Ironic Devices: Modes of Irony from Voltaire to Camus

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Philip A. Nelson, MA

Graduate Program in French & Italian

The Ohio State University

2010

Dissertation Committee:

Jennifer Willging, Advisor

Karlis Racevskis

Louisa Shea
Abstract

This study is an analysis of various devices for the production of irony used in three centuries of French literature. Theorists have typically formulated a taxonomy of irony based on properties of its production or reception while paying little attention to factors of temporality. I intend to show that the literary and cultural influence of a particular age will determine how an author shapes and presents irony. To this end, I examine the function of three devices in various works of French literature by Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Constant, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Rimbaud, Sartre, and Camus. I conclude that irony in each work reflects the literary and intellectual climate of its age.

This study also contains secondary conclusions and aims. Many of the works I examine have not to my knowledge been discussed in terms of irony and this study offers a different way of looking at some prominent works of literature in this regard. I also address some problems related to the distinction of verbal and situational irony prevalent in the theoretical literature of irony. Finally, I argue for a distinction between the presentation of irony and the employment of irony in relation to some of the works under discussion.
Dedication

For Gail and Madeline
I am very grateful to those who have participated in the completion of this dissertation. I benefited a great deal from the direction of my advisor, Professor Jennifer Willging. I relied on her judgment and advice more often than I can remember, and I cannot imagine how the process of writing a dissertation could have gone more smoothly or pleasantly than it did for me. I consider myself very fortunate to have studied under Professor Karlis Racevskis, who had been my advisor in the initial stages of this dissertation, before his recent retirement. It was he who suggested that I study irony in its literary and historical contexts. I would also like to thank Professor Louisa Shea, particularly for her advice about Diderot and Montesquieu.
Vita

Education

1987...............................................A.B. Philosophy, Ohio University
1997...............................................M.A. French, The Ohio State University
2005 to present ......................... Lecturer of French, Ohio Dominican University
2009 ..............................................Lecturer of French, The Ohio State University
2008-2009 ....................................Adjunct Lecturer of French, The Pontifical College Josephinum

1995 to 2002 .........................Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of French and Italian, The Ohio State University
1999 ..............................................Instructor of French and English, TRT/Lucent Technologies, Rouen, France

Fields of Study

Major Field: French and Italian
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This study is an analysis of various devices for the production of irony used in three centuries of French literature. In theoretical discussion of the concept of irony, there is a consensus about its difficulty and complexity. D. C. Muecke, whose *The Compass of Irony* is referenced in seemingly every study of irony following its publication, compares the attempt to understand irony with “the gathering of mist,” which is of course “a desperate adventure” (*Compass* 3). Attempts to formulate general rules that apply universally to cases of irony typically fail because there are far too many variables to consider. Even the slightest change in circumstances or of context can change a non-irony into an irony and vice versa. It is perhaps paradoxical that even with a very complicated taxonomy, the notion of irony itself is relatively simple, at least from the point of view of its production. Most agree that irony consists of a manner of speaking that creates an ambiguous message in which the intended meaning is at odds with the ostensible meaning. Incongruity between these two messages forms the basis of irony. Muecke’s work shows the advantages of looking at irony in a broad view, as he is able to place a wide range of examples within fairly stable categories, which are defined by similarities in terms of either its production or reception. These similarities are based on structure, for the most part. For example, many
Ironies are categorized in terms of the method by which the intended meaning is conveyed, and this includes sarcasm, parody, understatement, and blame-by-praise. Other forms are categorized on the basis of the relationship between ironist and victim, such as Socratic or self-disparaging irony, while others are dramatic, based on events. There are, of course, many more categories. With the exception of romantic irony, however, seldom is the concept of irony discussed in a temporal context, taking into account influences that belong to a particular intellectual or literary atmosphere. Such a discussion is my intention here and the reason for which I have separated the devices for the production of irony according to century.

I begin with ingénu irony as a device employed during the eighteenth century. I first read Muecke’s *Compass* while preparing a paper for a graduate seminar and was struck by the fact that he devotes a mere two pages to ingénu irony in discussion of his proposal to divide irony into four principal modes. His description of the ingénu reminded me of characters in literature he had not discussed, so I took his short treatment of the subject as an implicit invitation to research the topic. Most striking to me was the fact that the ingénu was a prominent and effective device for irony in Voltaire’s *contes*, then virtually disappeared once the novel began to hold a dominant position among genres in the nineteenth century. This lead me to investigate the possibility that certain forms of irony are dependent on the intellectual climate and literary convention of a particular period.
In the initial stages of this study, I meant for “ironist incognito” to apply to the verbal irony of Gustave Flaubert, which is produced by devices that are not easily detected by the reader. I presently use the term as indicative of much irony of the nineteenth century. Irony by stealth is well-suited to the novel, which was on the rise and often required making a pretense of realism and *vraisemblance*. Narrative also began to reflect different points of view and voice, or a “polyphonie constitutive du réel,” allowing for several points of enunciation within the text (Hamon 132). Incongruity between these different points of narration often leads to irony that has a structure quite different from classical forms of irony in which the message emanates from a single and reliable source. As the reader interprets irony from an unknown or unreliable source, she or he is less likely to recognize the intended meaning of the author or poet, or whether one even exists. Moreover, much irony of the nineteenth century is self-directed as the author is himself the source of creation as works of literature after the Romantic period are the product of one’s own imagination rather than imitative of some prior form. All of these factors, once again related to the literary climate of the period, lead to differences in both the production and reception of irony.

