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## Words and Worlds: Irony Makes Literary Creations

*Alastair Goff*

### Abstract

In this paper I take up anew the suggestion recurrent in the work of Kierkegaard and Lukács, among others, that literature is fundamentally ironic. Literary creations, I argue, are ironic because they convey the real world, even though the worldhood of this world is ineffable. In creating a world from words in a novel or poem, the author confronts his or her own scepticism about the possibilities of written expression. Literary creations are only completed when the reader is able to engage with the world of words that is constituted in the work, and to realize that what is said in the writing does not exhaust the literary creation as a whole.

### Key Words

aesthetics of literature, Broch, creation, expression, Faulkner, irony, Kierkegaard, knowledge, Lukács, reading, silence, symbol, worlds, words, writing

### 1. Introduction

In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard struck the method of Socrates against the work of Hegel, Solger, and Friedrich Schlegel, sparking a fire so bright as to make literature's ironic shadow, that the beauty of the work of art had up until then diminished, suddenly obvious to all. The irony of literature does not emerge in the craftsman-like manipulation of tropes within the manifold of a work, but is the spirit that characterizes it in its unity and defines the act of writing itself. Irony, maintains Kierkegaard, "is not present at some particular point of the poem, but is omnipresent in it, so that the irony visible in the poem is in turn ironically controlled. Therefore irony simultaneously makes the poem and the poet free."<sup>[1]</sup>

Yet irony is both the essence of literature and its fundamental failing-the quality that means that literature can never "reconcile" us with the factual world we must inhabit.<sup>[2]</sup> In leading us to see literature for its ironic self, Kierkegaard pre-empted the contemporary dismissal of literature as negatively escapist. Poetry is here, as for Plato, an attempt to evade the world rather than to better understand it. This paper aims to reject all such claims about literature and irony, to show indeed that it is only through irony that a connection between writing and the world is established. It is not a debasing escapist tendency that drives literature towards irony but the author's realization of the limits of the word-her or his acknowledgement of what can and cannot be written.

The second part of this paper will contain reflections on irony itself-whether there is such a thing as a "concept" of irony and whether irony can be defined. This section will undergird all my later arguments. The third part will set out the ironic nature of literary creations. The fourth section will briefly distinguish ironic from symbolic conceptions of literature. The fifth section will explain why irony is necessary to literature. While this paper takes aesthetics as its subject and is a work

of philosophy, the discussion will significantly incorporate considerations drawn from literary theory; hence, an ulterior interest of this essay is to display how critical examinations of literature can profoundly enrich the philosophy of literature and aesthetics.

## 2. What Is Irony?

Irony is a concept that has become progressively more diversified throughout the history of literary theory. Friedrich Schlegel's response to the unremitting recurrence of examples of irony in everyday life seems equally appropriate as a reaction to the diverse incarnations of irony we encounter in contemporary scholarship: liberal irony; romantic irony; absolute irony; suspensive or post-modern irony; ethical irony; dialogic irony; systemic irony; negating irony; judicial irony; new-critical irony; rhetorical irony; dramatic irony; poetic irony; classical irony; comic and tragic irony. . . "What gods will rescue us from all these ironies?"<sup>[3]</sup> Although I do not consider the project a hopeless one, a book-length literary survey would be the only suitable medium for the construction of a definition that delineates and integrates the features that make these various permutations of irony irony. Thus I will here consider only the vital characteristics that these forms of irony possess in common, and utilize a description of these key elements as the basis for my discussion of the irony of literary creations.

Irony is a form of self-negation; its intention is always to deny the meaning that the written or spoken words make clear. Kierkegaard refers to the ironic trope as a figure of speech that "cancels itself."<sup>[4]</sup> According to Joseph Dane, this characteristic of irony possesses its origins in the earliest rhetorical uses of the ironic mode. The rhetorician who, in pronouncing ironically, claims superiority over the target of his or her criticisms, establishes a hierarchical relationship between him- or herself and the ironic subject of criticism (the *eirōn*). It is over the *eirōn* that the ironist is victorious. Following romantic irony, notes Dane, this hierarchy of persons is translated to the arena of meaning, and all ironic discourse comes to manifest a hierarchy that reflects the relationship of speaker and *eirōn*: the hidden meaning of language that is wielded ironically takes precedence over the meaning that is superficially obvious.<sup>[5]</sup> However, even if self-negation is vital to irony, the phrase that is subordinated and overcome is not consequently forgotten. The real meaning of the ironic statement is hidden and not understood by all, but should the possibility of moving between the superficial and hidden meanings disappear, irony itself becomes lost. That irony is not the higher, freer meaning alone cannot be neglected.

Irony must therefore be interpreted as both what is said and as more than what is said.<sup>[6]</sup> Words left unpronounced constitute the sharp edge of ironic discourse. However, this layer of meaning that transcends open speech may well contain, not simply meanings the direct verbalization of which would lessen their effect, but likewise thoughts that could never receive proper expression. J.A.K. Thomson illuminates this quality of irony through a comparison between two descriptions of cities in plague times-the account provided by

Thucydides in his history of the Peloponnesian War and the story presented in Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*. Where Defoe's tale is resplendent with detail, Thucydides devotes no more than a few pages to description of the plague that beset Athens. Recognizing that, despite its brevity, the account of Thucydides is inestimably more affecting than that of Defoe, Thomson reflects thus on Thucydides' retelling: "There is no more to be said, he implies. But none knew better that there was a great deal more to be thought and felt; and when this happens we have Irony."[\[7\]](#) Thomson highlights the inaccuracy that inheres in imagining ironic discourse to consist exclusively in a contrast between enunciative propositions: irony presents thoughts that *cannot* be articulated. It *is* more than it *seems*, and does not merely *say* more than it apparently does. Irony accomplishes not just "what lies beyond the reach of direct communication" but conveys ideas that entirely surpass verbalization.[\[8\]](#)

