

GLAMOUR AND THE END OF IRONY

Harvie Ferguson

Irony has been closely linked with personal identity in modern times, Harvie Ferguson argues, and the changing nature of this link provides analytic purchase on new conceptions of the self in contemporary society. Tracing its historical interrelation, he suggests that irony emerged as a practical solution to a vexing identity problem. The self was conceived as wholly inward and unique, and thus could not be directly communicated, and yet self-expression was, at the same time, viewed as essential to freedom. Irony, a form of negative communication, dissolved the disjunction by allowing the authenticity of the inner self to be expressed indirectly by affirming its opposite. Essentially, irony became a device that allowed for a separation of the public self from the private self. In this seeming detachment, the fact of an inner self was revealed, yet its deep inner workings could remain hidden, protected from view. Ferguson turns to the question of identity in contemporary society and argues that with the decline of the notion of the self as an inner depth and a new preoccupation with surfaces, irony ceases to function in the communicative role it has long occupied.

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SINCE THE ROMANTICS, who advertised the stunning insights of the first moderns, irony has waned. Everyone, of course, must remain on nodding terms, so to speak, with the ironic. It remains significant as a technique of affirming membership in a specific “in-group.” But irony in the Romantics’ sense is no longer in evidence; as an all-embracing literary and metaphysical position, it seems to have had its day, and now it must be content with playing its part, with other figures, in the repertoire of modern rhetorical devices. Of course discourse has now become a matter of living and breathing, a style of life rather than a mode of speech alone; but all the same, few would confess to, far less boast of, living-out an ironic style of life.

Irony as a social form of communication exists in the period of developing individualism, a period in which voluntary communities and exclusive social groupings can form. The period of high modernity is inimical to irony in that sense because, for the most advanced societies, all communities tend ideally to be dissolved in the continuous flux of civil society.

The interchangeability of persons, the anonymity of large-scale organization, the division of labor, the legal-rational forms of authority, the decay of personal relations as a form of political organization and public life—all mean that, most of the time, social interaction takes place among strangers devoid of distinguishing inwardness. Identity thus becomes a purely “inward” and personal marker, rather than something to be displayed. “Communities” are conjured by special occasions, as in large sporting events, which are expressive only of a carefully staged show of emotion. Among the most fervent supporters, as among the most devout fashion worshipper, nothing, in fact, is being communicated about the “inner-person.” Modes of identification are at the same time displays of “role-distance.” The privacy of the modern self becomes a secret even from itself—an obscure inner region that, in spite of the interpretive efforts of Freud, ultimately resists clarification. The individual cannot, thus, even use irony on himself or herself as a maieutic device to bring

forth the hidden personality, as no such being any longer clothes itself in the possibility of existence.

Ought we to refer, indeed, to the end of irony like the end of ideology—and for much the same reason? If irony betrays the “depth” and hiddenness, the inwardness, of the soul and always works “from below the surface,”¹ then the contemporary age is no longer an age of irony. Now the soul is exposed, open, spread flat like the page of a book; there is nothing interior, underneath, or hidden. There is no disjunction or rupture upon which irony can get to work and in which it might take root. The most advanced societies are notoriously insensitive to irony. Identity is no longer linked to irony, nor is it secreted in the “ego.” Rather, it openly displays itself in a vortex of disconnected experiences.

Now there is no need to be ironic because no one would imagine that “depth,” authentic or otherwise, is being expressed. The non-ironic identity of contemporary society, unlike that of pre-modern society, is not based on trust, or on openness, but on superficiality—on the glamour of the modern personality and of modern identity.

Personality, that is to say, is no longer that “deep” selfhood that can only be expressed indirectly and ironically, but has become an aspect of the network of relations in which it is implicated. Social and personal identities are reconciled in the unity of fashion. Personality and self-image are no longer fixed from within but easily adapt themselves to the continually changing circumstances of time and place. The personality, shiny and mirror-like, is a glamorous soul. This is not because the contemporary world has in some way lost sight of reality, or cut itself off from every form of humanly meaningful relation but, rather, that for the contemporary world, the surface of things has been consecrated as the paramount “reality.” The contem-

¹ Douglas C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969) 5.

porary world is conceptualized as continuous with the self, an extended, energetic, and sensitive surface upon which is registered the continuous flux of experience. Identity, in such a world, cannot be a function of interior self-expression or the outcome of a process of actualization; there is no interior to express or to actualize.

The non-ironic mood—melancholic still, but no longer detached and superior, no longer heavy with suppressed passion—is very well expressed, for example, in the contemporary American writer Richard Ford. His celebration of the ordinariness of American life, or one section of it at any rate, seems, to a European reader still charmed by irony, to be so sincere that it *must* be ironic through and through; however, given that it might be read in two ways, Ford plausibly represents a non-ironic, and yet non-naïve, central character who claims at one point, “I can’t bear all the complications, and long for something that is façades-only. . .”²

He depicts the amorphous, and more or less anonymous, drifting soul and the contemporary world of appearances on which it floats: “And for a moment I find it is really quite easy and agreeable not to know what’s next . . .”³ Ford’s character experiences the serenity of finding pleasure without identity: “All we really want is to get to the point where the past can explain nothing about us and we can get on with life.”⁴ The abandonment of the personal past, more than any other aspect of the novel, makes it clear that he is serious about rejecting the unequal struggle of self-actualization. Though, of course, he cannot really be serious about that either. This lightness, the floating quality of the sportswriter (an ideal postmodern occupation) is quite unlike the detachment of the ironist. And, in spite of the phenomenological similarity, he is not bored, not “seriously” bored in Heidegger’s sense, not the “profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog,

² Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (London: Harvill, 1996) 37.

³ Ford 147.

⁴ Ford 30.