Idiosyncratic irony is a term I have coined to describe irony produced by Meursault in Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger*, and by similar characters. The theme of *L’Étranger* reflects much philosophizing and criticism of the twentieth century when the foundations of social and linguistic systems are put under intense scrutiny. I have chosen to focus discussion on Camus’s work because the mechanisms in play to produce irony are elaborate and require more attention than
other examples of irony I examine in this study. Idiosyncratic irony depends on
the temperament and behavior of a fictional character, and because Meursault
comes across as much out of the ordinary, one does not find many like him.
Camus’s irony is much more philosophical in nature than what precedes him with
regard to its target and victims. Specifically, Camus challenges the notion that
certain discourses are better suited than others to capture the world such as it is, or
that description made from a certain discourse is “true.” Camus also attacks
certain modes of narration, primarily retrospective narrative, for not adequately
representing the contingency of experience or the Absurd. I will discuss Camus’s
irony as it relates to a recent theory of irony developed by the philosopher Richard
Rorty.

This study is not exhaustive of all forms of irony that occur within a
certain time period, nor does it capture the full evolution of the concept. Authors
have practiced irony for more than 2500 years in every conceivable genre. The
works I will examine cover a span of time of just over two hundred years. This
relatively small slice of time is nevertheless sufficient to show that authors
adapted irony to the time in which they were writing. I will examine the concept
of irony in the second part of this introductory chapter.

Perhaps as a result of the sheer complexity of the concept, scholars of
irony seem to have been careful, perhaps even cooperative, in finding agreement
whenever possible. Though some theorists of irony use different terminology,
there is enough similarity in the approach of each to enable comparison, and
going back and forth between theorists does not create confusion if carefully
done. The fact that there is a preponderance of agreement among theorists of irony has not, however, prevented differences of opinion and approach in some critical areas. The purpose of the present chapter is to give an outline of prominent scholarship on the topic of irony in order to be able to identify the manner in which statements, events, or situations are ironic. I have decided to place more emphasis on the question of how certain statements or events are considered to be ironic than what I believe is typically found in the critical literature of irony. Most studies of irony will describe, or even define the narratological, factual or philosophical conditions present in a certain kind of irony, and then list a set of examples as evidence. What is often missing, in my view, is direct discussion of how the contradiction or incongruity that comes out of an ironic message is produced, and how it affects the receiver. This is typically involved in an explanation of how a particular device functions. In the cases of irony I discuss, I will follow the general scholarship of irony, though in some instances, I will point out where my understanding of a certain aspect might differ. There are also types of irony that do not receive much treatment in the critical literature, and I render my own thinking on the subject.

The use of speech designed to deceive or mock dates to the Pre-Socratics. This practice, considered by scholars at the time to be unscrupulous, represents one of the earliest rhetorical devices that is equivalent to the present term “irony.” The use of irony involved making pretence with the intention to dissemble, the latter term being a relative of the word “irony.” Aristotle, as Norman Knox informs us, placed irony on the opposite extreme of alazony, which is another
form of rhetorical deception: a boastfulness and exaggeration of one’s knowledge and power (Knox 4). The self-deprecating posture associated with this early form of irony, Knox indicates, is of course attributed most conspicuously to Socrates. His well-known tactic of blame-by-praise is the genesis of modern forms verbal irony, which means saying one thing while intending to convey the opposite meaning, or a meaning that is incongruent. The rhetorical tactics employed by Socrates in the dialogues of Plato take several forms. Lilian Furst describes one of these as Socrates’s tendency to “[m]ock by ironic concession which held an opponent’s views to clear light by echoing them in feigned and exaggerated approval” (Fictions 7). D.C. Muecke argues that the crux of the irony with regard to Socrates’s naïvety is not that he falsely portrays himself in order to convince his interlocutor that he knows nothing. Rather, Muecke claims that the success of Socrates’s irony stems from the fact that he creates the pretense that he will actually learn something from the dialogue while at the same time knowing very well that he will not (Compass 89-90). One may characterize the scope of Socratic irony as limited; it is confined to the level of an utterance, or series of utterances within a particular dialogical exchange. Because Socratic irony is employed in a truth-seeking effort, it is meant to be detected by all but the victim, who is primarily identified as Socrates’s dialogical counterpart. Socratic irony remains fundamentally important in discussions of irony to this day. Contained within the essential structure of Socratic irony is the immediate juxtaposition of two contradictory messages within an utterance, and this basic form has been left
unchanged in modern forms of verbal irony, and serves as a general model for other non-verbal forms.

Socratic irony functions primarily on a binary principle in that Socrates is able to disassociate himself tacitly from his interlocutor’s premises or beliefs by drawing attention to the fact that they are at odds with the way things really are. Socrates’s ambiguous message has two audiences: one who takes his ostensible meaning as true, in which case that person (the victim, usually the counterpart in the Dialogue) is blind to his dissembling, and another who sees through his pretence and understands the real, or intended meaning of his message. In cases of verbal irony, then, there are two necessary conditions. There is the presence of an ironist, which implies that the irony is intended, and that the irony must takes place on the level of semantics and rhetoric. In the absence of these two factors, irony is understood as the result of facts and events in the real or fictional world, otherwise referred to as situational irony. Catherine Kerbat-Orecchioni formulates the distinction between situational and verbal irony with precision: “Ironie référentielle [situational]=contradiction entre deux faits contigus,” whereas “ironie verbale=contradiction entre deux niveaux sémantiques attachés à une même séquence significante.” (108) Muecke has identified a set of conditions that fits the idea of irony presenting multiple layers of interpretation:

in the first place, irony is a double-layered, two-story phenomenon. At the lower level, is the situation as it appears to the victim of irony . . . or as it has been deceptively presented by the ironist. The upper-level is the situation as it appears to the observer or ironist. (Compass 19)
Yet, one must go further, it seems, in order to distinguish irony from lying, metaphor, hyperbole, and other figures of discourse because all involve ambiguity that stems from multiple levels of meaning.