If my comments thus far have pertained to the *structure* of irony, then the *spirit* of irony is inherently sceptical. Whether this is true in the sense that the ironist is doubtful about the claim that the real world possesses on his or her purposeful attention, such that s/he can, in good conscience, endeavor to escape it, or whether the ironist begins from the belief that reality can never be understood by non-ironic discourse and so depends on the ironic mode in order to be comprehended may, at this point, remain an open question. However, I think Richard Rorty captures something peculiar to the doubt that lies at the core of irony in characterizing the ironist as being in possession of an awareness of "the contingency and fragility" of the terms that s/he uses to describe him- or herself and life.[\[9\]](#) This Rortian scepticism about one's "vocabulary" tessellates with the more general thought that irony always possesses a target of doubt, something from which it is possible for the ironist, or the higher meaning of the ironic phrase, to become alienated.[\[10\]](#)

The real place of this "higher meaning" in irony is one of the latter's great subtleties, and consequently demands more explicit consideration than it has received thus far.[\[11\]](#) Irony does not *reveal* a higher meaning because, if it is higher, this meaning is also hidden by the ironic phrase that always puts itself in the way of the truth. At most, irony *conveys* a higher meaning. The presence of a higher meaning differentiates irony from a similar feature of language with which it is fated to be confused. Irony is not insincerity but a specific development of it. In simple insincerity, the presentation of an explicit meaning-that characterizes irony-is not accompanied by the offering of an alternate, higher meaning. Yet it is reductive and false to suggest that the insincere statement proposes itself only when nothing at all is meant. Rather, insincerity deliberately closes off its true intention by declining to indicate that a phrase should not be accepted for what it seems. Insincerity lets the higher meaning remain the private property of the speaker or writer. In irony at least the existence of hidden content, if not the actual nature of that content, is presented to an audience along with the obvious meaning. For example, rhetorical irony introduces the use of gesture to indicate that a higher meaning lies behind the spoken phrases.[\[12\]](#)

The esotericism of the ironic statement is perhaps the theme that leads Kierkegaard's treatment of irony astray. One of his earliest assumptions concerning the ironic mode is that it is in its nature not to "unmask" itself.<sup>[13]</sup> From this nascent step, it appears unavoidable that Kierkegaard should conclude irony to be a form of discourse that is inherently dismissive of actuality, so that the "freedom" that irony engenders must inevitably resolve itself into "negative independence of everything." However, later in the same work Kierkegaard suggests that irony "wants to be understood," even if it does not desire to be understood at once.<sup>[14]</sup> Perhaps Kierkegaard's real intention in arguing that irony does not unmask itself is to imply that the final revelation of the ironic phrase is accomplished by an audience rather than by the ironist. Yet speculation on the interpretation of Kierkegaard is not the interest of this essay. For our own purposes we need only appreciate that, even insofar as the higher meaning of irony is intended only for the initiated, irony never fails to include an invitation for an audience to undergo initiation for itself, and that it is for this reason that it should be distinguished from mere insincerity.

### 3. Literature as Irony

If irony involves the features that I have set down, that literature is ironic is still not apparent. This section will contain an argument towards that conclusion. Literary creations are ironic because they offer an imaginary world built up out of words, yet intend by that construction the real world itself. What can be written on the page is far removed from the world in which I live from day to day, and yet the fact that, as a reader, I understand the novel or poem to occur in just that world, the world that I inhabit, entails that it presents a meaning that lies beyond that of the word. Beside or behind the world of words thrives *my* world, and this is the world that the creation brings forth. Literature is ironic, not in that it "purports to be about the world and yet is fiction," because through the fictional it refers to the real, but because the world of the creation is the real world, even if the words themselves create for us something other than that.<sup>[15]</sup> How is this to be shown?

George Lukács identifies the following basis for the irony of the novel:

The irony of the novel is the correction of the world's fragility: inadequate relations can transform themselves into a fanciful yet well-ordered round of misunderstandings and cross-purposes, within which everything is seen as many-sided, within which things appear as isolated and yet connected, as full of value and yet totally devoid of it, as abstract fragments and as concrete autonomous life, as flowering and as decaying, as the infliction of suffering and as suffering itself.<sup>[16]</sup>

The comment is ambiguous. Does Lukács mean that literature is ironic in presenting a sense of the world as it does not exist factually, with no hint of the actual state of the real? If so, then the novel is surely insincere rather than ironic and, in this passage, Lukács at most proves that a book can be written

only with tongue-in-cheek. Literature, on this reading, lacks substance. Alternatively, perhaps Lukács intends to imply that the literary creation, as a vision that is plainly an amended version of the real world, brings out the way the world truly is. The world offered in the words of the work is finer than the real world, even if the true meaning is always the reality that I inhabit and that the work conceals. This second reading more obviously skirts the mire of simple insincerity and provides us with this reason for preferring it.<sup>[17]</sup> Is Lukács' argument therefore true? It is important to consider his claim more rigorously.

Lukács begins with the thought that the objective, real world is a disordered, fragile chaos characterized by incomplete relations. The world manifests the fragmentariness of Becoming rather than the permanence of Being. The novel, that purports to present this world as it is objectively, shows the relations that constitute it as complete and stable, endowing it with both unity and coherency. Since the world founded in the novel inescapably originates in an "act of consciousness" and the understanding that it achieves remains vested in the viewpoint of a subject, this world of words cannot correspond to the objective real world. The novel is ironic in that its attempt to present objective knowledge of the real world betrays itself as a fiction that human subjectivity endows with its structure.<sup>[18]</sup> The world of the novel never captures the "homogeneous, organic form of nature," although this is what it seeks to convey.<sup>[19]</sup> This conception of the irony of the novel is original and insightful. However, it is not the correct understanding of the irony of literature; or, at least, it is questionable whether it remains the correct understanding any longer.

