
THE CONCEPT AND FUNCTION OF EPIC IRONY

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"The problem of irony [is]
without exception the profoundest
and most fascinating in the world."
Thomas Mann¹

Mann is right. Irony also poses the most frustrating problem. I must therefore begin with a caveat about the claims made by my title. At times, claiming the privilege of theory but actually acting out of fear or cowardice or aggression, we name things as we have to pigeon-hole them, win control over them, in order to be comfortable with them. So I offer my notions of 'epic irony' tentatively and with some diffidence.²

Irony, meaning something like the contrary of what is expressed, the conflict of two meanings, requires poise of vision. Ironic utterance has a distinctive and coherent dramatic structure, the *appearance* standing as obvious truth but eventually yielding to the *reality*.³ Interest in the term itself is mainly modern. Socrates thought of it as mocking pretence and deception; Plato added a dimension of disingenuous self-deprecation; Aristotle regarded the notion with distaste (*Rhetoric*), but Cicero did confer positive dignity, distinguishing irony as trope from irony as 'pervasive habit of discourse'.⁴ Neither medieval nor Renaissance theorists gave pride of place to the concept of irony. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, irony was taken to mean what we could call satire (praise-by-blame or blame-by-praise) and so supplied a moral or reductive function. The word irony did not mainly refer to dialectical method; Socrates' irony, for instance, was seen as an effective figure of speech "mixing blame-by-praise and praise-by-blame".⁵

Both in the heyday of Romanticism and among the post-romantics and other moderns, however, the term irony enjoyed a great fashion. The Romantics fastened on it as a way of expressing their *Weltanschauung*; in the twentieth century, the term gave voice to *Angst* or to certain attitu-

des of artistic devising or invention.⁶ Post-modern theorists, with the exception of Paul de Man, have generally shied away from irony. However, the *practice* of irony was widespread in both the ancient world and the early modern periods; leaving aside dramatic or Sophoclean irony, or the Lucianic dialogues, Cicero's orations, and dozens of other works or groups that could be cited, one finds in the Socratic dialogues and in Erasmus's *Encomium Moriae* two stunning examples of the ironic attitude, a firm and self-conscious commitment to irony as a mode of vision.

Among the Romantics, both the concept and the expression of irony grew largely out of two dominant ideas (so dominant they became at times almost stereotypical) - the notion of a mocking, capricious, hostile deity, and the notion of a universal dialectic embedded in human experience. Paradox became the central unifying norm of being. "As philosophers claim that no true philosophy is possible without doubt, so by the same token one may claim that no authentic human life is possible without irony" (Kiekegaard). What had been conceived as a satiric or reductive function became metaphysical and central, with gradations from the conventional to the quintessential. Lilian Furst has argued that traditional irony, as in Jane Austen for instance, might exploit various conventional resources; it might probe deeply, but it could not deconstruct the moral norms of social institutions or attempt a total subversion of the established order. Ultimately, "the equivocations of irony yield to the certainties of affirmation" (Furst, 67).

One of the most eloquent statements is perhaps that of Georg Lukács, who sees Romantic irony as the "normative mentality of the novel":

"Irony gives form to the malicious satisfaction of God the creator at the failure of man's weak rebellions against his mighty, yet worthless creation and, at the same time, to the inexpressible suffering of God the redeemer at his inability to re-enter that world. 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".⁷

Of course there is irony *in* the epic - lots of garden variety irony, of meanings contrary to action, of verbal irony, situational irony, thematic irony. One needn't look far: Odysseus addressing Athena, just after he has awakened in Ithaca; Odysseus the beggar in his own court; Penelope questioning him. Verbal and situational ironies abound in Vergil and Milton. Just a few examples in *Aeneid* ii: the army in the womb, *feta armis* - ii. 238, and 243, the clashing armour sounding in the wooden womb; *utero ... arma*, rather like the fetus moving and giving its sign of life, not to mention the