Kerbat-Orecchioni proposes the following formulation to distinguish irony from lying: “le mensonge: L dit A, pense non-A, et veut faire entendre A; l’ironie: L dit A, pense non-A, et veut faire entendre non-A” (113). Coupled with Muecke’s conditions, this proposal implies that irony must involve, at least in theory, an accomplice as well as a victim, while lying requires only a victim. With regard to the victim of irony, she or he is confidently unaware of the existence of the intended irony hidden behind the ostensible meaning of the ironist’s utterance. Flaubert goes to great lengths to convince his readers that Emma Bovary has confidence in the hackneyed form of romanticism that defines her “bovarisme.” She believes it to be true to the extent that it will bring her happiness. The incongruity between the extravagant content of her dreams and the drudgery of her actual life forms the basis of Flaubert’s irony. A victim’s confidence is best illustrated by dramatic irony that is the result of characters who act out of ignorance. The tragic irony that befalls Oedipus after he vows to find the killer of King Laius, for example, is that he unknowingly makes himself the object of eventual punishment. He is quite confident that the culprit is someone else, notably Creon. Unlike the victim of a lie, there is a sense that a victim of irony has deserved her or his fate. This too is linked to a victim’s confident unawareness and is particularly true of Socrates’s interlocutors, all of them leaders of Athenian society who engage Socrates in a pompous and arrogant
manner. Irony in this case is further intensified by the fact that the reader of one of Plato’s dialogues knows what will happen to the interlocutor, while the interlocutor himself does not. From the reader’s point of view, the crux of irony is often that Socrates’s interlocutor behaves as if the argument will easily go his way while everyone else knows that his expectations are at variance with the eventual outcome. Finally, then, one may conclude that the elements that distinguish irony from lying advance the conception of verbal irony well beyond the commonplace notion that irony is “saying something other than what one really means.”

With regard to the distinction between irony and metaphor, most theorists call for a judgment by the reader about whether or not the metaphor employed is apt to represent the author’s intended comparison. Wayne Booth suggests that with metaphor, “we know at once that the author means a comparison, . . . [and] there is no moment of shock when incompatibilities are forced upon our attention, with the demand for negative judgment” (Rhetoric of Irony 23). Muecke contends very much the same thing. The ostensible meaning of a metaphorical expression, he says, parallels the real meaning, and does not oppose or invalidate it. This of course requires the reader to make a judgment. For example, when in “Correspondances,” Baudelaire begins “La nature est un temple” (1) his ostensible meaning is compatible with his intended meaning that nature is like a temple in which one is able to communicate with the Infinite, as one communicates with the Divine in a temple. Throughout the poem, there is continuity and congruity between this opening verse and the subsequent images conveyed, which Baudelaire was to describe as a oneness in nature through the
evocation of its synesthetic properties: “les parfums, les couleurs, et les sons se répondent,” (8) creating a “ténébreuse et profonde unité.” (6) To the reader, this comparison seems natural and fitting; there does not seem to be deception or disingenuousness on Baudelaire’s part.

Certainly a poet can be ironic in her or his use of metaphor. Critics have commented on Baudelaire’s use of ironic metaphor in “Les Bijoux”

La très chère était nue, et connaissant mon cœur,
Elle n’avait gardé que ses bijoux sonores,
...
Ce monde rayonnant de métal et de la pierre (1, 2 . . . 6)

The evocation of his nude lover (“Ce monde”) invites associations with the heat of passion which is then bound—and rather abruptly, at that—to the coldness and hardness of metal and stone. The oxymoron is meant to lead the reader to presume that Baudelaire is mocking his lover. Keeping in mind that metaphor has been described as a means to convey irony, it is not at all clear that the metaphor is itself ironic. It is important to note that the reader of the verses of “Les Bijoux” actually makes two judgments: 1) she or he considers that the metaphor is somehow incongruous to the image it is meant to represent and, 2) she or he concludes that Baudelaire did not intend to flatter his lover with the description. In fact, he probably meant the contrary. I would argue that the locus of irony is found in the second judgment since it is there that one encounters the contrariety between the two levels of meaning conveyed by the metaphor. Now the reader must raise the question whether the irony is confined to the utterance itself, or whether other factors, some perhaps extra-linguistic, are involved. At stake, so it
would appear, is the integrity of the distinction between verbal and situational irony.

A discussion of metaphor is important to the discussion of irony in general because of the judgment involved by the reader/hearer. In fact, all irony involves similar judgment. Booth, for example, in laying the foundation for irony, states that the concept always requires “judgment against an overt proposition and . . . a decision about where the author stands” (Rhetoric of Irony 39). In Baudelaire’s ironic use of metaphor in “Les Bijoux,” after the reader concludes that the metaphor is not compatible with the image of his lover, she or he must then consider how it is not. Without the latter judgment, the irony may very well be missed entirely, in which case the reader might simply conclude that the use of metaphor is odd, that Baudelaire is a poor poet, or something of the like. At the moment the reader begins to contemplate how the metaphor becomes ironic, it seems fair to say that a whole variety of considerations may come into play. First, obviously, one looks at what the metaphor connotes, and determines that the coldness and hardness of the elements that metonymically represent a nude woman, bearing only jewelry, does not fit the physical erotic image standing before him, but rather something else—perhaps either her character, or the character of his relationship to her. With this particular use of metaphor, Baudelaire invites the reader to consider his own life, or his attitude toward this relationship, or his relationship with women in general. The reader may ponder whether it was actually the case that Baudelaire privately had contempt for this woman, or whether he was simply attempting to warn his readers that despite their
alluring beauty, women are actually pernicious and coldly calculating. Each of these judgments, it seems, may have an effect on the irony of the metaphor, either by intensifying or attenuating it. These types of judgment, furthermore, go well beyond considering the semantic properties of the metaphor itself and look more toward a host of issues that are somehow evoked by the poet, but left unstated.