The novel, for Lukács, is a form of writing that attains its apex in the works of Dostoevsky. And the novel derives its superior interest for Lukács from the point in intellectual history reached by European culture in the first decades of the twentieth century. He marks out a triadic relationship between the novel, irony, and the intellectual progress of Western civilization:

Irony, the self-surmounting of a subjectivity that has gone as far as it was possible to go, is the highest freedom that can be achieved in a world without god. That is why it is not only the sole possible *a priori* condition for a true, totality-creating objectivity, but also why it makes that totality-the novel-the representative art-form of our age: because the structural categories of the novel constitutively coincide with the world as it is today.<sup>[20]</sup>

There are two clear reasons for questioning this diagnosis of the irony of the novel. First, the irony that Lukács identifies is not unique to the novel; second, if we refer to the development of literature since the early twentieth century, the world of the novel is no longer characterized by the type of irony that he describes.

Can the irony that Lukács identifies in the epic novel separate itself from a similar irony that seems evident in the human and natural sciences? Like the epic novel, these disciplines

claim to possess objective knowledge of the world, and yet their products remain the casts of human consciousness. The point is given particular clarity when we refer to the natural sciences, the peerless objectivity of whose results was long assumed. (The objectivity of the investigations of the human sciences seems, in an important and productive sense, always to have been subject to question.)<sup>[21]</sup> One achievement of the philosophy of science in the twentieth century was the realization that the objective view of the world composed by the investigations of the natural sciences is not to be celebrated as pristine and god-like. An insight from Hans Stubbe, given in the postscript to a book by Christa Wolf to which I will refer again in this section, proves particularly elucidative in this regard. Stubbe reflects on the shared status of their works as deliberate acts of human subjects as a reason for identifying an affinity between the writer and the scientific researcher. Characteristic of the labour of both writer and scientist is:

First of all, the inspired grasping of an idea as a creative process, then the analytical work on the details of the material and finally the composition, the gathering together and arrangement of all the facts into a higher system of knowledge which leads to a clear scientific picture of the world.<sup>[22]</sup>

The irony which, for Lukács, makes the novel representative of his age, is equally fundamental to the knowledge-claims of the natural sciences; for, as Stubbe suggests, neither the scientist's results nor the writer's story ever elude their status as acts of human consciousness. All comprehension, be it artistic or scientific, is also a form of "correction." Thus, the irony of the novel is not idiosyncratic, because in offering an understanding of the world that is a false image of the pure objectivity that defines the view of god, the structure of the novel does not differentiate itself from the structure that distinguishes the human and natural sciences. The novel may be ironic, but this is an irony that is indistinguishable from that which infuses other forms of human knowledge.

A second motive for questioning the truth of Lukács' thesis on the irony of the novel emerges when we reflect on the conceptions of human understanding laid out in the writing of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In such literature, it is at least not obvious that the objective knowledge that god would possess emerges as one element in an ironic juxtaposition. The possibilities that distinguish human understanding—the necessarily finite and subjective character of knowledge that is inescapably a product of consciousness—have become explicit rather than ironic themes for literature.

In works modern and post-modern, an overt interest is human understanding itself. Consider, among novels, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and, in poetry, Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of looking at a Blackbird."<sup>[23]</sup> In a novel such as *Absalom, Absalom!*, human subjectivity, manifested in the narrator, supersedes the objective viewpoint of god as the foundation for knowledge. The understanding of the subject presented in the world of the novel is a theme to be explicitly interrogated. And if we cannot easily or lightly accept Adorno's

judgment that, since *The Theory of the Novel*, in all worthwhile novels "an unleashed subjectivity turns into its opposite through its own momentum," objectivity arising through-and only through-the consciousness of a human subject, it is nonetheless apparent that the conditions under which contemporary writing occurs are not those that Lukács describes as pertinent to the writing of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that his ascription of irony to the novel cannot be made to apply seamlessly to modern and post-modern literary creations.<sup>[24]</sup>

Even if Lukács' interpretation of the irony of literature does not survive the developments in writing since the publication of *The Theory of the Novel*, reflection on his argument reveals it to be driven by a recognition that does seem unsullied and permanent. Essential to Lukács' position is the thought that a literary creation involves a clash between two separate worlds: the world of the fiction and the real world. The former is a world made of words and the latter the world that we inhabit; the one an act of consciousness, the other a free product of organic processes.

This distinction between worlds is, in itself, appropriate: Lukács errs only in assuming the scepticism of the writer to be epistemological, as possessing its foundations in "not-desiring-to-know and not-being-able-to-know."<sup>[25]</sup> The failure of his view of the irony of the novel stems from the fact that it takes doubt about the possibilities for knowledge as its basis. The irony that is supposedly authentic to the novel also characterizes the understanding of the sciences; the knowledge that a subject is capable of becomes, in the novels of the twentieth century, a theme that is overtly explored rather than a component of irony. However, if epistemological scepticism is not the grounds of the irony of the novel, another form of scepticism may nonetheless impose itself in literary creations.

