian and Pagan ideas of grace and love sets a complex tone for such a purportedly simple love song, suggesting the quality of divinity with which lovers perennially endow maidens who are finally mortal
- Another example of ironic complexity comes from Wordsworth’s Lucy poems:
 - She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and oh,
The difference to me!

- Which is Lucy really like – the violet or the star
 - The context in general seems to support the violet comparison – the violet beautiful but almost unnoticed, already half-hidden from the eye, is now, as the poem ends, completely hidden in its grave
 - The star comparison may seem only vaguely relevant – almost there out of convention (love poem tropes)

- But the star can be separately justified by saying that to her lover's eyes, Lucy is the solitary star – she has no rivals, nor would the idea of rivalry even occur to her
- Thus the violet and the star (when not viewed as a convention) can balance each other out
 - Lucy was from the viewpoint of the great world, unnoticed, shy, modest, and half-hidden from the eye; but from the standpoint of her lover, she is the single star, completely dominating that world, not arrogantly like the sun, but sweetly and modestly, like the star
 - The implicit contrast is the one so often developed ironically by John Donne in his poems where the lovers, who amount to nothing in the eyes of the world, become, in their own eyes, each the other's world
 - As in "The Good-Morrow" where their love makes "one little room an everywhere"
 - Or as in "The Canonization" where the lovers drive into the mirrors of each other's eyes the "towns, countries, courts" which make up the great world
 - It is easy to imagine how Donne would have exploited the contrast between the violet and the star, accentuating it, developing the irony, showing how the violet is really like its antithesis, the star, etc.
- But, of course, Wordsworth is entitled to his method of simple juxtaposition with no underscoring of the ironical contrast
 - It is simply worth noting that the contrast with its ironic potential is there in the poem by Wordsworth, as it is in nearly all of his successful lyrics
 - For example:
 - A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears;
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.
 - No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees,
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.
 - The first stanza is often read as a lover's insensitive response to mortality
 - That the lover compares death to a mere slumber and that he states that he lacks human fears, or in other words is not empathetic with humanity's normal response to death
 - The fears of the lover however could mean fears *for* the loved one as a mortal human being (instead of a lack of fears)

- It does not occur to the lover that he needs to fear for a loved one who cannot be touched by “earthly years”
- As we move into the second stanza, the potential irony almost becomes overt
 - If the slumber has sealed the lover’s spirit, a slumber – so too a slumber has now definitely sealed her spirit: “No motion has she now, no force;/she neither hears nor sees”
 - It is evident that it is her unnatural slumber that has waked the lover out of his
- Wordsworth, however, still does not choose to exploit the contrast as such
 - Instead he attempts to suggest something of the lover’s agonized shock at the loved one’s present lack of motion
 - And how does he suggest it? – not by depicting Lucy laying in her tomb like a quiet motionless body but instead depicting her in violent motion
 - The motion she has now is violent but it is imposed (since Lucy herself cannot move)
 - Motion imposed by nature
 - Why does this image of violent natural motion convey so powerfully the sense of something inert and helpless
 - Part of the effect, of course, resides in the fact that a dead lifelessness is being suggested more sharply by an object’s being whirled about by something else than by an image of the object in repose
 - But there are other matters which are at work here:
 - The sense of the girl’s falling back into the clutter of things, companioned by things chained like a tree to one particular spot, or by things completely inanimate, like rocks and stones
 - Here, of course, the concluding lines refer to the suggestion made in the first stanza, that the girl once seemed something not subject to earthly limitations at all
 - And surely the image of the whirling earth is important in its suggestion of something meaningless – motion that mechanically repeats itself
 - The girl, who to her lover seemed a thing that could not feel the touch of earthly years is caught up helplessly into the empty whirl of the earth which measures and makes time
 - She is touched by and held by earthly time in its most powerful and horrible image
 - The last figure thus seems to summarize the poem – to offer to almost every facet of meaning suggested in the earlier lines a

- concurring and resolving image which meets and accepts and reduces each item to its place in the total unity
- Wordsworth, as shown above, does not choose to point up specifically the ironical contrast between the speaker's former slumber and the loved one's present slumber
 - But there is one ironical contrast which he does stress: this is the contrast between the two senses in which the girl becomes insulated against the "touch of earthly years"
 - In the first stanza, she "could not feel / The touch of earthly years" because she seemed divine and immortal
 - But in the second stanza, now in her grave, she still does not "feel the touch of earthly years,; for, like the rocks , and stones, she feels nothing at all
 - The statement of the first stanza has been literally realized in the second but its meaning has been ironically reversed
 - Ought we, then, to apply the term ironical to Wordsworth's poem? – not necessarily
 - Since Wordsworth and John Donne are both poets, their work has at basis a similar structure
 - And the dynamic structure – the pattern of thrust and counterthrust – which we associate with Donne, has its counterpart in Wordsworth
 - In the work of both men the relation between part and part is organic, which means that each part modifies and is modified by the whole
 - To intimate that there are potential ironies in the Lucy series is perhaps to distort it
 - Are the poems not simple and spontaneous (two terms that were critical catchwords of the 19th century)
 - By simple we mean that the poem came easily to the poet, and by spontaneous that it came quickly
 - We can also mean that the poem reads to the reader like a simple spontaneous utterance of the poem
 - What often happens though when describing poems as simple or spontaneous in their composition is that it bleeds over into the reader's reception and the reader believes the poem itself is to be read in a simple and spontaneous manner
 - There is no harm in thinking of Wordsworth's poem as simple and spontaneous unless these terms deny complexities that actually exist in the poem
 - Brooks has been arguing that irony, taken as the acknowledgment of the pressures of context, is to be found in poetry of every period and even in simple lyrical poetry
 - A great deal of modern poetry also uses irony as its special and perhaps its characteristic strategy
 - This is because there has been a breakdown in common symbolism, a general skepticism of universals, and a depletion and corruption of language by advertising and pop-culture