In addition to metaphor, there are other figures of discourse and rhetoric that will enter into this study of irony. In a discussion of Montesquieu’s Lettres Persanes, for example, I examine the relationship between irony and burlesque, and forms of understatement that are found in observations made by the ingénue. It is important to note initially that just as in the case of metaphor, hyperbole, and other figures of speech under discussion, neither burlesque nor understatement alone is sufficient for irony. There is little in the critical literature on irony to serve as a guide for these two figures. Muecke does not say much about understatement because, as he claims, it is often not ironic because the ostensible and real meanings conveyed have come to mean the same thing, as in “I’m not feeling my best” (Compass 80). There are instances when understatement does contain a dual message. For example, Socrates’s self-deprecating protestations to his interlocutor of his own ignorance and inadequacy is a form of understatement that contains both an ostensible and implied message in the manner of blame-by-praise. The interlocutor is made to look good by the comparison, just before facts that arise from the dialogue indicate the truth is quite to the contrary. With regard to burlesque, there is a sense of ambiguity in its definition which seems to allow the term to apply to both overstatement and understatement. Norman Knox
categorizes burlesque, as it was used during the eighteenth century, as a form of irony that resembled blame-by-praise, in which praise had became, as the result of natural progression, an exaggerated extreme (126). This type of burlesque often takes the form of a mock-heroic, in which case the exaggeration moves upward, making the caricature greater in some respect than the object it represents, to the point of being ridiculous. However, because burlesque implies only the making of caricature through exaggeration and distortion, it seems equally plausible that caricature could move downward, crudely exemplifying the baseness of an object. For this reason, Knox and others make a distinction between high and low burlesque, each referring respectively to the upward and downward trajectories of the exaggeration and distortion involved. Understatement typically involves meiosis: the use of expressions that have a minimizing effect when the situation would typically require a maximizing or superlative expression. Litotes are frequently meiotic when, for example, one says “That was not bad” when one really means “That was great!” While understatement is saying less than what is typically required, the original idea remains intact in juxtaposition with the figure of speech used to express it. For example, “That’s not bad!” is merely a difference of degree, and a general implication of praise is maintained. This is not the case with burlesque, however, because the figure of speech has much destructive capacity, rendering the original idea distorted to the point of absurdity.

For example, my next-door neighbor is fond of saying, “Look at Tiger Woods! The guy makes millions of dollars for chasing a little white ball and knocking it into a hole!” Obviously, this crude depiction of what Tiger Woods
does for a living is absurd on its face because it omits context which is required for one to understand, and perhaps accept the fact that Woods makes as much as he does. For example, there is no mention of the advertising market, and how Woods’s success makes him an effective salesman, and someone who increases profits for the types of companies that cater to people for whom golf holds appeal. In the end, Woods earns what people are willing to pay him in a free and open market and this is part of the conventional wisdom of most any capitalist society. Without mention of these things, my neighbor’s description of Tiger Woods is more like burlesque than understatement because it involves a distortion of what is the case, and there is very little, if anything to indicate what the actual situation is. There is nevertheless a morsel of truth in his base description, enough to invite a comparison with a true description that contains the missing contextual information. In this regard, the crudely exaggerated caricature of Tiger Woods’s profession is in certain respects similar to parody, which is a form of overstatement, an exaggerated imitation of an author’s work. Good parody bears enough resemblance to the original to invite a comparison of two forms in which, states Jonathan Culler,

> the two different orders must be held together in the mind—the order of the original and the point of view that undermines the original—which does not generally lead to synthesis or naturalization at another level but rather to an exploration of the difference and the resemblance. (Structuralist Poetics 152)

A parody of a work of literature is actually stronger than the original, argues Culler, because it shows a weakness of the imitated work in that the original must depend on certain conventions of reading to be taken seriously. Parody, he says, is
liberating and gives the reader an idea of what it is like to get out from under the control of conventions (153). The crudely understated description of what Tiger Woods does to earn money, though not itself a parody, operates in much the same manner. It invites the addressee to weigh the apparently absurd description against that which she or he believes to be the case in the actual world. As a device for irony, the force of the absurdity produced by understatement has the power to illuminate the artificial nature of what is considered by many to be the justification for Tiger Woods (or any famous person for that matter) to earn the enormous sums of money he does. In stripping away the context, which could be viewed as a type of rationalization, that Tiger Woods earns millions for chasing a white ball and knocking it in a hole is not all that far from the truth. The force of absurd description also has the power to shed light on certain injustices in our capitalist system, which could very well be the point my neighbor is trying to make indirectly. The ingénu in French literature often uses the same sort of low burlesque or understatement in ironic discourse that pertains to various aspects of French society. I discuss the ingénu in Chapter 2.

Now that I have discussed irony as it differs from, or takes form in various figures of speech, I turn the discussion to the nature of irony itself. Much has been said about irony in the critical literature, but the sheer complexity and diversity of the concept inhibits investigation on a grand scale where an exhaustive definition of the term might be proposed. Even though irony has a complicated taxonomy, there is a consensus among most scholars on the distinction between situational and verbal irony. D. C. Muecke, in his seminal work on the subject, contends that
situational irony “does not imply an ironist, but [is] merely a ‘condition of affairs’ or an ‘outcome of events’ which is seen or felt to be ironic” (Compass 42). Verbal irony, on the other hand, entails an ironist who intentionally presents irony using some technique. The crux of the matter appears to lie in the understanding of both “presentation” and “technique” as a broad interpretation could easily render the terms more or less synonymous. In that case, the distinction between situational and verbal irony becomes less clear. For example, it is clearly a calculated effort on the part of Flaubert to present the idea to his readers that Charles Bovary is the author of his own undoing when he unwittingly encourages Emma to spend time with her lovers. A question one might raise is whether or not Flaubert’s calculation implies the use of a technique. One could argue that no doubt when Flaubert conceived the episode, he knew Charles’s words would have an ironic effect, so having placed Charles in that situation is an example of verbal irony, albeit a not-so-subtle one. Muecke would take exception to this broader interpretation of verbal irony. Implicit in his definition is that “technique” must preclude the possibility that the source and interpretation of irony lies outside an ironic utterance. Even though irony is produced by a statement, it does not necessarily have to be verbal irony. This is rather an example of situational irony because it arises from facts in the story. Charles, intending to act in the interest of his wife’s well-being, unknowingly pushes her into relationships that are destructive to her, and to himself.