Rather than embodying the epistemological scepticism that, for Lukács, defines his age, literary writing is challenged and guided by scepticism about the possibility of expression-an awareness of the inability of words to impart or represent the real world. The question is not whether-or how-it is possible to know the world, but whether words are capable of conveying it insofar as it is known. The world constructed out of words in the novel is fantastically different from the world that we each inhabit. Is this a problem we can just pass by? Is the point itself unarguable? Are there no novels that at least approach expression of the richness of the real and so defeat the possibility for irony, no poems that close upon and "capture" things as they are? Perhaps certain words or phrases do equal the phenomena that they seek to portray. However, around and in specific phenomena rests the great world itself. It is this great world that is distinct from the world built up through words. And it is distinct because its worldhood surpasses expression.

The premise of this argument is not that words lack the ability to produce a sense of world at all. The case is quite the reverse. It is only in realizing that words make a world that the ironic nature of literature emerges. A world of words is built up in a novel or poem through the engagement of



sentence with sentence, the linking of dialogue and description, the intersection of numerous perspectives on single events, the magnification of intricate elements of life that we always pass by too hurriedly. An author composes a world through perspicuous insights and dramatic inflections in a story-line. Even out of thin strands of language that seem insufficient to constitute any more than a veneer the surest intensity can be accomplished. However, this world made of words that surrounds me as I read is not even an echo of the world of my quotidian existence. The latter is fertile, dark, and vast, imbued with the uncertainty of fate; yet I am, in a particular effortless way, involved in it. The world of the word and the world in which I exist are remote. That this latter fecund world is linked to the world of words in the literary creation is irony. However, the connection is ironic not because the objective world of the novel is structured by consciousness while the real world is fragile and incomplete; not, that is, because the literary work is always colored by the only perspective from which it can know. It is ironic because the crescendo of writing is not the ineffable but the merely expressible and because, despite the fact that they may say only what can be said, literary creations still mean the real world and bring it forth. What is *said* in the creation is all that words can express; what *is* in the creation is the world in which I exist. This makes literature ironic.

It is important to be clear on this point. My claim is not that the world of words and the real world couple in the literary creation and so engender some entirely original world, the "new reality of the book"-that confused fermentation of "reality" and "invention" that Christa Wolf experiences on the occasion of a visit to the former home and haunts of Dostoevsky in St. Petersburg, locations that also serve as the setting for *Crime and Punishment*.<sup>[26]</sup> The world of words and the real world always remain distinct, and even if, as Wolf argues, we live just as much with Raskolnikov as we do with Napoleon or Lenin, we do not live with him in precisely the same way, and it is not the case that we fail to distinguish between fictional characters and historical figures ontologically.<sup>[27]</sup> My argument regarding the irony of literature is that literary creations are constituted by both the world of the words and the real world: the former is an overt construction by the author, the latter is a hidden meaning that emerges only via the reader's reflection on the world of words itself. The world of the book is composed in part by the real world, while the real world is at most impinged upon by fictions.

Yet in order to properly reveal literature for irony, the argument presented thus far must go on to address the way in which the world of words invites its own intersection with reality. How does literature achieve the ironic encounter? A connection between the world of words and reality does not come about through sheer coincidence nor is it the result of the projection of fictional events onto a real backdrop. Rather, it occurs by means of the reader's own sense that what presents itself in the book is lacking. This world is very much like that world in which I live, but it is devoid of all that makes reality full and diverse and insuperable. If the world of words is a representation or an expression of that world, then it is no more than a lie. Yet the creation *is* vivid, it *does* achieve the

reality that seems to evade written expression; it does so when the reader is willing to stretch beyond the obvious and apprehend for him- or herself a relationship between the world of the words and the real world. Only in thinking not just actively and cleverly but also imaginatively does s/he render complete and true a creation which, accepted at face value, is deficient and false. In this way, the novel or poem becomes for the reader greater than the words on the page. The farther into the written world s/he is led, the more arises an unquestioning awareness that the world of the creation lies far beyond the word. It becomes reductive to suppose that the creation is all that good writing has managed to manifest. The literary creation is the world of life *and* the world that has been written down. It is these two worlds, discrete as they are, that constitute the book as a work of art.

However, the suggestion that writing that unleashes words on the construction of worlds cannot achieve the complexity and unity of the real world may seem paradoxical. Are words expended on description of ephemeral moments or the communication of eviscerating passions just words wasted? Are references to the "skill of the writer" mere delusions? I mean to go on to suggest that irony is the only possibility for writing, and that the writer's skill is to be discovered in the way that s/he confronts his or her own scepticism concerning his or her ability to say all that s/he means. However, before doing so, I wish to clarify a prospective point of confusion that may arise in the context of reflection on irony and literature.

#### 4. Irony and Symbol

The theorizing of the work of art as a symbol is drawn out of Goethe, and has become most familiar as given in the writings of Heidegger and Gadamer. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer distinguishes the symbol thus:

In representing, the symbol takes the place of something: that is, it makes something immediately present. Only because it thus presents the presence of what it represents is the symbol itself treated with the reverence due to the symbolized.[\[28\]](#)

He describes the symbolism of the work of art as lying in the fact that:

In any encounter with art, it is not the particular, but rather the totality of the experienceable world, man's ontological place in it, and above all his finitude before that which transcends him, that is brought to experience.[\[29\]](#)

Irony is not a kind of symbolism. However, the qualities that Gadamer attributes to art as symbolic and the properties that I have ascribed to literature as ironic are, in critical respects, similar. In both irony and symbolism a hierarchy of meanings seems crucial; what is immediately evident does not constitute the real intention. The description that Gadamer gives of the symbolic might equally be applied to the ironic; both depend on the "intricate interplay of showing and concealing."[\[30\]](#) Before concluding this paper, I feel it is necessary to demonstrate that I have done more than simply propose

symbolism by another name. Why, then, is literature ironic rather than symbolic?

There is a feature of the symbol that immediately distinguishes irony from symbolism. Even in presenting, the symbol represents. The ironic phrase, insofar as it holds out a meaning to an audience, likewise presents; but it does not, in holding out that meaning, stand for it. As Nietzsche suggests, the purpose of the symbolic statue of a god for the Greeks—a wooden obelisk of Apollo, a stone carving of Eros—was "to excite the fear of beholding him."<sup>[31]</sup> In contrast, the intention of the ironic statement is not itself to evoke a feeling appropriate to something greater than itself, but to lead the audience to an alternate meaning for which that response is appropriate and that does, then, evoke it.

Given that irony has this important difference from the symbol, is the literary creation rightly understood as symbolic or ironic? Reference to Gadamer's reflection on the Christian sacrament—archetypal of the symbolic relationship—according to which "the bread and the wine of the sacrament *are* the flesh and blood of Christ," is elucidative here.<sup>[32]</sup> The world built from words in the novel or the poem is no sacrament, to be taken in and revered as if it *were* the reality itself and not separate from it; rather, the world of words is in possession of its own vital meaning. The world of words brings out the real world, but this fictional world does not entirely "pass away," as Gary Handwerk notes regarding the symbol, since it is an equal part of the structure through which the novel or poem attains itself as a creation.<sup>[33]</sup> The ironic phrase may be negated, but whereas the symbol is usurped and replaced by nothing more than what it already presents, the ironic phrase brings forth something quite different from itself.

The world of words is a component of a creation that is completed by what is hidden and brought forth. It is therefore inappropriate to say, as we would on a symbolic understanding of art, that the literary creation "does not refer to something, because what it refers to is actually there"; what is there may be there, but insofar as it is hidden it might as well be absent.<sup>[34]</sup> Nor does it seem accurate to suggest that the work of literature, as a *symbolon* immediately before us, "points to, makes us see the whole"; literature is much more than a sign.<sup>[35]</sup> Literature is irony because the reader is led, not to recognize the totality where the writing once was, but to see both the written and real worlds alongside one another and as the completion of a creation. The symbol is that unique possibility for two things to exist in the same place in the one moment; irony is at best the opportunity for these two things to exist side by side. It is the latter, I have suggested in this paper, that most clearly identifies literary creations.

##### **5. For What Reason Is Literature Ironic?**

St. John of the Cross and Ludwig Wittgenstein examine the relevance of silence for speech and writing. The final proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, numbered, starkly, 7, announces, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."<sup>[36]</sup> His cautionary instruction that silence is sometimes the only fitting course proposes a form of "mystical" silence that must be construed, not as the repudiation of all utterances, but as the refusal to speak or

write because "one can make a linguistic response by leaving unsaid what might be said."[\[37\]](#) The ambiguity of mystical silence, whether it is, or has become, a fundamental tool of the writer, is a question that has inspired numerous discussions in literary theory, finding perhaps its most intelligent critical treatment in the work of George Steiner.[\[38\]](#) Central to such reflections is the suspicion that silence can remain a "linguistic response" provided it is a means of conveying a theme—a theme that is impossible to articulate.

Literary creations concern themselves with matters that make an obligation of silence. Desire and fear, suffering and beauty are all upraised in fictional writing, and remain notions of such depth that verbalization can obfuscate as much as reveal them. Yet beyond all else literary creations are involved with the real world. As I argued in the previous section, this is a world that cannot be captured in words. The real world is the most eminent of admonitions to silence. The blunt impossibility of presenting in words the richness of the world of our living and its countless significances and interconnections impels a writer to eschew the attempt to contain it; the author who nonetheless seeks to lay out the entire world before his or her reader brings about its loss. A poem or novel that struggles in vain to fully articulate the manifold of the real world and to replicate or mirror it in the creation will succeed only in blanketing the real and never at conveying it. The outcome is similar to that of discourse that Heidegger designates "idle talk." When the use of language devolves to the status of idle talk, "it serves not so much to keep Being-in-the-world open to us in an articulated understanding, as rather to close it off and cover up the entities within-the-world."[\[39\]](#) Works that simply erect the world they have built up in language and stretch it before us as a pretence rather than conveying the real world by allowing it to enter through the words obscure the reality of the world in which we are. They present not the real world but some marvellous verbal construction that affects, yet only as the imitation of something far more vast.

If the real world itself is insusceptible to expression, the supreme work of literature consists in just that moment of pristine silence that springs from the knowledge that nothing can be said. The truest poem, the purest novel, can never be written. Yet works are written. Why are there novels and poems, not just blank pages? Creations are—and are ironically—because even if, following Wittgenstein, everything that cannot be put into words makes itself manifest, what is right under my nose may still be overlooked.[\[40\]](#) Which is not to suggest that the real world is such a thing as those great truths of goodness and justice that, lacking frequent reiteration, would be just as likely to be neglected as remembered; it is merely to say that reality is not forever set forth and depends on the writer to produce it. The peculiar sense that makes the author, the germinating fear that decides his or her, is the thought that the real world can be forgotten, and that even if its heights cannot be attained by a world made up of words, they may at least be pointed out beyond the rim of clouds that defines the limits of expression and so be scaled by a reader whose feet were once fast in the valley's decline.