continual multiple ironies around the story of Sinon or of the Wooden Horse or of Laocoon or of the battle at night in the dark. In the enwombed army, the juxtaposition of creation and destruction foreshadows the dear nourishing land flowering with weapons of death in the invocation to the catalogue of Book vii or the link of myrtle and steel in the final image of that book.⁸ The ironies of *Paradise Lost* range from the divine (and unseemly?) laughter in Heaven - "Nearly it now concerns us to be sure / Of our Omnipotence..." (v. 721f) - to the ironies of Satan's triumphal return after the temptation (e.g., the nicely textured lines: "Disguis'd he came, but those his Children dear / Thir Parent soon discern'd, though in disguise," x. 330f.) and its ironic echoes of his shocked encounter with his offspring Death and his daughter/wife Sin at the gates of Hell in Book ii.

There can be many ironies and many kinds of ironies *in* epic poems, just as in all literature; for irony can be a figure of speech, a verbal trope, a tone of voice, a rhetorical device; it can be a natural result unintended or unforeseen by author, narrator, or character; it can be incidental to the action, plot, characterization, symbolism, or meaning. The ironies *in* the poem are quite distinct, however, from the essential irony that is proper to epic *qua* epic.

The problem may be clarified if we consider for a moment the convention of tragedy known as dramatic irony. While there are several kinds of ironies in *Oedipus Rex*, central to it is the dramatic irony of blindness and insight, ignorance and knowledge, fact and fact. Dramatic irony is in large measure epistemological; it arises mainly from the three-way relationship between playwright, characters, and audience - the playwright manipulating our knowledge, and the resultant epistemological incongruity between the perceptions or knowledge of agents and of observers. The central irony in *Oedipus Rex* is largely verbal, cognitive, inevitably so given the nature of drama. But it *is* central, not incidental; it drives the plot, it affects the whole experience of Oedipus, it empowers almost every line of the play. The contradiction between everything that is said, thought, experienced in the play up to the moment of *anagnorisis* on the one hand and our superior knowledge on the other sometimes makes it unbearable.⁹

Epic irony is structural irony, of the kind we suspect, for instance, in the powerful scene in *Aeneid* ii when Venus reveals the actual sources of the Trojan tragedy - not mainly the cunning and power of the Greeks, but the will of Jupiter and Neptune and Pallas Athene and Juno. (It is a minor irony that she does so to keep him from slaying her protégé Helen.) It is the kind of ironic juxtaposition of the mute image at the end of Book ii, Aeneas bearing his father on his shoulder, and the similarly image at the end of Book viii, Aeneas bearing the Shield with its unknown and unknowable cargo. I suggest that such ironies are subversive, for they spring from and focus upon the finally irreconcilable contradiction which is the condition of the human existence.

At Venus's urgent plea, Jupiter foretells (i. 257-79) the greatness of her posterity; his ringing periods coil upwards in a heady temporal spiral - the three years of Aeneas's campaigns; the thirty years of Ascanius's reign (doubtless after Aeneas's death); the three hundred years of the kingdom; and finally, Romulus, Remus, and perpetual rule - to a climax uttered in the grave uninflected tones: the utter voice of Absolute Law:

"his ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono:
imperium sine fine dedi". (i. 278f)

This prophecy is bracketed with two brief glimpses of Aeneas - (i. 220f) worrying about his missing Trojans, after having rallied the others with a brave speech that hides his own inner anguish; setting out, at dawn, to explore the terrain and try what he might do for his men's welfare. While Jupiter and Venus contrive dynasties and power, Aeneas about his Trojan remnant and their want of a city. The gulf between divine power and human heroism is felt throughout; the blessing conferred on Aeneas - his mission as founder of a new kingdom - is itself a kind of curse.¹⁰

The final consummation of power is attended by an amazing compromise, Jupiter yielding before Juno's ancient hatred. Though, as Jupiter reminds her, Aeneas will be a kind of national demigod - "indigetem Aenean scis ipsa ..." (xii. 794), he grants her astonishing suit, that the "indigenas ... *Latinos*" be permitted to retain their identity. The words are crucial. The term *Indiges*, while it technically refers to the hero elevated to deified state after death, etymologically evokes *indigena*, *native*. This land, Italy, is in fact the land of Dardanus and homeland of Aeneas, and so Aeneas is truly a native son. Nonetheless, the Trojans shall lose their particular identity - precisely the indigenous identity of the descendants of Dardanus; their name and race will be subsumed in the Latin. Casually, with a smile (*subridens*, 829), Saturnian Jove wipes out the Trojans as a race, erases the last shred of Aeneas's personal identity.