While there appears to be nearly universal agreement about the nature of verbal and situational irony, making a clear distinction between the two is
sometimes problematic. Verbal irony is contrasted with situational irony and the two together form the category of simple irony—irony that is limited in scope where, usually, an individual is the victim of a single ironic episode or statement. The problem arises when these two types of irony are juxtaposed in an apparently complementary relationship in which the locus of irony is either in facts from the narrated story, or in hidden semantic content within a single narrative proposition. This relationship is misleading, in my view, because it suggests that the genesis of irony, or what is “felt” to be ironic in each mode, would be different in some manner. Moreover, situational irony, like its counterpart verbal irony, often takes place at the hands of an ironist. In other words, it is wrong to assume that what distinguishes the two modes of irony is the presence of an ironist in one form, and an absence of an ironist in another. Many cases of verbal irony may be construed as being more complex forms of situational irony, and what is presently labeled verbal irony should be considered as merely the means by which an author, through the narrator can silently add semantic content that refers to an ironic situation. In other words, the apparent difference between verbal and situational irony is the degree of subtlety used to convey the irony. I will consider two examples from *Madame Bovary* to illustrate this point.

At a point later in the story, Charles again persuades Emma to spend time with a lover. After the two encounter Léon in Rouen, Charles encourages Emma to stay an extra day in order to see an opera for the second time, which of course affords Léon and Emma the opportunity to be alone together and rekindle a mutual attraction they once shared. At first Emma is indecisive, so Charles tells
her to think it over before evincing an ironic double entendre: “la nuit porte conseil” (299). The fact that Charles encourages his wife to spend time with a lover is again situational irony. On the other hand, Charles’s double-entendre, while clearly an instance of verbal irony, seems to acquire some of its ironic force from the situation. Charles is undoubtedly oblivious to possible double-meanings of his utterance, while readers may juxtapose his well-intended advice with what they have learned from the story. For Charles to say “la nuit porte conseil” as a precaution, something to help Emma to not make a hasty and poor decision can be compared to another decision Emma once made during the night. As the reader knows, it was at night as she lay next to Charles feeling her discontentment when Emma opened up to the idea of beginning a romance with Rodolphe. Moreover, it was often at night when she and Rodolphe had many of their encounters. At the very least, then, one can say the situational and verbal irony often work in tandem, but both types of irony are at work in Charles’s double-entendre.

In another example, what looks at first to be situational irony contains elements of verbal irony. Consider the following description of Charles Bovary’s office:

De l’autre côté du corridor était le cabinet de Charles, petite pièce de six pas large environ, avec une table, trois chaises et un fauteuil de bureau. Les tomes du Dictionnaire des sciences médicales, non-coupés mais dont le brochure avait souffert dans toutes les ventes successives par où ils avaient passé, garnissaient presque à eux seuls les six rayons d’une bibliothèque en bois de sapin. (91)

The irony that is obvious to most everyone resides in the fact that Charles, as well as others who previously owned the set of dictionaries, had not read them, which conveys an easily detected commentary about his ability as a medical student and
officier de santé, as well as the medical profession at large—how is it, then, that Charles and the others were able to pass their medical exams? On the surface, it appears that Flaubert’s narrator is straightforwardly presenting an ironic fact, using no particular device to convey it. Nevertheless, the irony in the passage comes about as a result of a deduction, one that the reader must make from the facts as they are presented. In other words, the irony is implicit, a fact that indicates that the narrator has become an ironist. The precision used in the description of Charles’s office, as well as the fairly thorough inventory of its contents is done by a design in which Flaubert attempts to create the illusion of reality within the diegesis. In conveying this illusion, Flaubert creates a message having multiple meanings. Ostensibly, the passage contains a description of Charles’s office, one that the reader expects to see, which then relays an underlying message that Madame Bovary refers to the “real” world. But the passage contains another underlying message, thanks to Flaubert’s selective inventory, namely that Charles is a poor medical practitioner, and that the medical establishment showed poor judgment in granting him a license to practice. The irony in the description should be considered a combination of situational and verbal irony. The fact that the medical dictionaries are uncut is in itself situational irony, and conveys a message that shows a deficiency in Charles’s abilities as an officier de santé that undercuts the contrary, and more positive impression the reader has begun to form from the description just prior to the mention of the dictionaries. The information about the dictionaries comes to the reader as the result of a device containing an ostensible message in the form of a description,
which disguises the implied message the uncut dictionaries make about Charles. The fact the Flaubert would have the narrator settle on the uncut dictionaries among all the other objects in the room is not a very subtle way to convey an ironic message. But it is verbal irony as a result of a double-sensed message, and the degree of subtlety an irony has does not enter into its classification. The lack of clear distinction between verbal and situational irony has bearing on this study as it will be necessary to discuss the nature of the device used when, for example, Candide says “Si c’est ici le meilleur des mondes possibles, que sont donc les autres?” after the Lisbon earthquake and the subsequent auto-da-fé. Voltaire’s irony has elements of both situational and verbal irony that comes from the fact that Candide, a naïf, says it, and thus contradicts the learned philosopher, Pangloss, and also from the fact that the statement takes on multiple meanings in the form of an ironic echo of both intra- and extra-textual sources.

There is some question about how irony comes into being despite the intention of a speaker to be ironic. This point is of considerable importance to the present study because I will be discussing the purposeful use of devices in the production of irony. There are some who deny the validity of a presumption of irony just because an author has used a device to produce it. For them, irony cannot be limited to authorial intention because it must include the reader. An extreme position within this camp suggests that there is no irony at all if it is missed by the reader. Another difficulty is that it would be no easy task to describe the psychological processes that compel a reader to opt for the ironic intended meaning over the ostensible meaning of a proposition. If one considers
simple ironies, such as those I have discussed above, as exemplary of traditional and classic forms of irony, its advent is easily described. Any person “with a sense of irony,” as Muecke stipulates, who is able to see past the ironist’s pretence (e.g. Socrates’ feigned adulation for his counterpart’s arguments) will reject out of hand the meaning of the ostensible message and adopt the ironist’s intended message, which invalidates the ostensible message, or is in some manner opposed to it (Compass 56-59). Wayne Booth, in keeping with Muecke’s architectural metaphor of irony being a “two-storied phenomenon, describes his own reaction to an irony in the following manner:

Thus I do not reject . . . the statement because of any literal untruth. I reject it because I cannot believe that the author of the statement can be that kind of person, I am forced (through psychological and intellectual pressures which I will not even pretend to understand or explain) to make sense out of the statement by concluding that it is ironic. (Rhetoric of Irony 34)

There is abundant discussion of verbal irony in the critical literature that suggests that it is more a mode of presentation of irony than a sui generis category of irony. For example, Culler, in discussing verbal irony, states that there is no sentence that is ironic per se. He brings up the role of the reader and points out that irony depends on the contingent fact that it is possible to imagine someone who takes the utterance literally, thus taking the ostensible proposition as true. The perception of irony, he adds,

depends upon a set of expectations which enable the reader to sense the incongruity or invraisemblence of literal or apparent meanings and to construct an alternative ironic meaning which accords with the vraisemblence which he has established for the text. (Flaubert 188)
In order to conclude that a particular author or speaker intends an irony depends on many factors, not the least of which is one’s familiarity with the beliefs of the potential ironist. If one were to say, for example, “Bill Clinton was a great president,” the addressee, it seems, would have to have a fairly intimate knowledge of the speaker’s political point of view before deciding whether or not the statement is ironic. This is particularly true with regard to Clinton since there were a fair number of people from his own political party who never liked him. It should be stipulated as well that a postmodern view of irony, one that regards the concept as a political and communicative act, takes the position that there are valid reasons for discounting intentions of an author or speaker as a guarantee of irony. Furthermore, what does one say of ironies where the reader finds irony that the author has not intended? This is not to say that authorial intention does not exist, but for scholars of irony like Linda Hutcheon, the “intention / non-intentional may be a false distinction: all irony happens intentionally whether the attribution be made by the encoder or the decoder.” (Irony’s Edge 118) Despite these valid objections and warnings of potential difficulties, it seems that one should be able to make fairly definitive conclusions about the functioning of simple ironies.

Part of the reason that classical and more traditional ironies are stable is that they function as correctives, which are categorized as such, according to Muecke, because

we pass from an apprehension of the ironic incongruity to a more or less immediate recognition of the invalidity of the ironist’s pretended or the victim’s confidently held view. Psychic tension is generated but rapidly released. (Compass 25)
A rapid conclusion that an irony is present stems from what Muecke describes as an apparent absurdity of opinion or behavior. This judgment is possible only within the context of clearly established values and accepted norms where the victim of irony is easily identified and reversibility and reconstruction are evident. Booth claims that once a simple irony has been detected and taken in its corrective capacity (i.e. a reconstruction of meaning is made), the reader/addressee does not feel any pressure (psychological, intellectual, or otherwise) to further deconstruct what she or he has just constructed. In other words, stable irony operates in a finite realm. Simple ironies are “narrowly circumscribed,” or in other words, are attached to discrete issues and events or to individuals. Stable irony, as Booth argues, “does not say, ‘There is no truth,’ or . . . ‘We do not know anything.’ On the contrary, it delimits a world of discourse in which we can say with great security certain things that are violated by overt words of the discourse” (Rhetoric of Irony 6). The crux of more complex and more modern irony is that it functions without these limitations on the discourse.

Muecke distinguishes general irony from specific irony in that the latter typically describes irony that involves a single victim, a discrete action, or a the exposure of a specific hypocrisy or other aberration in the world (Compass 119). General irony begins most visibly with the Romantics around the beginning of the nineteenth century. The period was marked by the emancipation of artistic convention from classical norms that sparked an “upsurge of speculation about new directions of the arts,” in which the “prominence of such terms as ‘originality’, creativity’, and ‘genius’ show changes in artistic standards” (Furst
Artists, having shed the conventions of classicism, now operated in an open system in which there was a seemingly infinite potential for artistic creation. Furthermore, as Furst is correct to point out, there was a concomitant “revolution” in philosophy, particularly in the area of epistemology. Kant’s distinction between the phenomenal realm (that which is experienced) and the noumenal realm (that which underlies experience) “diminished men’s faith in their epistemological capabilities,” thus “yielding fewer certainties and leaving more room for doubt.”

She continues,

Kant’s Copernican revolution represents an important step in the replacement of the ‘closed ideology’ by the ‘open ideology’. The pursuit of the fixities of the finite world gave way to a probing of an infinite universe to which great areas of indeterminacy now had to be conceded. Once the reliability of knowledge had been undermined, a flood of doubt invaded men’s minds, making them particularly receptive to the ambivalences of irony. (38)

Furthermore, the importance of taking the phenomenal over the noumenal realm as the immediate source of knowledge placed more importance on subjectivity and the ego. In other words, in light of Kant’s epistemology, one had to examine her or his own experience in the world as a way to determine truths, rather than to “discover” some inherent Truth out in the world. Because knowledge became a matter of self-reflection, one was apt to doubt oneself and realize the inadequacies that were considered inherent in belief systems. Irony of the period will reflect an exhilarated artist’s newfound sense of liberation in coming out from under ancient and classical models, but will also display a form of anxiety that stems from viewing conventions not as a putative foundation immutable and stable, but as
merely a way to cover absurdity. This type of irony is of course labeled “romantic irony,” which is characterized by an artist’s reaction to this new state of affairs.

A concise definition of romantic irony is not difficult to find in the critical literature; there are many from which to choose. Lloyd Bishop defines it as the “tension between the romantic author’s search for the Ideal or Absolute and the simultaneous awareness of the search’s futility” (12). Gary Handwerk defines the notion as “a response to the unrealizability of the Absolute as a tangible presence of self-consciousness,” where one’s perception of the Absolute is seen only as arbitrary and chaotic, far from meeting the promise made by the rationalist philosophy of the time (21). Furst, writing about Friedrich Schlegel, contrasts romantic irony with simple and concrete forms of irony: “[t]he concrete forms of irony are here grounded in a distinctive ideological substructure; they are secondary to its philosophical capacity, serving not as a technical device but for the exposition of a cosmic vision” (26). Schlegel, she says, envisioned the artist as “simultaneously committed to his work and to himself as creator,” where the artist is “both involved and detached from his creation,” being both aware of the limitations of the artist, and committed to transcending them (26). An awareness of this conflict will influence authors throughout the nineteenth century and will become the principal theme in a great number of works. I will examine several authors in this study, most notably Constant, Baudelaire and Rimbaud.

In discussion of romantic irony, there is a tendency to conflate the various terms pertaining to general irony. All general ironies have universal application in which everyone is victim; it is an inescapable condition of the world with
which one must cope. The designation “romantic” with “irony” is a temporal
ascription to the concept of general irony, making reference to literature of a the
period in which authors and poets reacted to issues that were bound to the
discovery of the self in the act of creation. The fact that romantic poets were no
longer imitating earlier forms but creating their own, argues Richard Rorty, was
the first recognition of contingency of knowledge and language: “[w]hat was
glimpsed at the end of the eighteenth century was that anything could be made to
look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless by being
redescribed” (7). Rorty calls it an idea of Romanticism that truth is “made rather
than found,” because of the Romantic’s recognition that imagination, and not
reason, is the central human faculty (7). This, he says, marks the recognition that
Truth is not something that is out in the world, waiting to be discovered. To adopt
this view is to be an ironist, according to Rorty. Taking a philosophical position,
an ironist does not believe in essences or the intrinsic nature of things, and rejects
the idea of a “final vocabulary” which corresponds to “the way things are” (74-
75). An ironist, he continues, accepts that contingency is a fact of existence. This
position is portrayed in existentialist novels of the twentieth century, as “truths”
that come from conventional thinking and “common sense” are put to the test. An
absurdist hero, Charles Glicksberg,

shows how the sense of security born of routine is an illusion . . . The
materialist who confidently assumes that his method comprehends all of
reality is the most crassly deluded, blind to what lies outside his myopic
gaze. The absurdist hero is at least aware of his estrangement on earth, the
anomalies of existence, the occurrence of the unexpected. (226)
For the absurdist hero, there is no explanation for what happens, and even the search for a “why” to explain existence is bound to be fruitless. This type of irony is particularly destructive it not only seeks to disprove, or to show that certain conventions are inadequate, but is also seeks to change the manner in which one speaks of them. I discuss irony of this type in Chapter 4.

In addition to the distinction between simple and general irony, there are distinctions to be made between types or categories of irony. The different types resemble different genres, so there is some justification, for example, in subsuming satire and parody into the greater category of irony. However, both satire and parody operate on different levels than irony, and this creates a difference in their apprehension. Verbal irony is considered a trope, making it different from parody, which is a genre. This difference, Hutcheon points out, is one of scope: “[la parodie] se définit normalement non pas comme phénomène intratextuel [like irony] mais en tant que modalité du canon de l’intertextualité.” ("Ironie, satire, parodie" 143) Parody also has a more stable target because it is limited to existing texts and literary conventions:

Satire, Hutcheon continues, differs from parody only with regard to the target. Parody mimics other literary texts with the intent to mock them, while satire exposes human vices and other foolish behavior, and consequently subjects them to ridicule. There are, as a result, three different competences needed for the
decoding of each of irony, parody, and satire: linguistic competence for irony; knowledge of genre and literary convention for parody and ideological competence for satire. The successful communication of any of these three, according to Hutcheon, depends on a degree of institutional homogeneity within each of the competences. Because Hutcheon considers irony to be a communicative act between author and reader, her focus is of course on both its production and reception. This study will focus on the production of irony, and will not consider its reception apart from that of the implied reader. In this case, the reception of irony does not depend on the vicissitudes a real reader’s competence or capacity to detect its presence. Another way to say this is that I will consider irony only as it is part of the structure of a text, though I realize that this view is not without controversy.

The author who writes parody, Booth claims, is prone to the charge of snobbery because her or his audience is confined to those who are both well-read, and intimately familiar with all types of literary genre—the professoriat, in other words. Parody, Booth continues, will be missed by those who cannot rely on this “special experience” (73). There are relatively few, one would imagine, who have the competence to notice every instance of parody they happen to encounter. From the point of view of reception, a missed parody might well be construed as satire, or even simple irony. For example, I once watched a comedian performing a voice impression of William F. Buckley, which was to me an obvious parody of his political views and manner of interviewing. A friend watching with me, who knew nothing at all about Buckley, remarked that he thought the comedian was
performing a funny satire, having missed the fact that he was imitating someone in particular. The fact that we both could see the same performance as both parody and satire indicates that there is a similarity of form between the two modes. From the point of view of production, parody and irony are very closely related, according to Dan Sperber. He describes one of the claims in the mention theory of irony as “verbal ironies [that] are implicit echoic mentions of meaning conveyed in a derogatory attitude to the meaning mentioned” (Sperber 131; author’s emphasis). The relation of this description to parody should be obvious. On the other hand, verbal irony that matches Sperber’s description is based on the characteristics of the person who echoes the statement. For example, when Charles Bovary utters “C’est la faute de la fatalité” in the aftermath of Emma’s death, the idea of fate, as it had been used in the great tragedies, is revived to serve in a context that does not merit the momentousness of the notion. Emma’s death, while perhaps having a tragic quality, is not in itself a tragedy on a scale equal to that of other memorable heroines of French classical drama, such as Phèdre. Charles’s reference to fate, or his imitation of a tragic character, is not in itself parody, but is rather a parodic echo. Parody involves a much closer attention to caricature. Sperber characterizes the difference between an ironist and the parodist as the case in which the former makes echoic mention in indirect discourse, while the latter uses direct discourse. The parodist, he says “does not pretend to be someone else,” whereas the ironist is “reproducing his or her own words and tone of voice . . . the content of the words or thoughts that he or she is attributing to the victim” (Sperber 135). In this regard, parody and irony, while
differing vastly in terms of reception, are fairly closely related in terms of production.

Postmodern critics such as Hutcheon consider irony as part of a communicative process that moves in two directions. Hutcheon describes how irony functions in this manner:

Who are the participants in this social act called “irony”? The party line says that there is an intending “ironist” and her/his intended audiences—the one that ‘gets’ and the one that doesn’t ‘get’ the irony. What do you do, then, with the obvious fact that ironies exist that are not intended, but most certainly interpreted as such? Similarly, there are ironies you might intend, as ironist, but which remain unperceived by others. Irony’s indirection complicates considerably the various existing models of intersubjective communication between speaker and hearer. With irony, there are, instead, dynamic and plural relations among the text or utterance (and its context), the so-called ironist, the interpreter, and the circumstances surrounding the discursive situation; it is these that mess up neat theories that see the task of the interpreter simply as one of decoding and reconstructing some “real” meaning.” (Irony’s Edge 10)

Irony is also considered to be a politicized activity, not only in terms of what meaning it expresses, but also in its function. Hutcheon argues, “Because irony . . . happens in something called ‘discourse’, its semantic and syntactic dimensions cannot be considered separately from the social, historical and cultural aspects of its contexts of deployment and attribution”(Irony’s Edge 17). Irony is risky, she says, because it is beyond any single person’s control. It also deals in relations of power. We must, she adds, consider that the functioning of communicative discourse in our society does not occur in a sort of utopic, mutually beneficial context. Irony can always be used to someone’s advantage at the expense of another.
Hutcheon’s position might seem antithetical to that of Wayne Booth who insists that intended ironies are there for the taking, and that some readers are better than others at interpretation. Those readers who miss an irony suffer from one of five “crippling handicaps,” according to Booth: ignorance, inability to pay attention, prejudice, lack of practice, and emotional inadequacy. He may have a point, but Hutcheon does not dismiss the fact that the formation of better readers would simply change the dynamic of the communicative process in the creation of irony. At issue for her is not the capability of the reader, but the capability of the author to control irony in her or his own text, both at a linguistic level and an interpretive one. She makes a strong point, but I agree with Booth, first making the caveat that once an ironist considers the use of a particular device in the production of irony, she or he has already to a certain extent considered what reader reaction will be. But Booth’s other point, with which I also agree, is that once irony is considered as being intended, it becomes part of the text, while Hutcheon considers irony to be a part of the communicative process. Devices used in the production of irony are as much a part of the structure of the text as the narrator, or any other means by which an author communicates with the reader.

I will now turn my attention to various devices that are used to produce irony, beginning with the ingénu, following with the ironist who operates incognito, and end with iconoclastic irony. Although the ironies I will discuss take many different forms, there is a sense in which what is “felt” to be ironic is the same for all. This issue in the study of irony is elusive as it pertains to a
psychological state which recent studies have indicated that not all people share.\textsuperscript{6}

However, one may say with at least some certainty that all forms of irony, in some manner or other, portray contradictory or incongruent messages simultaneously. This is true in the most crass example of sarcasm and in the most sophisticated example of parody.

\begin{itemize}
\item[1] In Liddel & Scott’s \textit{Greek-English Lexicon}, the term “εἰρων” is defined as “a dissembler, one who says less than what he thinks or means.” “Εἰρων” is derived from “εἰρωνεία,” the Greek term for “irony” and “dissimulation.”
\item[3] See Roland Barthes, “L’effet de réel.” He argues that description in realist fiction can appear to be superfluous, as it is loaded with content that has no effect on plot. Nevertheless the “superfluous” details do serve a function, namely to make the content of the diegesis appear to be “real.” There is more to realism implies Barthes, than to simply describe what is there. It is to be treated as a convention no different than any other “-ism” in literature.
\item[4] The situation is made even more difficult when an author will deny having intended an irony that is apparent to most readers. For example, in a letter of June 18, 1876 to Mme. Roger des Genettes, