

Meaning Irony

The Ethics of Irony

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In the second of this two-part article¹, the phenomenon of irony and the processes through which it generates meaning will be approached from a perspective that shows how irony not only happens through the semantic interplay between what is “said” and what remains “unsaid”, but also through the ethical interplay between writer, text, and reader. Arguments will be based upon work of authorities on the subject of irony, like Linda Hutcheon, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, and Wayne Booth.

Introduction

A story like *Breakfast of Champions* (Kurt Vonnegut 1973), in which irony is a central ingredient, raises an important question: how does a reader infer from a literal utterance that the writer is not seriously committed to what he or she states, but instead intends to dissociate him/herself from it and make some evaluative point? How should the reader deal with the responsibility that is passed on by irony? Thus the question is, how does the reader decide to take the responsibility that is passed on by irony? vind ik niet mooi (question = dubbel) The decision to see and approach something as ironic goes far beyond merely following the formal features of a text; it is always an ethical decision because it ultimately depends on moral attitudes and social engagement. Ironic interpretation involves norms and values; “standards,” which, according to David Kaufer are “critically misapplied” (Kaufer 1981: 507). Whether you want to reconstruct stable irony, or understand ironic meaning as a more dynamic process, it is clear that no interpretation of irony is possible without some idea of the value patterns involved. The reader needs to figure these out and is thus forced into an ethical engagement with the text, just as the writer needs to respond to the values of his assumed audience. Besides, as Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck suggested, all forms of morality or

¹ The first part dealt with the semantic complexity of irony and was published in *Frame* 16/2 (2002).

ethics somehow enclose their own negation; opposites are recognized and dealt with.² What makes irony furthermore an interesting communicative strategy is, as I showed in the first part of this article, that it is much more than simply a matter of negation. Irony refers not just to opposites but to moral alternatives, and demands of the reader to take the reader has to take a position among them.

How do reader and text meet?

One conceptualization of the ethical engagement between reader and text and the ethos of a narrative is seeing it as a friendship (Booth 1988).³ The elements that determine the ethical value of this special friendship are, for example, the intensity of the engagement, the sense of 'otherness' the reader is confronted with, and the reciprocity and intimacy between the reader and his 'friends'. This encounter between the ethos of the text and that of the reader is inherent to all reading, but in the case of imagery and other forms of indirect speech it is intensified. "[S]ince 'energy expended = ethical power', every deviation from the conventional way of speaking, every special demand on the listener's powers of reconstruction, will add to the effect" (ibid., 299). In other words, "ironic authors offer their invitation more aggressively, and we must answer it more actively" (Booth 1974: 41).

Adam Zachary Newton, writing about narrative ethics in general, calls this process "Saying," which is performed by all participants in a narrative; it is "the level of intersubjective relation – being the site of surplus, of the unforeseen, of self-exposure" (Newton 1995: 3). Therefore, the claim or invitation of an (ironical) narrative implies a "responsibility" (ibid., 7): a reader who engages in a narrative is automatically lured into the process of constructing meaning. It is impossible, especially with irony, to just keep your distance and watch the story evolve without getting involved. But the task irony imposes on the reader, of choosing between 'literal' and 'figurative' meaning and making sense of the interaction between *said*, *unsaid* and their context, is not always easy, and never without risk. The reader is, in a way, held responsible for his or her interpretation and a 'wrong' choice, or actually any choice, has consequences for the relation with the text and the social context it is

² At the "Narratology 2001" workshop at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen on November 1st, 2001.

³ Though this friendship metaphor is very helpful in getting insight in narrative ethics (the dynamic interrelation between reader, writer, and text) it does express a rather limited and degraded appreciation of friendship and human interaction in general. Especially when Booth goes as far as arguing that literary friends "lead me first to practice ways of living that are more profound, more sensitive, more intense, and in a curious way more fully generous than I am likely to meet anywhere else (among the real people I live with) in the world" (Booth 1988: 223).

part of.