These two sections of the poem present us with the an irony as unavoidable as it is challenging. Jupiter's vision offers a kind of hope, however fixed on power; only a trivial and tawdry cynicism can totally dismiss it. But the final sellout decodes for us the political realities of that vision and of the other visions - the Elysian parade of mighty Roman heroes, fiercely revelling in their violent power; the graphic history of violence and disorder on the Shield of Aeneas. Taken together or singly, these passages imply a level of irony which most criticism of Vergil refuses to see. Not pathos or melancholy, not the oversentimentalized *lacrimae rerum* which intimate weary vision and energyless recoil from the clash of reality, but rather deep ambivalence, the objective correlative of the split announced in the opening words - *Arma virum* - and focussed in the eleventh line: "tantaene animis caelestibus irae?"

Epic irony defines the point of intersection of divine and human and so

identifies the chasm of irreconcilable contradiction essential to the human condition.¹¹ Hence it is situated in the intrinsic conflict between the ways of gods and the ways of men. (Epic irony springs from taking the gods seriously). Perhaps this appears to impute malevolence to the gods; we can never know and the poets can never tell us - not even Lucretius in his philosophical epic *De rerum natura* or Thomas Hardy in his remarkable epic drama *The Dynasts*. In the *Aeneid*, in any case, epic irony can be located in the fundamental contradiction between the two claims - on the one hand of the divine/impetial/national and on the other of the human/individual/personal. These claims may also be described as on the one hand the humanizing of the hero - the process which began with Gilgamesh's discovery of friendship and with Adam's and Gilgamesh's discovery of death - and the insistent demands of the dynastic imperative imposed on him on the other.¹² The divergent interests and diverse morality of gods and men is essential; it is that divergence which itself fully creates and embodies epic irony - for that matter, epic itself.

Epic poetry (or western consciousness, for that matter) emerges in the discovery of death, whether in the *Gilgamesh* epic or the Creation epic of Genesis or the *Iliad*, the archetypal poem of death; in all three, this discovery amounts also to a descent into humanity. In all three there is a choice of life which must therefore eventuate in death; that theme is even more pronounced in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus's *nostos* truly begins when he re-visualizes those most obvious but ambivalent of images, the smoke curling above the rooftops of Ithaca and the aging wife, who will die, and turns his back on the immortality graciously offered him by the ever-young beautiful nymph Calypso - when, that is, he accepts the claims of life (including death) over the offer of immortality, i.e., non-life. The dualist perspective suggested here, quintessentially epic, counters the reductionist views of Hegel, Bakhtin, Lukács, for whom the epics bodies forth "a basic apprehension of substantial changelessness".¹³ In the *Iliad*, the claims of peace are grounded in those remarkable similes; in the *Odyssey*, the heroic standards of the remembered war are viewed at a particular angle of distortion - Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, now becomes a placid matron; the imperatives of Achilles and Diomedes faded before the instinct for riches and long life. The Olympian perspectives of the *Aeneid* set off, against historic destiny, a sense of the dynastic imperative and the ruthlessness of divine power and of history. Thus, the hero must struggle against the forces he serves, the forces of history, divinity, and power; and his motives for struggle are his humanity, his *pietas*, and his mortality.

The gods of epic are unjust, inscrutable, involved in their own aims; such gods may toy with us or use us, and these can make for tragedies as diverse as *Oedipus Rex* or *King Lear*. But epic irony resides less in this sort of cruelty or conflict than it does in the gulf which *separates* gods and men, in the distance between them and us. The gulf can be found and

felt in the very act of advancing theology¹⁴ or in the attempt, wittingly or unwittingly but still deliberately made by the divinely-descended heroes Gilgamesh, Adam (both him of Genesis and of Milton), Achilles, Aeneas to realize more fully the human condition, in works which embody the descent into humanity, the discovery of death and therefore the discovery of form, and so leave behind a divine heritage.