The distinction between novels and poems that convey the world ironically and those that pour into the mind of their

reader only an unquenching draught of images, characters and plot can be made more precise by juxtaposing writing that does not rely upon the retention of the connection between the real world and the world of words for its success as literature, with that for which the sustenance of this connection is integral to its nature. We might contrast Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* with Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!*. We might likewise judge the genius for world-construction of Dickens against the talent for world-production of George Eliot.<sup>[41]</sup> In *David Copperfield* we experience a world that is awoken for us through the celebration of its minutiae; in *Daniel Deronda* we enjoy a world crafted with equal skill, yet one that, through Eliot's frequent philosophical asides, retains the notion of itself as pervious to the real world.<sup>[42]</sup> However, if a certain rank of novels and poems are more ironic than a certain other group, does it follow from this that our judgment concerning the quality of a particular piece of literature is necessarily or no more than a product of the extent to that it is ironic?

Such literary creations as I have already identified as channelling the real world through the world of words make a claim to quality on the basis of their reticence. We might compare them with the ironist who, in avoiding direct expression, broaches a topic and at the same time pre-empts accusations of tastelessness, tactlessness and obtrusiveness, even if, in so doing, s/he invites charges of cynicism or insincerity. Those books are unsophisticated that overshadow existence by offering a world of words too thoroughly woven to allow the real world to pass on through it, and in attempting to relate what is unsayable they become either an inferior ersatz or an arrogating trespasser on a sacred and nameless real. Nevertheless, if a lack of due discretion can constitute grounds for the criticism of artworks, few achievements have ever been affirmed as great on account of their tactfulness. Poems and novels display an artist's virtuosity and lead the substantive themes of human life along the unworn path of their own sublimation. The excellence of a book depends on far more than the extent to that it is ironic, and there are surer bases for calling a piece of writing great, if all that irony can inspire in us is gratitude for literature's appropriate hesitancy.

However, it is not due to its positive contribution to our aesthetic evaluation of a piece of writing that irony is of paramount significance. It is a world of words, as a product, artefact or object, that is most conducive to the formation of aesthetic judgments, but the world of the literary creation is comprised of both this world of words and the real world. When we recall Kierkegaard's suggestion that irony characterizes a work in its entirety, it becomes clear that the irony of the novel or poem is something more pervasive than the use of language and the exploration of vital themes. Irony elevates a novel or a poem, extracting it from an aesthetic category that tolerates and even affirms it as a falsified image of life, repairing it as the re-entry of the real world.<sup>[43]</sup> The impressiveness of works and the foundation of the claim of a novel or poem to be honest are separate matters, and it is the latter rather than the former to which irony makes its contribution. Ironic works are superior to such books as are resistant to irony only because we already consider

faithfulness a finer thing than falsehood, honesty more momentous than pretence, and a literary creation therefore richer than a world of words that obscures the real world by embellishing it.

Irony is the key to the accomplishment of honest, faithful literature, rather than a quality as a result of the presence by which we form an aesthetic evaluation of a book. Yet how does a reader appreciate the extent to that a novel or a poem is ironic? Towards the end of the third section, I argued that this realization is a product of a sense in the reader that something in the book is lacking. Is this sufficient? Perhaps it was adequate when addressing literature in general; yet in this section I have referred to *pure* and *true* literary creations, particular artworks that embrace the unsayable without violating it: how do *these* creations convey to the reader the primacy, not of the world of words, but of the reality to which silence is the appropriate response? This is a difficult question because it must respect the fact that irony is a craft of the utmost subtlety. If there is a means through which a reader understands a piece of writing as ironic, it cannot be explicit or overt and must at least introduce the possibility of its own misinterpretation. As I have already noted, in classical irony it was the use of the gesture that aided the recognition and discovery of the higher meaning of ironic discourse. The mechanism through which paradigmatically ironic literature conveys its status to a reader can be understood in a similar way. It is the inclusion of the gesture—that can in writing be thematic, stylistic, structural, or a function of the plot—that opens up the world of words for the real world. I have already made mention of one example of the gesture—the asides that occur in Eliot's *Middlemarch*. However, deeper consideration of two novels that exemplify irony and that present this ironic nature to the reader will serve to legitimize and explicate this concept.

Steiner attaches special importance to Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil* in the context of discourse on what cannot be articulated, describing it, along with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, as a work that is "pervaded by the authority of silence."[\[44\]](#) Broch's novel creates a sumptuous world of words, a world that lies on the fringes of life itself, yet for all that this world is developed and refined throughout the novel, its sheer contingency as a world of language is repeatedly affirmed. The phrase, "Burn the Aeneid!" that demands of the poet Virgil the destruction of his finest work, is a reproof to those who would imagine language to be the equal of the real.[\[45\]](#) Yet this phrase is still more telling as a gesture towards the vulnerability of *The Death of Virgil* itself as an artefact formed out of words. An allegorical relationship is incorporated through the proposed immolation of the Aeneid: if the language of Virgil's revered text does no justice to the real world, so too must Broch's novel and its words likewise be inadequate. All language is fallible insofar as it is unable to answer the inevitable critique from the world of life.[\[46\]](#)

However, the consequence of the failure of words to reach the real world is not the reduction of the novel to empty insincerity. Even as it propounds the inadequacy of a world cast of words, *The Death of Virgil* always maintains the primacy of what cannot be said:

For this voice of all voices was beyond any speech whatsoever, more compelling than any, even more compelling than music, than any poem; this was the heart's beat, and must be in its single beat, since only thus was it able to embrace the perceived unity of existence in the instant of the heart's beat, the eye's glance; this, the very voice of the incomprehensible which expresses the incomprehensible, was in itself incomprehensible, unattainable through human speech, unattainable through earthy symbols. .  
.[47]

Language fails to reach the inexpressible, but what is unsayable retains a peculiar significance. As Virgil's stream of consciousness tells, what cannot be said remains "compelling." Broch's novel indicates that we remain most tightly bound to this ineffable real world, that it is the unsayable, as a category, that bears the utmost significance for human beings. In questioning the use of language, *The Death of Virgil* creates the space for the entry of reality and, in promoting the inexpressible, it reminds the reader of what is truly substantial. Even if the reader is not directly brought to understand that it is upon him or her that responsibility for the emergence of the real world falls, the unsayable that s/he, more than language, can reach, is nonetheless proposed as the true concern of literary creations.

William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is a novel that overwhelms the reader through a radical structure and an innovative and frequently bemusing use of language.[48] Yet *Absalom, Absalom!* also subtly reminds the reader of his or her own importance to the completion of the literary creation. In the discussion between Shreve and Quentin that is the basis for the second half of the novel, Shreve, the nominal "reader" of Quentin's "text," eventually emerges as a contributor to the narrative. Early in chapter VI, Shreve is positioned as audience to the story of Sutpen, Aunt Rosa, Henry, Judith and Bon; in fact, he proposes himself for this role by ordering Quentin to assume the burden of narrator: "Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all." [49] Yet by chapter VIII, the relationship between the author of the story (Quentin) and its reader (Shreve), has been transformed:

It was Shreve speaking, though save for the slight difference which the intervening degrees of latitude had inculcated in them (differences not in tone or pitch but of turns of phrase and usage of words), it might have been either of them and was in a sense both.[50]

By the conclusion of the novel, the factual reader is led by the one narrative voice—a voice not easily distinguishable as that of either Quentin or Shreve—that relates the story of the Sutpen family.[51]

The engagement of the fictional reader with the fictional author and the completion of the narrative world through their common enterprise presents to the factual reader his or her own task in reading. As Pitavy has noted, it is the attitude that

Shreve adopts towards Quentin's story that facilitates the factual reader's involvement in the narrative; Shreve has a function analogous to that of the reader.<sup>[52]</sup> What is this function? Although we should not presume his opinion faultless, Faulkner himself offers an interesting insight into the role of Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!*. In a lecture given at the University of Virginia, Faulkner said:

The story was told by Quentin to Shreve. Shreve was the commentator that held the thing to something of reality. If Quentin had been let alone to tell it, it would have become something completely unreal. It had to have a solvent to keep it real, keep it believable, creditable, otherwise it would have vanished into smoke and fury.<sup>[53]</sup>

Were Shreve absent, Quentin's account would be reduced to a façade: it requires an input from without to make of it something real. Yet the necessity of this addition by the reader to the narrative ramifies, not merely within the plot, but between the open page and the audience to the novel. The character of Shreve provides the reader of *Absalom, Absalom!* with a hint as to the nature of his or her own task: Quentin's word itself cannot suffice for truth and requires Shreve's contribution for its fulfilment. The world that has been written down is incomplete and depends upon the real world in order to *be* something, rather than to just *seem*. This world that is beyond speech can be introduced by the reader alone. Like *The Death of Virgil, Absalom, Absalom!* demonstrates that a world of words is inadequate, and this on its own suffices for us to view the novel as a paradigm of irony. Yet Faulkner's work goes still further than Broch's: it indicates to the reader the essential contribution that s/he can and must make to the literary creation—a contribution through which the book becomes complete.

## 6. Conclusion

I began this paper with Kierkegaard's Socrates. Yet it was Plato's Socrates who inspired all doubts as to the real value of literature.<sup>[54]</sup> Perhaps art seeks only to impress its audience; poetry tells no lies since it makes no assertions; literature refines us, but gives us no new ideas about how the world might be. The beauty of writing does no more than confound us, and yet it is easy to love literature out of the longing to be confounded, from a desire for that simple joy that thrives only in words not suspended from facts. Then there is that contrary, often repeated, theme: Literature returns something to us, a purer truth than history and philosophy, in wresting it forth from the hold of human life, isolate and diminish. If irony makes literary creations it also reconciles these two thoughts. Literature is beauty and reality and includes the dreamed and the lived. Love it for no lesser reason than those.

## Endnotes

I would like to acknowledge with thanks the contribution of an anonymous reviewer for *Contemporary Aesthetics*, whose comments were of invaluable assistance in the preparation of this article.



[1] Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony; with Continual Reference to Socrates*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 324.

[2] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 297.

[3] Joseph A. Dane quotes and translates this comment from a work of Friedrich Schlegel, "Uber die Unverständlichkeit." See Joseph A. Dane, *The Critical Mythology of Irony* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1991), p. 115.

[4] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 248.

[5] Dane, *The Critical Mythology of Irony*, p. 81.

[6] D.C. Muecke, *Irony* (Norfolk: Methuen, 1970), p. 32.

[7] J.A.K. Thomson, *Irony: An Historical Introduction* (London: George Allen, 1945), p. 147. I have retained Thomson's capitalization.

[8] Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), p. 111. Thucydides himself says of the plague at Athens, "this was a kind of sickness which far surmounted all expression of words. . ." Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* trans. Thomas Hobbes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), II.50, p. 117.

[9] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 61 and 74.

[10] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 88.

[11] Although I will go on to suggest that it is irony that allows literature to defend itself against accusations of sheer falsity, it is important to note that the "higher meaning" of irony does not unfailingly possess greater veracity than the phrase that is explicitly presented by the ironist. It is possible and, in the case of modernist irony, crucial, to see irony as involving statements the veracity of whose semantic content can be of equal status: equally certain, or equally confused. See Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 30.

[12] Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, p. 76.

[13] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 48.

[14] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 248.

[15] Muecke, *Irony*, p. 20.

[16] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1963), p. 75.

[17] Further evidence to support this reading arrives in Lukács' reference, elsewhere in the text, to the "self-surmounting" of subjectivity. The full quotation is given in the coming paragraphs.

[18] Paul de Man, "George Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*" in Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays on the Rhetoric of*

*Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 51-59; ref. on p. 56.

[19] De Man, "George Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*", p. 56.

[20] Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 93.

[21] I have benefited greatly from Hans-Georg Gadamer's reading of the philosophical project of Wilhelm Dilthey in forming this opinion. See the section in *Truth and Method* titled, "The Conflict Between Science and Life-Philosophy in Dilthey's Analysis of Historical Consciousness." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 225-235.

[22] Hans Stubbe, "Meeting Christa Wolf," in Christa Wolf, *The Reader and the Writer: Essays, Sketches, Memories*, trans. Joan Becker (Berlin: Seven Seas, 1977), pp. 215-222; ref. on p. 220.

[23] François Pitavy discusses Stevens' poem in the context of Faulkner's novel and the notion of truth in literature. See François Pitavy, "The Narrative Voice and Function of Shreve: Remarks on the Production of Meaning in *Absalom, Absalom!*" in Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: A Critical Casebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), pp. 189-205, see especially pp. 189-190.

[24] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes To Literature: Volume One*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Wieber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 30-36; ref. on p. 35.

[25] Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 90.

[26] Christa Wolf, "The Reader and the Writer," in Christa Wolf, *The Reader and the Writer: Essays, Sketches, Memories*, trans. Joan Becker (Berlin: Seven Seas, 1977), pp. 177-212; refs. on pp. 205 and 203.

[27] Wolf, "The Reader and the Writer," p. 206.

[28] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 147.

[29] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful: Art as Play, Symbol and Festival," in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 1-53; ref. on pp. 32-33.

[30] Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," p. 33.

[31] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Richard J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 267.

[32] Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," p. 35.

[33] Gary J. Handwerk, *Irony and Ethics in Narrative: From Schlegel to Lacan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 83.

[34] Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," p. 35.

[35] Versenyi, Laszlo, "The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry," in *The Philosophical Forum* 2, 4 (1970-1), 200-212; ref. on 204. The notions of symbolism discussed by Gadamer and Versenyi clearly contradict one another, although both offer symbolic conceptions of the artwork. In "The Relevance of the Beautiful" Gadamer explicitly states that the symbolic "does not simply point towards a meaning" (p. 34). Versenyi's article is an interpretation of Heidegger's arguments in "The Origin of the Work of Art," although Versenyi seems at times to mistake symbolism for allegory.

[36] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 89.

[37] Jill LeBlanc, "The Act of Silence," *Philosophy Today* 39, 3 (1995), 325-328; ref. on 326.

[38] The essays collected in *Language and Silence* are each in their own way touched by the question of silence in literature, although the topic is most directly examined in "The Retreat from the Word," "K," and "Silence and the Poet." See George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967).

[39] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), H. 169, p. 170.

[40] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, p. 89.

[41] 'Construction' has its origins in the Latin *construere* (heap together), 'production' in the Latin *producere* (bring forth). See *Oxford Dictionary of English: Second Edition*, eds. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[42] One such aside may be of particular interest to us: "Here undoubtedly lies the chief poetic energy-in the force of imagination that pierces or exalts the solid fact, instead of floating among cloud-pictures." George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), p. 315.

[43] Nietzsche refers to "these born artists who can find pleasure in life only in the intention of falsifying its image." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 85.

[44] George Steiner, "K," in George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), pp. 141-9, ref. on p. 146.

[45] Hermann Broch, *The Death of Virgil*, trans. Jean Starr Untermyer (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976), p. 178.

[46] Some care must be taken at this point. Although Broch, in his theoretical writings, defines the purpose of art as the representation of the totality, *The Death of Virgil* unquestionably points to the futility of such a labour, presenting, as Ernestine Schlant has said, "a poet's renunciation of his most loftily conceived mission." Schlant goes on to note a change in Broch's thinking across the 1930s and 40s, distinguished by the declining importance of the

notion of "totality" in his thought, and its supersession by an interest in the investigation of human cognitive processes. See Ernestine Schlant, "Hermann Broch's Theory of Symbols Exemplified in a Scene from *Der Tod des Vergil*," in *Neophilologus* 54, 1 (1970), 53-64, refs. on 54-5.

[47] Broch, *The Death of Virgil*, p. 214.

[48] Arthur L. Scott's identification of the reader's empathy with Shreve's often-repeated phrase, "Wait, for God's sake wait," is not misplaced. See Arthur L. Scott, "The Myriad Perspectives of *Absalom, Absalom!*" in Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: A Critical Casebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), pp. 23-54, ref. on p. 25.

[49] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), p. 174, italics in original.

[50] Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, p. 303.

[51] The indication of differences in "turns of phrase" at this point, may be one occasion where the text is inconsistent with itself. See Pitavy's observations on the homophony and shared verbal mannerisms of Quentin and Shreve. Pitavy, "The Narrative Voice and Function of Shreve," p. 199.

[52] Pitavy, "The Narrative Voice and Function of Shreve," pp. 192-3.

[53] The quotation is taken from Faulkner's lectures at the University of Virginia and is quoted by David Paul Ragan, *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: A Critical Case Study* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 90. Ragan suggests that Faulkner's description at best faultlessly describes the role of Shreve in chapter VI and is inconsistent with his function later in the novel. I disagree. The description of Shreve as the "solvent" of Quentin's story seems a fairly accurate characterization. Quentin's discourse does seem to dissolve into that of Shreve as the novel advances. We should, however, attend with interest to a further comment from Ragan on the same page. Ragan notes of Shreve, "He provides a sense of ironic detachment which Quentin knows he lacks." Ragan, *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!* p. 90.

[54] See Book X of Plato's *Republic*.

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