

IRONY: "A MOMENT IN A DIALECTIC OF THE SELF"

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Abstract

Like Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Schlegel (among many other prominent thinkers), Paul de Man is fascinated by the highly disruptive potential of irony, a trope traditionally defined as "saying one thing and meaning another". In "The Rhetoric of Temporality", he looks at irony as a typical example of the disjunction between "sign" and "meaning" that is totally in keeping with his notion of the linguistic "emptiness" of meaning, or the insubstantial character of language. At the same time, and more significantly, irony is reevaluated from an epistemological perspective, as a major figure of disjunction whose temporal structure seems to point to a problem that goes far beyond the area of rhetoric, or literary studies in general, into the much wider field of cognition; an analysis of its "empty" temporality throws light on human existence considered as "a succession of isolated moments lived by a divided self". The subtle distinctions previously made by Baudelaire between "le sentiment du comique", "le comique absolu" and "le comique significatif" are used as arguments in favour of the Deleuzian account of the temporal structure of irony – the key to understanding its epistemological thrust.

Keywords: "dédoublement", temporal void, inauthenticity, self-knowledge, "permanent parabasis"

An Epistemological Approach to a Rhetorical Device

One of the most unsettling effects of deconstruction is that of casting a veil of uncertainty on all the traditional concepts of philosophy, literary criticism, rhetoric, etc., or defamiliarising our most common assumptions about everything that we usually tend to regard as definitively encapsulated into air-tight, perfectly coherent definitions, theories, and systems. The various rhetorical devices, for instance, are no longer viewed merely as techniques whose function is to convey a meaning, to persuade a reader or an audience, or to prompt a certain emotional response in them, but rather as either linguistic mystifiers (in the case of unifying figures such as metaphor and symbol), or linguistic eye-openers (like the figures of disjunction,

mainly represented by allegory, allegory and emblem). According to Paul de Man, rhetoric is “an epistemological discipline” (de Man, 1997 b: 50) whose object of study should be considered from the point of view of its relation to truth, as exemplified by his own essays on the epistemological implications of rhetorical figures. As a consequence, the rhetorical devices analysed throughout the history of rhetoric, from Aristotle to the present day, are shown to acquire new dimensions, in keeping with de Man’s deconstructionist, anti-logocentric view of language as a playground of contradictory impulses. Of all rhetorical devices, irony is, next to metaphor and allegory, the trope that particularly draws de Man’s attention, for two reasons. In the first place, because it confirms his notion of the linguistic “emptiness” of meaning, or the insubstantial character of language which sets him apart from the entire metaphysical tradition dedicated to the pursuit of an unmediated, non-linguistic and non-rhetorical truth conveyed by an ideally transparent language: “The sign is devoid of substance, not because it has to be a transparent indicator that should not mask a plenitude of meaning, but because the meaning itself is empty” (de Man, 1997 a: 127). And secondly, because of its “epistemological” thrust. According to de Man, a close analysis of the temporal structure of irony will reveal “the factitiousness of human existence as a succession of isolated moments lived by a divided self” (de Man, 1997 a: 226), and remind us of “the predicament of the conscious subject”, which is that of an essentially “unhappy” consciousness that is trying hard to transcend its own limits, or “move beyond and outside itself” (de Man, 1997 a: 222). The major merit of irony is therefore that of bringing to awareness “a problem that exists within the self” (de Man, 1997 a: 211).

Irony, or “le comique absolu”

Like Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Schlegel before him, the American deconstructionist is fascinated by the highly disruptive potential of irony, a trope traditionally defined as “saying one thing and meaning another”, which he examines in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” (de Man, 1997 a: 208-228) as a typical example of the disjunction between “sign” and “meaning”. The starting point of de Man’s analysis is offered by Charles Baudelaire’s essay “De l’essence du rire”, which describes, among other ridiculous situations, the experience of a man tripping and falling in the street, followed by the remark that it is always the on-looker who can laugh at the situation, and not the man who has fallen (unless he is a philosopher, and is therefore able to look at himself and the situation in a disinterested, detached way, as if from the outside, through the process of “self-duplication” [“dédoublement”] underlying any reflective activity):

...la puissance du rire est dans le rieur et nullement dans l’objet du rire. C’est n’est point l’homme qui tombe qui rit de sa propre chute, à moins qu’il ne soit un philosophe, un homme qui ait acquis, par l’habitude, la force de se dédoubler

rapidement et d'assister comme spectateur désintéressé aux phénomènes de son moi (Baudelaire, 1962 : 215 ff., apud de Man, 1997 a: 211-212).

“Laughing at oneself” therefore involves a “dédoublement” understood as a process specific to an ironic consciousness: the self-duplication of the subject into a mystified “empirical self, immersed in the world” (de Man, 1997 a: 213) and a lucid self that “becomes like a sign in its attempt at differentiation and self-definition” (Idem); or “an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity” and “a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity” (de Man, 1997 a: 214). The former is a naïve, deluded self, a man who literally *falls* prey to his own mystified assumption that he has the power to dominate nature with which he thinks he has an intersubjective relationship, whereas the latter is a lucid, “linguistic” self (that practically cannot exist outside of language) that is willing to “differentiate” itself from the other self’s “major mystification”, and is fully aware of the falsely intersubjective, and “purely instrumental, reified character” of the empirical self’s relationship to nature. The fall has, consequently, the significance of a *certain* increase in self-knowledge: “the man who has fallen is *somewhat* wiser than the fool who walks around oblivious of the crack in the pavement about to trip him up” (de Man, 1997 a: 214). The fall of the naïve empirical self is the condition for “the ironic, twofold self” (ibid.) to come into being. So it could be said that it is the ironic language itself that is ultimately responsible for the disjunction within the self, by which the self comes to the awareness of its own “inauthenticity” and “self-deception”.

Baudelaire distinguishes between a mere sense of comedy (“le sentiment du comique”), manifested in interpersonal relations on the one hand, and “le comique absolu” (interpreted by de Man as irony) which does not involve a relationship between two people, or between two other similar entities, but one between man and nature – in other words, one between radically different entities, separated by the distance required by any real “act of reflection” (de Man, 1997 a: 213). His preference goes to “le comique absolu” which he regards as a higher form of comedy and the prerogative of artists and philosophers (people who “deal in language”, as de Man notes [de Man, 1997 a: 203]).

The “dédoublement” noticed by both Baudelaire and de Man is not, however, an easy, “reassuring process”: “once the mask is shown to be a mask”, de Man notes, “the authentic being underneath appears necessarily as on the verge of madness” (de Man, 1997 a: 216). Baudelaire, too, compares “le comique absolu” to a state of dizziness (“vertige”) that is very similar to the near-madness referred to by de Man, a notion that in “De l’essence du rire” is repeatedly associated with laughter: “Le rire est, généralement, l’apanage des fous” (Baudelaire, 1962: 303, apud de Man, 1997 a: 216). What prevents the inner disjunction to turn into sheer madness is the fact of its being assumed: the subject yields to “the conventions of duplicity and dissimulation” (de Man, 1997 a: 216), thereby maintaining his mental sanity.

*The Risk of Relapsing into “Inauthenticity”:
“le comique significatif”*

But is the lucid, linguistic (ironic) self completely free from self-delusion? De Man’s answer is no: there is always, within irony, the risk of the ironic self forgetting its own purely linguistic – i.e. “fictional” – character, and imagining its own function as “one of assistance to the original self” (de Man, 1997 a: 218), an illusion that is interpreted by de Man as “a betrayal of the ironic mode” (de Man, 1997 a: 217) . Such a degradation of “le comique absolu” into a “comique significatif” could only be avoided by the ironic self by reaffirming its purely linguistic nature and, consequently, its “radical difference” from the empirical self and from the “world of empirical reality” through a kind of “irony to the second power or ‘irony of irony’” (de Man, 1997 a: 218). In order for irony to keep its status as a demystifying rhetorical device, it has to make a statement about the impossibility of reconciling the world of language and fiction with the empirical world, and appear more like a “permanent parabasis” – according to the formula used by Friedrich Schlegel to define irony (Schlegel, 1962 b: 85 apud de Man, 1997 a: 218). Parabasis, the device used in ancient Greek comedy to express the author’s own views on topical issues in the form of a choral ode, was a means of disrupting the fictional illusion in the same way that the linguistic self must continuously distinguish between fact (or the empirical world) and fiction in an endless “dialectic of self-destruction and self-invention” as a condition for maintaining its purely ironic, demystifying character (de Man, 1997 a: 220).

Irony: Its Structure, and Its Cognitive Thrust

Irony, as understood by de Man, thus appears to have a temporal structure as it consists of an endless “sequence of acts of consciousness” (de Man, 1997 a: 220) that never really culminates into “authenticity” – but the temporality of irony is not “organic” (de Man, 1997 a: 222) because experience is divided into two parts corresponding to the two selves, separated by a “temporal void”: “Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the inauthentic. It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it. It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world. It dissolves in the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from its meaning, and it can find no escape from this spiral” (de Man, 1997 a: 222).

In another essay, whose title, “The concept of irony”, is borrowed from Kierkegaard, de Man defines irony in similar terms, as “a moment in a dialectic of self” (de Man, 1997 b: 170)). The ironic act of “self-duplication” is, after all, like

the fall itself, an instantaneous process, as described by Baudelaire: "*la puissance d'être à la fois soi-même et un autre*" (apud de Man, 1997 a: 225), which leads de Man to a new "definition" of irony as "a synchronic structure", determined by "an authentic experience of temporality which, seen from the point of view of the self engaged in the world, is a negative one" (de Man, 1997 a: 226) especially if we consider the impossibility of the empirical self to benefit from the lucidity of the linguistic self. The two selves, like the two temporal dimensions (the past and the future) associated with them, are permanently kept apart by a radical difference and an insurmountable void. The only truth that the highly disruptive force of irony can convey is the impossibility, or the illusory character of a unified, organic world (similar to the one postulated by symbol and metaphor). As long as irony is viewed as a disruptive, anti-totalizing figure, it can be translated, in terms that are characteristic to de Man's deconstruction, as "the irony of understanding", which brings to mind the title of Friedrich Schlegel's essay, "Über die Unverständlichkeit" ("On Incomprehensibility"), and at the same time points to the real question that, according to the American critic, is raised by irony: the very possibility of understanding, or the very possibility of reading.

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