We need to be careful not to think about irony as if it could be physically and morally intelligible, to justify the pity and terror associated with tragic irony. I think this distorts the irony inherent in epic, just as much as the effort to identify blame, guilt, tragic flaw, etc., in *Oedipus Rex* or *Lear* distorts tragedy. In Shakespearean tragedy, the innocent sufferers can be quite as tragic figures as those who have fallen from high estate by virtue of their own errors: is Cordelia, for instance, to be taken as a cautionary tale rather than a tragic heroine?¹⁵

But epic, like tragedy, finally transcends the easy antithesis of moral responsibility as opposed to arbitrary fate, or the even easier antithesis of good and evil.

Let us consider briefly two contrasting examples, poems which offer hard kinds of irony, or divine-human encounter, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The two seem to be far from the austere religious kind of poetry suggested so far. *Orlando Furioso* is determinedly and vexingly secular, and *Paradise Lost* resolutely doctrinal and orthodox. So at least it would seem.

For Hegel and De Sancti, later brilliantly synthesized and advanced by Croce, the central force of the *Orlando Furioso* is an irony "often named but never well-defined," which "does not invest certain sentiments, for example the chivalric and the religious, and spare others, but invests all equally, and is thus not an idle game but something much loftier, pertaining purely to art and poetry, the victory of the fundamental motive over all the others".¹⁶ This irony is like "the eye of God surveying the motions of his creation, whole and entire" and "love[s] it equally in all its parts ... because all of it is his handiwork".¹⁷ Croce thought it improper to apply the term 'epic quality' to Ariosto "because he not only lacked the ethical sentiments proper to epic, but he proceeded to dissolve in 'harmony' and 'irony' even such scraps of the epic tradition as he might ... seem to have inherited" (p. 856). These probing observations touch on a 'fundamental motive' of the Renaissance - the analogy between the poem and the cosmos and between the artist and God. Durling emphasizes the "attitude of control of an extremely complex work of art": the Figure of the Poet adopts a stance of absolute control over the material of the poem. He asserts repeatedly that the enormous richness and variety of the poem have a plan and that his narrative procedures have a rationale. He reminds us repeatedly of his presence as manipulator.¹⁸

The risk Ariosto took was that, like the Erasmus of the *Moriae Encomium* his work would be dismissed as light and trivial, mere art. In fact,

in revolting against the conventions of sublime and heroic epic, Ariosto's poem embodies, examines, celebrates, and criticizes humanistic values, the fundamental goodness of life, the basic standards of moral judgement, the sources of value, the double standards applied across the spectrum of human conduct. It is the poem of Europe, the poem of decent humanity (whether pagan or Christian) rather than of relentlessly absolutist Christendom, a poem essentially serious, trenchantly unsolemn, rigorously ethical, striving after a vision of life which is neither religious nor irreligious but secularized and radically human. Ariosto tests the very limits of epic again and again, even to serious parody, in the descent episode, of his venerated predecessor Dante. Ariosto's cool and balanced English Duke Astolfo, capable perhaps of sublimity, is entrusted with the journey into the underworld (cantos 33-34) where he finds a Dantesque inferno, the princess Lydia exposing the peculiar wickedness of these damned as of herself, men and women who jilted or deceived their lovers. Lydia's tale, notably detached and economical, earns comparison with Vergil's Sibyl, but with an effect not as in *Aeneid* vi of divine terror, but of cold human wickedness. The tale smooths the texture of evil encountered in Dante's *Inferno*. Leaving this underworld, Astolfo expends much good human sweat to seal up the entrance, then plunges into a stream to wash himself. The simple actions refresh him and us, but we seem a world away from Vergil and Dante clambering over Lucifer's flank to emerge into the fresh air of grace and joy. Just so Ariosto's version of the ascent, in the episode with John the Evangelist ("Eagle of Christ" in Dante, *Par.* 25, 26), is austere and unsublime.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* is analogous to *Orlando Furioso*. Whereas Ariosto's poem seems to separate utterly the divine and human, the putative purpose of *Paradise Lost* - to justify the ways of God to man - would appear to bridge the unbridgeable gulf. But that purpose is damaged by the unattractive figure of God even more than by the manifest energy and power of Satan, sufficient to engender heresy and persuade that Milton was of the Devil's party, that the unconsciously made Satan the hero of *Paradise Lost*, and that the root contradiction between this fact and his stated purpose created a rift at the heart of the poem. The rift is there; it is the rift if epic irony transformed in Milton's unique way. His two human heroes are "Lords of all";