The relational aspect of “Saying” is particularly strong in irony as it creates “immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text... In this sense, prose fiction translates the interactive problematic of ethics into literary forms. Stories, like persons, originate alogically” – or rather “the ‘logic’ which binds narrative and ethics is really a pragmatics, implying an interactive rather than a legislative order” (ibid., 13). Consequently, the ethical role of (ironic) narrative is not to teach morals and rules of conduct, or to promote a certain worldview, but to train the reader’s moral flexibility as it puts his or her perception and understanding to the test: “I must make, at every step of the way, extremely complicated responses to extremely complex signs; my imagination and ethical sensibility are stretched to their utmost” (Booth 1961: 303-304). Beyond deontology or mere theory, it is social practice aiming for what Martha Nussbaum calls a “perceptive equilibrium” (Nussbaum 1990: 173). However, no matter how Nussbaum and Booth try to stress the dynamics of these ethics and the necessity to avoid dogmatic moralism, they also illustrate that the line dividing these two discourses is easily transgressed. I think Nussbaum contradicts herself with phrases like “How should a human being live” (ibid., 25), and *does* imply some kind of norm, or at least an absolute limit to the dynamics of ethical conduct and awareness.

The common entanglement of ethics and moralism is a central element of irony, because it often carries moralistic or even dogmatic overtones, in spite of the general idea that irony can keep all options open by undermining certainties and deconstructing absolute values. Even if ironists do not ‘use’ moralistic language, but only ‘echo’ it, it is not true that this just renders all moral positions relative. On the contrary, because irony involves evaluative judgment, it automatically carries implications of failure to reach certain standards. Since norms are frequently invoked and culturally well-defined common knowledge in most discursive communities, they are always available for echoic mention (Sperber and Wilson 1981: 312). Morals are prime targets of irony, but treating them with irony in turn serves moralistic purposes. This is what creates a complicated tension central to *Breakfast of Champions*: Vonnegut (or rather Philboyd Studge, the narrator of the main story line) appears to undermine and ridicule all moralistic worldviews. Studge claims that he refuses to make sense of a world that to him makes no sense at all. As a true postmodernist, he approaches the world as a place of conflict, hypocrisy, and contradiction, not as a streamlined system that is in balance with itself. One of the most meaningful ways he does this is by ironizing

contemporary American dogmas, as the discrepancy between ideas and practices is one of his major themes. It is ironic because it cultivates the tension between the *said* and the *unsaid*. By echoing true American values like equality, liberty, and individuality, the narrator emphasizes their hypocritical, racist, polluting, and consumerist perversions in every-day life, while claiming to have rejected this moralistic hypocrisy himself:

I resolved to shun story telling. I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead, as I think I have done. If all writers would do that, then perhaps citizens not in the literary trades will understand that there is no order in the world around us, that we must adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos instead. It is hard to adapt to chaos, but it can be done. I am the living proof of that: It can be done (Vonnegut 1973: 210).

However, Studge is not "living", let alone "proof" that anyone could adapt to chaos; his apparent undermining of all morality is only superficial and it is done so overtly crude and simplistic that it is obvious that Vonnegut problematizes Studge's ideas in turn; he 'mentions' them. Ironically, Philboyd Studge fails blatantly and clumsily to deal with this proclaimed 'chaos' and is victimized by it. Still, in spite of the way he contradicts himself at crucial points, many readers who have a certain idea of Vonnegut's work and moral standing, might miss some of the irony and choose to agree with what is *said*. Thus, Vonnegut's moral fable primarily parodies its own form and the author's image and reputation as a hip philosopher (Berryman 1990: 165).

The Risk irony poses

The power of irony, which causes its emotional effects and makes it such an "ethical" discursive strategy, lies in its characteristic that, while it forces readers into an active participation in the text, there is always the risk of misunderstanding. For readers who are caught up in the puzzle, there are not enough guidelines and this makes the choice of a position tricky business: "It forces us to judge, and yet it produces disagreements that seem to render all judgment capricious" (Booth 1973: 194). It is no wonder, therefore, that irony evokes conflict and failure to communicate. To understand the meaning of an ironic utterance, the reader has to take into account every element, every small detail that makes up the whole

and only then decide on a position. However, his or her position will still be just one of the many possible positions and never 'the right one'.

Wayne Booth argues in *The Company We Keep* that “we should make our choices from among formal fictions pretty much as we make them in the rest of life,” taking into account “the unique value of fiction: its relatively cost-free offer of trial runs” (Booth 1988:485). And Martha Nussbaum argues something similar: with literature “we are detached perceivers (...) liberated from (...) the hard jolted shocks of the real surprises that mark our actual personal relations. Reading is a preparation for life that is lived at one remove from life, a life that gains fineness and clarity by warding off certain risks and dangers” (ibid., 188). This might be so, but I do not think this is quite true when irony is involved, because then choices *do* have consequences for the interpreter’s position in “the rest of life”, and they *do* cause “hard jolted shocks.” Irony forces readers into self-exposure, while their choices express their ethical position: the risky line between the ethics of literary discourse and the ethics and emotions of 'real life' is crossed.

Breakfast of Champions illustrates this point in an extremely banal and simplistic manner. The novel evolves around two main characters, Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout, and culminates in the disastrous effect Trout’s books have on Hoover.

Trout did not expect to be believed. He put the bad ideas into a science-fiction novel, and that was where Dwayne found them. The book wasn’t addressed to Dwayne alone. Trout had never heard of Dwayne when he wrote it. It was addressed to anybody who happened to open it up. It said to simply anybody, in effect, “Hey – guess what: You’re the only creature with free will. How does that make you feel?” And so on. It was a *tour de force*. It was a *jeu d’esprit*. But it was mind poison to Dwayne. (Vonnegut 1973: 15)

Basically, Trout’s story, which has the form of a letter from the Creator of the Universe to the only creature he endowed with free will, is taken too seriously while it was meant to be ironic. Hoover’s 'wrong choice', for the literal meaning of the text, added to the misconception that the story was addressed to him personally, turned him into a “homicidal maniac” (ibid., 56). This example underlines that the risk of misunderstanding is particularly inherent to irony. But it is not just the risk for the interpreter to draw the wrong conclusions, but also for the ironist: if his or her words are taken literally, he or she can lose touch with the audience. To avoid this and to reduce the risk of being misunderstood, an ironist can warn readers that irony is at stake by using certain markers.

The Edgy Ethics of Irony

The riskiness that is inherent to irony is closely connected with another central characteristic, which Linda Hutcheon calls its critical, or evaluative “edge”: “There is an affective ‘charge’ to irony that cannot be ignored and that cannot be separated from its politics of use if it is to account for the range of emotional response and the various degrees of motivation and proximity” (Hutcheon 1994: 15). It is the critical impact of this edge that distinguishes irony from mere ambiguity. Emotions play a key role in this narrative situation and determine its ethical impact; they signify that reading is not simply a matter of detached evaluation, but that it entangles the reader. As Newton shows in *Narrative Ethics*, the impact of the ironist on the interpreter “precedes rational decision and choice – it is first *felt* as exposure. To read is to be vulnerable” (Newton 1995: 65). As argued before, reading implies a responsibility, which goes two ways: the first is to surrender to the story, to be immersed in it and to “*think the thoughts of another*.” The second is to reflect upon this experience from an “aesthetic distance”, seeing it in a “real world” perspective. “Intellectually, I never stop playing [this] double role (...) but the two roles overlap whenever I laugh, weep, sweat, or tremble” (Booth 1988: 139, 205; Newton 1995: 19). Irony is not simply an intellectual procedure, but specifically aims for such an overlap of roles, provoking a combination of emotional immersion and a reflection upon this immersion. Because it is never absolutely clear what position the ironic text asks you to take, and because it does not allow for detachment, emotions are almost always a component of the process of irony.