[which] removes all things and men and oneself with it into a remarkable indifference.”⁵ But this drifting is engagement. He is fully absorbed in and by reality; it is just that this reality remains ill-defined and fluid. He is borne effortlessly in the directionless and intermittent currents of life. This characterization of contemporary life as a ubiquitous sense of drifting, in contrast to the rectilinear motion of self-actualizing intentions, resonates with much of the literature of this century and is by no means confined to recent examples. Its most complete and (ironically) its most profound expression can be found in Robert Musil’s masterpiece *The Man Without Qualities*.

Identity for a person without qualities becomes a more or less arbitrary matter of social relations. Identity can be multiple, transformative, and variable without impinging on the obstructive notion of an inner soul. Social identity is expressed not in terms of ego-based utterances but in terms of superficial signs: clothing, style of life, advertising, and so on.

Glamour is non-ironic non-identity—a surface gloss, which, in fact, neither conceals nor reveals the “person.” Glamorous personal accessories are, in this sense, non-ironic commodity consumables, taken up and put down as is convenient. Once the ego-self relation is split apart, it becomes possible to parade quasi-self-identities like any other aspect of fashion. Glamour is exciting; in it the self loses itself, abandoning itself to appearance. Whereas the classical ego recognized itself in melancholy, in a gloomy despair, the contemporary self (non-self) recognizes itself in the despair of glamour. Glamour is the exclusiveness of money alone, and it requires no effort, no refinement of taste, to consume. Glamour does not expose the private—it is not conspicuous consumption—so much as it transforms

⁵ Martin Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 101, as quoted in Pat Bigelow, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Writing*, Kierkegaard and Postmodernism (Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, 1987)120.

the private into the visible innocence of the “man without qualities.” The lives of the rich and famous become glamorous not because they are unable to conceal how they live privately, or because they court publicity to become yet more rich and famous, but because glamour in itself de-individuates and disintegrates all boundaries; the glamorous is essentially public.

Has, then, the “age of irony” passed to be replaced by an “age of glamour” in which appearance is consecrated as the only reality in which both personal and social identities are assimilated to a new culture of consumerism?⁶ Possibly. Where it does not matter what sort of person one is—even to that person himself or herself—then neither identity nor irony remains important, and there are only the continuously shifting boundaries of impersonal and transient life contents. In this context, identity is a transitory selfhood, momentarily distinguished from what might be termed the “background radiation” of self-presence. This hardly amounts to an alternative spectator ego, watching over the whole comedy. There remains not much more than a bare impersonal presence, a quality of hereness and nowness, which lends to the fleeting experience of conventionalized selfhoods their peculiar, but intermittent, primacy.

Modernity thus moves through a period of “authentic” selfhood to one of “ironic” selfhood to a contemporary culture of what might be termed “associative” selfhood—a continuous “loosening” of the tie between an “inner” soul and an “outer” form of social relation. A certain contemporary infatuation with the notion of “irony” as the inauthentic is surely misplaced. The age of irony is primarily the age of high capitalism; the post-modern is, in contrast, the age of glamour.

Yet we remain aware of ourselves as individuals; personal identities are not wholly dissolved into immediate relations. Or, rather, of the

⁶ See Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997).

modes of identity and non-identity available to us, “old-fashioned” individualism remains a possibility. It seems that modes of experience persist in us, or through us, which not only have their origin in the past but also continue, as it were, to point to a vanished social and cultural context. We do not live only in the contemporary world, but at every period in the development of Western society—pre-modern as well as modern. We thus “feel” ourselves to be in one moment souls enclosed in bodies, and then, in the next moment, we are spread out as extended surfaces, or become primitive cosmological schemas.

Identities, thus, are continuous oscillations, movements from one world to another. And irony, its protean form adapting to contemporary conditions, now expresses the freedom of this movement and the false limitations of accepting any position or perspective as genuine and authentic. Contemporary identity has the added advantage, as it were, of being a self-conscious form of historicism and perspectivism. Without irony we remain unaware of this and cannot commit ourselves even to the possibility of variety. Irony, thus, has become a technique of losing rather than gaining the soul. Indeed, contemporary irony has become self-consciously historical and social. It is a succession of forms, now “postmodern” superficiality, now the depth of the soul—a succession from which we do not detach ourselves but adopt in relation to it, at appropriate moments, an “ironic” or a non-ironic standpoint. This perspectivism might be regarded as itself a thoroughgoing irony. The idle playing with forms with which Hegel charged the Romantics has become, rather than an extreme measure of individuation, the general condition of contemporary life. More optimistically, it may be closer to Thomas Mann’s understanding of irony as, “adopting, one after another, an infinity of points of view in such a way that they correct each other; thus we escape all one-sided *centrismes* and recover the impartiality of justice and reason.”

As in the postmodern world, all distinctions become fluid, boundaries dissolve, and everything can just as well appear to be its oppo-

site; irony becomes the perpetual sense that things could be somewhat different, though never fundamentally or radically different.

Modernity, that is to say, has become so well established (as post-modernity) that it can now allow individuals not simply the reconciling luxury of an inner and harmless freedom—a personal identity conceived as a soul—but also the freedom to express themselves, and, even more significantly, to act without expressing themselves and to abandon altogether the pursuit of personal identity. Modernity has become so effectively institutionalized that it no longer requires that its subjects be individuated, personalized, and identified in terms of the unique qualities of inwardness.

In this perspective the inexplicable succession of events and images exercises a fatal power over us. The world becomes so confident in its appearance (glamour) that it parades itself before us and humiliates our puny efforts to assert ourselves, ironically or actually, over its objectivity. Now, rather than the exalted subject rising ironically above the world of its own limiting objectivity, the irresistible force of this very objectivity transforms every subject into a plaything of its casual irony.