- **The modern poet has the task of rehabilitating a tired and drained language so that it can convey meanings once more with force and with exactitude**
 - This task of qualifying and modifying language is perennial but it is imposed on the modern poet as a special burden
 - Those critics who attribute the use of ironic techniques to the poet's own bloodless sophistication and tired skepticism would be better advised to refer these vices to the poet's readers, a public corrupted by Hollywood and the Book of the Month club, says Brooks
 - For the modern poet is not addressing simple primitives but a public sophisticated by commercial art
- For a look at irony in modern poetry, take Randall Jarrell's "Eighth Air Force"
 - If, in an odd angle of the hutment,
A puppy laps the water from a can
Of flowers, and the drunk sergeant shaving
Whistles *O Paradiso!*—shall I say that man
Is not as men have said: a wolf to man?

The other murderers troop in yawning;
Three of them play Pitch, one sleeps, and one
Lies counting missions, lies there sweating
Till even his heart beats: One; One; One.
O murderers! ... Still, this is how it's done:

This is a war.... But since these play, before they die,
Like puppies with their puppy; since, a man,
I did as these have done, but did not die—
I will content the people as I can
And give up these to them: Behold the man!

I have suffered, in a dream, because of him,
Many things; for this last saviour, man,
I have lied as I lie now. But what is lying?
Men wash their hands, in blood, as best they can:
I find no fault in this just man.

- There are no superfluous parts, no dead or empty details
- The airmen in their hutment are casual enough and honest enough to be convincing
- The raw building is domesticated: there are the flowers in water from which the puppy is drinking; there is the drunken sergeant whistling an opera aria as he shaves; friends casually playing cards

- Theses “murderers,” as the poet casually calls the airmen, display a touching regard for the human values
 - These men play with their puppy
- So after seeing this opening tableau of domesticity and friendship, how can one say that man is a wolf to man?
 - But the casual presence of the puppy in the hutment allows us to take the stanza both ways – for the dog is a kind of tamed and domesticated wolf
 - Thus the presence of the dog may prove the contrary, that the hutment is in fact a wolf den; after all even a wolf plays with its puppies
- The second stanza takes the theme to a perfectly explicit conclusion
 - As these men sleep and play cards and the like at least one is there counting himself and his companions as murderers
 - The counting man’s unvoiced cry “O murderers”
 - This cry of “O murderers” is met, countered, and dismissed with the next two lines: “...Still this is how it’s done: / This is a war...”
- This note of specious and cynical apology and excuse (simply that bad things are done in war), prepares for a brilliant and rich resolving image, the image of Pontius Pilate
 - The poet is trying, like Pilate, to placate a clamoring crowd of people, by giving them what they want, by indicting Christ or the airmen respectively
 - As Pilate says “behold the man!” to the crowd, the poet says that to the audience, “behold the airmen!”, essentially
- The integrity of man itself is at stake in this poem
 - Is man a cruel animal, a wolf, or is he the last savior, the Christ of our secular religion of humanity
- The Pontius Pilate metaphor, as the poet uses it, becomes a device for tremendous concentration
 - For the speaker (presumably the young airman who cried “O murderers”) is himself the confessed murderer under judgment, and also the Pilate who judges, and, at least as a representative of man, the savior whom the mob would condemn
 - The speaker is even Pilate’s better nature, i.e. Pilate’s wife, for the lines “I have suffered, in a dream, because of him, / Many things” is merely a rearrangement of Matthew 27:19, the speech of Pilate’s wife to her husband
 - Matthew 27:19 – “While Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.”

- The speaker's dilemma is that modernity has had high hopes for man – but are these hopes merely a dream? Is man incorrigible, merely a cruel beast?
 - The speaker's present tortured state springs from that hope for man, and from his reluctance to dismiss that hope in man's magnanimity as merely an empty dream
 - Thus the Pilate in this poem is more hard-pressed than the Roman magistrate himself – first the speaker must convince himself of this last savior's innocence
 - In other words, the speaker must believe that man is humanity's last savior, and must acquit man of all the atrocities man commits that would seem to negate this fact
- The poem, though, ends on a hopeless note, as the speaker cannot bring himself to truly exonerate man and must lie on man's behalf
 - “Many things; for this last saviour, man, / I have lied as I lie now.”
 - The speaker says he must lie for man in order to say “I find no fault in this just man”
 - The speaker even asks “But what is lying” as if to say, compared to man's great inhumanities what is a simple little lie
- What is the meaning of “Men was their hands in blood, as best they can: / I find no fault in this just man.”
 - It can mean: since my own hands are bloody, I have no right to condemn the rest
 - It can mean: I know that man can love justice, even though his hands are bloody, for there is blood on mine
 - It can mean: Men are essentially decent – they try to keep their hands clean even if they have only blood in which to wash them
 - None of these meanings cancels out the others; all are relevant, and each meaning contributes to the total meaning
 - Indeed, there is not a facet of significance which does not receive illumination from the figure
- We do not ask the poet to bring her poem in line with our personal beliefs – still less to flatter our personal beliefs
 - What we do ask is that the poem dramatize the situation so accurately, so honestly, with such fidelity to the total situation that it is no longer a question of our beliefs, but of our participation in the poetic experience
 - Poetry is not a rendition of the citizen's creed or the poet's creed – indeed, poetry must carry us beyond the abstract creed into the very matrix out of which, and from which our creeds are abstracted