"in thir looks Divine

The image of thir glorious Maker shone" (iv. 286f).

They are situated between Heaven and Hell, between Son and Satan, between challenge and saving. In the paradigmatic scene at the beginning of Book III, the Almighty Father gazes down, beholding "past present future",

on his right
The radiant image of his Glory sat,
His only Son; On Earth he first beheld
Our two first Parents, yet the only two
Of mankind, in the happy Garden plac'd
Reaping immortal fruits of joy and love,
Uninterrupted joy, unrivall'd love,
In blissful solitude; he then survey'd
Hell and the Gulf between, and Satan there
Coasting the wall of Heav'n on this side Night
In the dun Air sublime, and ready now
To stoop with wearied wings, and willing feet
On the bare outside of this World". (iii. 62-74)

"For man will
... easily transgress the sole Command,
Sole pledge of his obedience: So will fall
Hee and his faithless Progeny: whose fault?
Whose but his own? ingrate ...". (93-97)

Just so, at the center of the poem, Raphael's secondary narrative juxtaposes War in Heaven and Creation, both turning on the figure of the Son, who does not spare the Almighty's "dreadful Thunder" or stop the "flaming Chariot wheels, that shook / Heav'n's everlasting Frame," (iii. 393-396), and who then as creative Word takes "the golden Compasses ... to circumscribe / This Universe, and all created things" (vii. 225f.); so that at the midpoint of that still world of Raphael's secondary narrative, also the center of the poem, Messiah Avenger Destroyer is simultaneously Creative Logos. In sacred space, not unlike Aeneas or Achilles or Gilgamesh or Dante's Vergil, Adam is between heaven and hell, the true and worthy center of "this pendant world" (ii. 1052). It should follow from the gaze of the Father and the tendentious narrative and moralizing of Raphael, that Adam must love God only, but the poetry leaves behind

doctrine and probes complex experience. The mutual human love of Adam and Eve - love which their Creator nominally approved - precipitates the Fall just as the expansive divine love of the Creator precipitates the Redemption. The opposition is not absolute, however.

In *Paradise Lost*, the central irony is twofold: Adam falls precisely because he is *incapable of not loving Eve*: the Son forgives precisely because he is *incapable of not loving man*. Thus Adam and Eve's tentative reaching out for godlike state, while it has disastrous results for their history, has small effect on their persons (unlike the case of Satan). It is surely unseemly (if not sheer lunacy) to assert doctrinal logic here - divorce, for instance, or abandonment as workable alternatives - for that violates Milton's poetry and renders these two puppets, like the Adam of the dumbshows. This poem bodies forth human love in some of the finest love poetry ever written; Adam's love for Eve is the inexplicable and indefinable reason ("uxoriousness" is nonsense) for his heroic fall; his is the creaturely condition, not the divine condition.

There is a kind of Christian paradigm urging hope at the end of the poem in the way that the end of the *Aeneid* or the *Iliad* or the *Gilgamesh* (or even Genesis) could not; those poems reach a delicate but exacting and enigmatic equilibrium. Adam's location, dynamically between Heaven and Hell, is symbolically just right, reflecting his condition and its ambiguities. Doctrine harmonizes opposites: the Son will "die / And dying rise, and rising with him raise / His Brethren ...". (iii. 295) So doctrine offers advantage; the Redemption solves all the problems raised here by (a) bridging the unbridgeable gulf between divine and human; and (b) transforming blessing-curse into saving act. Divine contact with man will, we are told, henceforth be beneficent. Adam recognizes something of the sort in his famous recognition, "goodness infinite, goodness immense! / That all this good of evil shall produce...". (xii. 469f.) But the *felix culpa* conjecture confers no certainty on human experience. Even in *Paradise Lost* epic remains a form for both expressing and containing a divided vision. In balancing the paradoxes of a complex and disharmonious reality - like Adam's godlike love for Eve and the divine taboo; Aeneas's humanity and the exigencies of the dynastic imperative; Achilles's godlike magnanimity and his mortality - epic irony can be creative, making possible the equilibrium painfully achieved at the end of each of our three poems.

Epic irony, I believe, unites the two quintessential elements of epic - the idealized vision, the seeking for a stable universe which confers or legitimates meaning - and the recognition of the profound ambivalence at the heart of that vision. Epic poets must strive for a universal or cosmic vision, must range out to most if not all time and space, must try for some kind of order against disorder. All true. But also true that their visions of the god-man relationship are troubled; that the endings of epics often belie the apparent themes; that the imputations of intended meanings fade away before an honest reading of each of these poems.

Vergil is able to celebrate Homer even while recognizing with unblinking vision that Homer's world is not adequate to the exigencies of his own time. Ariosto is able to celebrate the heroic potential of his characters while fully enjoying their follies; he is able to look clearly at the folly of life itself without descending to the darkness of despair and healing that despair with a sterile kind of art-for-art's-sake, the kind of 'harmonious' irony mis-attributed to him. And Milton: grimly determined as he might have liked to be to make Christian sense of the world, Milton's vision is too cogent, too demanding, too exacting, to allow the poem to degenerate into tract. Epic irony allows the poet to mediate between order and disorder, cosmos and individual, power and justice, history and humanity, god and man. He will not choose "sides" or abandon his detachment or color his vision or write a satire or propaganda. His poem's epic.

Epic poetry is also fundamentally noble. Vergil, for instance, sees right through to the core of the divine terror in the universe; his response is not simply a rational Stoicism, as some scholars would have had it, for that describes too little of our experience of the poem. In this context, what is true about the troubled end of the *Aeneid* is that Vergil will not let any of us off lightly - neither Aeneas nor Rome nor the reader, nor himself for that matter. The vision is bleak, in some respects; to fulfill this part of his destiny, Aeneas must adopt the manner he has been internally battling against all through - the manner of a *pietas* which is monolithic, one-sided, single-minded, which rejects the outstretched hand and the appeal to his humanity. One may excoriate him for it; Virgil does not settle the matter; the poem is open-ended; but one may not impugn his fundamental integrity. For this painful but integral ending, nobility is not too strong or too broad a word. For centuries, epic was honored not only as the most ambitious, the most difficult, the most demanding form, but also as the most sublime form. Epic earned that distinction.

Noten

1. "Goethe and Tolstoy", *Essays of Three Decades* transl. by H.T. Lowe-Porter (Londen, 1947) 122.
2. J.A.K. Thompson's belles-lettristic study, *Irony: An Historical Introduction* (Londen, 1926) begins: "Irony, which is a criticism of life, is as hard to define as poetry. On the other hand, it is perhaps no harder to recognize. I hold it therefore the wiser course to treat it as one treats poetry, content in the main to know it when one meets it." Of Vergil, he says, "one may pass the melancholy of Virgil, which should not be called Irony because it has made sorrow only beautiful ..." 219.
3. N. Knox, *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York, 1973) ii 626. See also Knox, *The Word Irony and Its Context, 1500-1750* (Durham,