The rhetoric of irony accomplishes a form of pathos; its ambivalence has an affective charge and can make you feel uneasy, undermining the certainties you feel you need in order to stay in line with the story. Moreover, it has the capacity to ridicule and to make you feel embarrassed or stupid. Were you right in (not) inferring irony at that particular statement? If you draw the wrong conclusions and do not get it, irony has the power to exclude you, so you better be right. On the other hand, if you do get it and see the irony of a (narrative) situation, it can cause great satisfaction and delight. Irony is a great way of making fun of attitudes that are different from yours and those of the people who share your position. It can function as an emphasis of the fact that the reader is included into the discursive community of the ironist.

The review of *Breakfast of Champions* in *Newsweek* of May 14, 1973 is an excellent example of the emotional consequences caused by irony’s edge. The reviewer, Peter S.

Prescott does not particularly like the book: he thinks it is “Manure, of course. Pretentious, hypocritical manure.” And he goes on and on: “I hate this book for its preciousness, its condescension to its characters, its self-indulgence and its facile fatalism (...) Mostly, I hate it for its reductiveness, its labored denial of man’s complexity and resilience” (Prescott 1990:39). It is not my intention to defend the greatness of Vonnegut's novel against this condemnation or give a 'better' interpretation; there might be a point in Prescott’s words, especially if you ignore the possibility of irony. But Vonnegut’s style and theme make a lot more sense when you see them as an “echoic mention.” It is interesting how Prescott’s judgments are determined by the (mis-)interpretation of most of the novel as “use” and not as “mention.”

Maybe the biggest mistake Prescott makes is to equate the implied author with the actual writer (who, in Prescott’s non-ironic interpretation, both more or less correspond to Philboyd Studge: it is Studge who “uses” the *said*, while Vonnegut is behind the meaning of the *unsaid*). The irony is that Prescott, in the end, might very well agree more and have more moral values in common with Kurt Vonnegut than he would be willing to imagine, because the pretentiousness and hypocrisy in *Breakfast of Champions* that Prescott so vehemently condemns are exactly those characteristics of Philboyd Studge, which Vonnegut ironizes. Philboyd’s divine pretensions as author are comically mocked when he enters into his own story and feels “at par with the Creator of the Universe” (Vonnegut 1973: 200). Obviously, he is hypocritical; too obvious, I would say, to be taken literally. But the edge of irony can cut different ways, not in a logical manner, but strongly determined by emotions.

Scenes and Discursive Communities

Vonnegut might indeed, as Prescott does, be criticized for hypocrisy, but then rather for the way he hides behind his ironic mask, since “putting the whole world in quotation marks” is not without its dangers and ethical consequences (Hutcheon 1994: 202). Because irony often marks the presence of some controversial and delicate matter, it can have serious effects. So obviously, it would be too simplistic to conclude that people who misunderstand an ironic point have the wrong attitude, while the ironist and the people who get the irony, are always right. Still, this is often the connotation of irony; it hints at elitism and arrogance.

Here, we arrive at another aspect that makes irony happen and which shapes its ethics: the social and political scene which it sets and in which it is set. It is a “political issue, in the

broadest sense of the word. The ‘scene’ of irony involves relations of power based in relations of communication” (ibid., 2). Consequently, it is associated with hierarchy, with the ironist on top, and the interpreters who get it all wrong at the bottom. This hierarchy intensifies the riskiness of ironic communication, as it accomplishes a division in the audience between those who are fooled and stick to the overt meaning, and those who see the irony and its covert insinuations. “Whenever an author conveys to his reader an unspoken point, he creates a sense of collusion against all those, whether in the story or out of it, who do not get that point. Irony is always thus in part a device for excluding as well as for including, and those who are included, those who happen to have the necessary information to grasp the irony, cannot but derive at least part of their pleasure from a sense that others are excluded” (Booth 1961: 304; also Kaufer 1981: 505). Exclusion of ‘others’ is one of the most efficient and powerful ways of constructing and maintaining an identity and generally irony works very well to emphasize this ‘otherness’. Therefore, it is a community building device rather than just an excluding strategy (Booth 1974: 28).

This community sets itself off against those who take the echoic mention as a *said*; they are the ‘victims’ of irony who are somehow put in the out-group together with the (either real or imagined) originators of the utterance or opinion “mentioned.” Because they go along with the characters that are echoed and made fun of, they become the targets of irony as well (Sperber and Wilson 1981: 314). So, those in the in-group (like us...) can judge people like Peter Prescott in the previous example and consider him as one of those people who hold exactly the kind of attitudes that are responsible for the dire straits the world is in according to Vonnegut. He is just like Philboyd Studge, who is arrogant and ignorant because he thinks he knows what the world is all about.

The idea that irony is a rhetorical tool that brings about a sense of community is only one side of the story. Paradoxically, in order to build these communities through (indirect) language, some kind of common ground is a strict requirement to start with. The ideal of “communal attunement” (Nussbaum 1990: 192) generated by narrative is only possible within an elaborate system of shared knowledge. In other words, irony can only happen within “discursive communities” (Hutcheon 1994:195). The semantics of irony depend very much on a common ground of information the ironist and interpreter have or assume about each other’s position and values. First of all, they obviously need some shared linguistic foundation, which is by no means straightforward. But then irony builds on, and goes beyond, this foundation, emphasizing the *unsaid*. This *unsaid* can only be grasped if the reader knows, to some extent,

how to infer it from, and within, the linguistic and social context of the communicative situation. For this reason it requires shared cultural experience and a shared knowledge of literary genres as well (Booth 1974: 100).

But what is needed most, is an active involvement and an intense ethical engagement on the part of the interpreter, since discursive communities are multiple and dynamic, each with their specific set of rules and conventions which overlap and change. Because there just is no one-on-one relation between (ironic) signifier and signified, it is inevitable that the reader's interpretation deviates from what the author intended, or from what others might interpret.⁴ So it is not surprising that irony goes awry so many times; it is even a miracle that it ever works as the ironist intended it, since, according to Linda Hutcheon, all irony is unstable to the extent that it happens in dynamic and variable discursive communities (Hutcheon 1994: 195). Interpreters (and writers) are never autonomous subjects but determined by their social, cultural, and ideological environment so that judgment is a communal enterprise; it is "the company we keep," both literary and "real," which guides us to determine the *unsaid* of irony.

The Intention of the Ironist and the Markers that Point to it

It might be a matter of fact that ironic meaning is determined by the discursive community, but Wayne Booth is right in claiming some more stability in this process: "[w]hat determines which values emerge in each imposed system, each new community of discourse, is not *only* what the community chooses to do with the stuff but also what the stuff itself 'chooses' to do" (Booth 1988: 86). We must take a closer look at the potential of the text itself to point the reader in the direction of the author's intention (no matter how unreliable) and to indicate whether irony is at stake or not. Less specific knowledge is required to "get it," and a wider discursive community can be reached, if it is offered in bite-size chunks, for example when the ironist makes it clear beforehand that ironic rhetoric is going to be involved.

Nevertheless, anyone who approaches irony as something that is reasonably stable, must realize that any sense of stability can in turn be compromised by the reader, who has the

⁴ Nevertheless, Monica Fludernik argues that this "Saussurian arbitrariness is well on its way to being replaced by models that centre on iconicity relations which are perceived to be more 'natural': 'the natural condition of language is to preserve one form for one meaning, and one meaning for one form' (Fludernik 1996: 18). In that case, this article would be based on a great misconception. I do not believe this. On the contrary: I think irony is as "natural" as it is going to get; it emphasizes how language and narrativity are not logical, but ethical.

potential to see irony when it was not intended. Moreover, stability can always be undermined again (and again...) because the 'clues' provided can be ironized themselves, as Kurt Vonnegut is in the habit of doing. For example in the preface, he writes things like "What do I myself think of this particular book? I feel lousy about it, but I always feel lousy about my books". Or: "So this book is a sidewalk strewn with junk, trash which I throw over my shoulder as I travel in time back to [the day of my birth]" (Vonnegut 1973: 4, 6). Does this mean he will not be serious about *anything* he writes? Is he being ironic? The reader is stuck with these questions, even though the novel offers many clues that indicate irony and seem to give some guidance for the interpreter. At least they suggest that it was not the author's intention to be straightforward or uncontroversial. However, it is still up to the reader to play the ethical game of engaging with the text and take the risk he or she needs to take. It is the controversy caused by irony that makes the ethics happen. So, the ethics of irony are deepened and intensified when there are fewer signals, when the risk of misunderstanding is greatest, because then the reader has to use his or her ethical skills to reflect on the discursive community and to indulge in an intimate engagement with the ironist.

However, for many authors who make use of irony, it is still a main priority to get across a stable point instead of provoking an unstable and complex, or "ethical", process in the reader. They prefer to reduce the chances of being misunderstood. "[S]itting before his desk wondering which of his secret ironies will be overlooked, which of his straightforward judgments read as irony, [h]e may succumb to his mistrust of the unsophisticated reader and issue a warning against identification" (Booth 1961: 373). In a text, these warnings are more limited than the arsenal of gestures, registers and other indications at play in face-to-face communication, but they can still take many forms, five of which are described by Wayne Booth (Booth 1974: 53-76). The first markers are the straightforward warnings in the author's own voice (in the form of the title, epigraph or some direct statement). Secondly, Booth mentions the violation of shared knowledge like popular expressions and historical facts. As a third marker count the internal contradictions within a work. For example Philboyd Studge's hypocritical attitude which quite unmistakably indicates the working of irony. His haughty promise to "set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career" (Vonnegut 1973: 293) is in contradiction to the fact that he puts them in a story, where only a reader can free them. A fourth marker is the clash between styles, like in parody; Vonnegut's simplistic and banal language is probably the most unmistakable aspect of his narrative to suggest irony. A fifth clue is the conflict of beliefs, which is what the use-

mention distinction focuses on (as I showed in part one of this article). In *Breakfast of Champions* this clue is ubiquitous since Vonnegut wants to strip American history from its mythology: “Millions of human beings were already living full and imaginative lives on the continent in 1492. That was simply the year in which sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill them” (ibid., 10). Or: “The Thomas Jefferson high school was named after a slave owner who was also one of the world’s greatest theoreticians on the subject of human liberty” (ibid., 34).

So, certain markers can point to the presence of ironic meaning and encourage the reader to look for the *unsaid* behind and in what is actually *said*. But what could this say about the author’s intention? Moreover, what status should the author’s intention have in the theorizing of ironic meaning? According to John Searle it is quite straightforward: “meaning is a form of derived intentionality. The original or intrinsic intentionality of a speaker’s thought is transferred to words, sentences, marks, symbols, and so on.” (Searle 1999: 141). However, this gravely oversimplifies the value of narrative meaning, let alone ironic meaning. Even Wayne Booth accepts that “many authors seem... to create works that go deeper or further than their conscious art would ever plan for, and a complete Rhetoric of Irony would, I suppose account for the deeper communings that such works invite us to (Booth 1974: 241n). An author’s intention is not a well-defined guideline since, as Kurt Vonnegut keeps reminding his readers, it is not autonomous or impeccable:

“I can’t tell if you’re serious or not,” said the driver.

“I won’t know myself until I find out whether *life* is serious or not,” said Trout. “It’s *dangerous*, I know, and it can hurt a lot. That doesn’t necessarily mean it’s *serious*, too.”

After Trout became famous, of course, one of the biggest mysteries about him was whether he was kidding or not. He told one persistent questioner that he always crossed his fingers when he was kidding.

“And please note,” he went on, “that when I gave you that priceless piece of information, my fingers were crossed.”

And so on.

He was a pain in the neck in a lot of ways (Vonnegut 1973: 86).

Still, intentionality is an unmistakable element of every piece of art, and a central

ingredient that makes irony happen.⁵ And indeed, intentions are a determining factor in judging whether the author is a good “friend” or not; without them there could be no evaluative judgment, and consequently no ironic edge. But I think it is not primarily about assessing these specific intentions for their moral integrity: as I suggested, narrative ethics is about directness and a logical and emotional entanglement with your “friends”; it *precedes* detached reflection upon their specific intentions. It is rather the combination and the interaction of the ironist’s and the interpreter’s intention which keep the ethics going.

Some final Notes On *Breakfast of Champions*

Vonnegut’s style illustrates the power of irony to play with and question the expectations of the reader. It aims to deconstruct the reader’s desire for coherence, not only on the level of the narrative, but also beyond. There is a link between the way readers are lured into active involvement in the process of irony, and the way they are urged to take a closer look at what is going on in the contemporary world. Readers who are not able to see and make sense of the irony are excluded and victimized, while the ones who do form a community of people who agree with Vonnegut and his particular idealistic worldview. According to Nussbaum, “the telling itself – the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulaire, of the whole manner of addressing the reader’s sense of life – all of this expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communicating are, of life’s relations and connections” (Nussbaum 1990: 5). This puts Vonnegut’s novel in an organicist perspective, indicating how its ironic form fits in with the content; not that it incorporates all aspects of the narrative in support of one specific, clear-cut message, but that it is a whole in a dynamic and ironic sense and that it requires the reader’s ethical responsibility to assume an active role in completing the narrative process.

Hence, Vonnegut’s use of irony is in line with the philosophy of Richard Rorty (another American liberal like Martha Nussbaum). According to Rorty, it is the task of philosophers, like novelists, to be ironic in order to redescribe, and open up new perspectives on society (Bakker and Flameling 2000: 281, 282). Indeed, Vonnegut gives us a perspective on the world as if we are looking at it for the first time or from a great distance. Irony is an important rhetoric tool in this engagement, because it emphasizes the relativity of ideas by

⁵ Intention is also what makes the difference between being ironic and merely lying: “lies are not usually intended to be interpreted or decoded *as lies*; on the contrary, ironies are really only ironies when someone makes them happen” (Hutcheon 1994: 66).

confronting us with alternatives and showing how they are products of certain circumstances and contexts. This relativity of ideas, in spite of their importance, is one of the major themes in *Breakfast of Champions*: “ideas or the lack of them can cause disease!” (Vonnegut 1973: 15). The problem is that “[t]here was no immunity to cuckoo ideas on Earth” (ibid., 27), which makes them the cause of a lot of misery in the world. The blurring of ontological levels, the levels of fact and fiction, of ideas and reality, put the world into a crisis, according to Philboyd Studge. (“I understood how innocent and natural it was for them to behave so abominably, and with such abominable results: They were doing their best to live like people invented in story books” ibid., 209-210). When Dwayne Hoover goes berserk, this is an illustration of the harmful consequences of wrong ideas, whereas Kilgore Trout, the hero of the story, seemingly overcomes this blurring of reality and illusion: “his head no longer sheltered ideas of how things could be and should be on the planet, as opposed to how things really were. There was only one way for the Earth to be, he thought: the way it was” (ibid., 106).

The irony is, of course, that Trout’s creed, “we are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane” (ibid., 16) motivated him to become a writer, who continues and increases the spread of ideas. Any reader and writer, even the most extreme postmodernist, or Rortyan liberal, needs to face this paradox, and Vonnegut does this by parodying his own style. He can only “mention” because no “use” can escape the contradiction. The 'truth' can only be represented in the ironic *unsaid* and dynamically performed within the ethical relation between reader, text, and author. Vonnegut 'leaves it open', so to say, but not so that he can safely hide behind his ironic mask. He is, and should be, well aware of the risks involved in meaning irony: “A writer off-guard, since the materials with which he works are so dangerous, can expect agony as quick as a thunderclap” (ibid., 285).

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