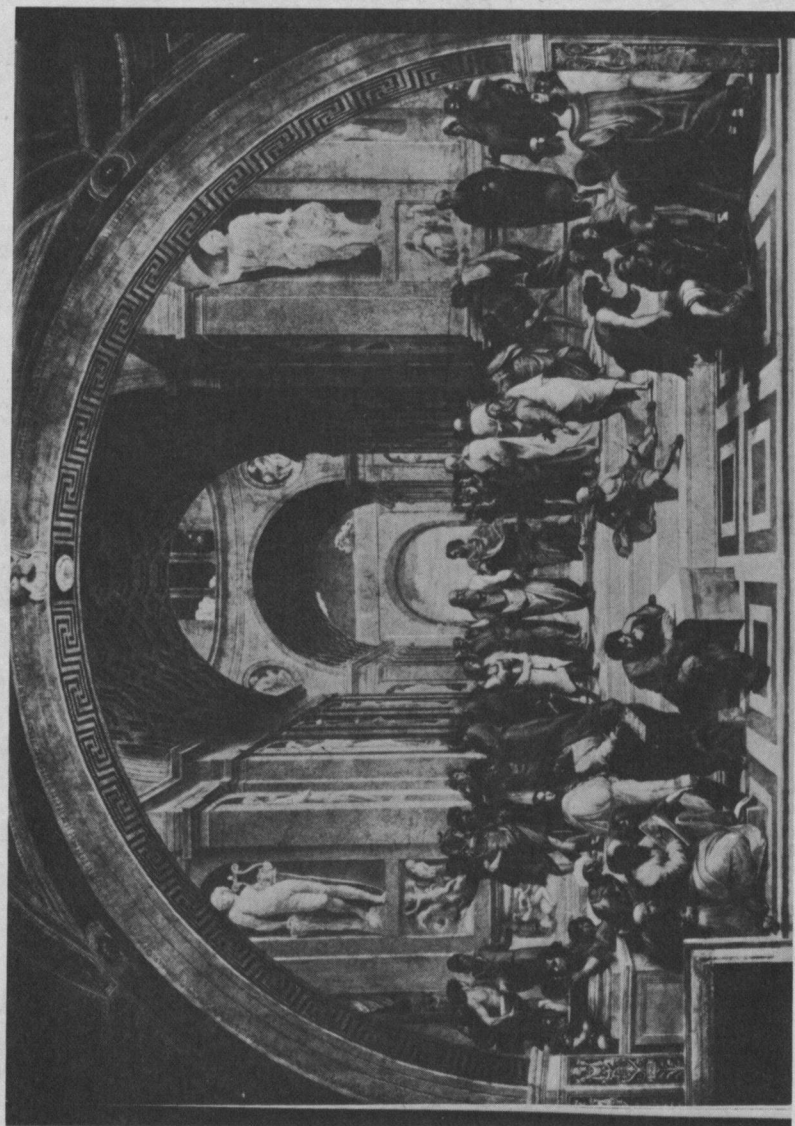
- 1961) which is particularly concerned about the term.
4. See Knox, 3-5, and his source, Sedgwick. Knox suggests, wrongly I think, that Cicero does not "imply a habit of thought or anything approaching a philosophic view." Quintilian, *Institutio oratoriae*, specifies three categories of irony: a trope; a speech; a whole pattern of life, e.g., as of Socrates, the "ignorant man lost in wonder at the wisdom of others" (ix. 2. 44-53).
 5. Knox, 21. See 183 for examples. See also Knox's categories or chapter headings, e.g.,
 Irony as pretense and deception
 Irony as limited deception
 Irony as saying the contrary of what one means
 Irony as understatement
 Irony as indirection
 Irony as ... casual satire or aimless mystification
 Irony as any discourse not meant to be taken seriously
 Irony as any kind of derisive attack
 6. See Hayden White's analysis of the deep structure of the historical imagination, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europa* (Baltimore, 1973), especially the chapters on the historical imagination 'between metaphor and irony' and on Hegel ("The Poetics of History and the Way beyond Irony"), 45-131. The most useful account of the varied meanings and functions of irony can be found in D.C. Muecke's works, *Irony and the Ironic* (second edition) and *The Compass of Irony*. For a broad-ranging treatment of Romantic Irony, see also Lilian R. Furst, *Fictions of Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984). Dating the beginning of Romantic irony with Friedrich Schlegel's writings of 1797-1801, she reminds us of his trenchant comment, "Mit der Ironie ist durchaus nicht zu scherzen."
 7. G. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* transl. A. Bostock (London, 1971), 92-93.
 8. See, e.g., Gordon Williams, *Technique and ideas in the Aeneid* (New Haven, 1983), 40f, 65ff, 247ff. In his narrative to Dido, Aeneas himself perceives and articulates (sometimes with unconscious irony) certain ironies in the situation in the night of Troy or on the journeys. His encounter with Mercury and his subsequent defense speech in Book iv, like his meeting with Venus in Book i and his encounter with the Sibyl in Book vi, all bristle with several types of irony. But there are deeper ironies, explored on various levels by, for instance, R.G. Austin in his Oxford commentaries, especially to Books ii and iv; Michael C.J. Putnam, *The Poetry of the Aeneid* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965); W.R. Johnson *Darkness Visible* (Berkeley, 1976); and Lilian Feder in a splendid and durable essay "Vergil's Tragic Theme," *Classical Journal* 49 (1951) 192-209.
 9. A further note: in *Oedipus*, as in some Ibsen plays one crucial piece

of information both creates the puzzle of the play and resolves it. The actual crime and the guilt of killing the father and marrying the mother are at a second remove from the acquisition of this particular bit of information, viz. that the person whom Oedipus *happened* to kill *happened* to be Laius, about whom there was the prophecy and because of whom there is now in Thebes the plague. This bit of knowledge brings all the other puzzle pieces together. Thus the solution of the oracle to Oedipus himself; thus the 'reason' (but this is not the place to examine the gods of Sophocles' play) for the plague, the curse begotten by Oedipus's presence. And it provokes profound happenings; it is the *peripeteia*; it explodes Oedipus' world. But in the end it is precisely a bit of information.

10. Aeneas does not suffer alone; Vergil presents many kinds of celestial incursion upon the human as blessing-curses - think for instance of Cassandra, Anchises, and Iuturna in this poem.
11. I borrow from Lilian Furst the image of chasm; she points out that romantic irony offers a dual vision which "opens up a chasm of irreconcilable contradiction lurking within the human condition." She goes on to say that "the equivocations of [traditional] irony yield to the certainties of affirmation" (65, 67). But that simply is not true about the endings of epics. See, for instance, the end of the *Iliad* or of the *Aeneid* or, even, *Paradise Lost*.
12. These remarks are developed from my earlier exploration of this topic, "The gods of epic", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (1979), 273-306.
13. Hegel, cited by Hayden White in *Metahistory* 93. Elsewhere, White applauds the Enlightenment notion that "the Epic form presupposed the cosmology represented in the philosophy of Leibniz, with its doctrine of continuity as its informing ontological principle, its belief in analogical reasoning as an epistemological principle, and its notion that all changes are nothing but transformations by degrees from one state or condition to another of a 'nature' whose essence changes not at all" (54). See also Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* 100ff.
14. See Walter Otto, *The Homeric Gods*.
15. See the rich comments of Northrop Frye: "Catharsis ..., central to Aristotle's view of tragedy, is inconsistent with moral reductions of it. Pity and terror are moral feelings, and they are relevant but not attached to the tragic situation ... In [many Shakespearean] tragedies there is a sense of some far-reaching mystery of which this morally intelligible process is only a part. The hero's act has thrown a switch in a larger machine than his own life, or even his own society. "All theories of tragedy as morally explicable sooner or later run into the question: is an innocent sufferer ... not a tragic figure? It is not very convincing to try to provide crucial moral flaws for such characters ... [Here he cites the example of Cordelia.] Here we are

getting away from tragedy, and close to a kind of insane cautionary tale ... Tragedy, in short, seems to elude the antithesis of moral responsibility and arbitrary fate, just as it eludes the antithesis of good and evil." *Anatomy of Criticism*, 210-11.

16. "Ariosto" in his *Philosophy/Poetry/History: An Anthology of Essays* (Londen, 1966) 850, 852.
17. Page 854. Robert Durling calls the comment "utterly anachronistic ...; the idea that God loves evil as much as good is a vulgarism which would have been incomprehensible to [Ariosto]." But he does see it is as catching "something central to the poem." See the chapter on Ariosto in *The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966) 250-51.
18. Durling, 123. See Meyer H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Londen, 1953) 272-77.



Raphaël "School van Athene"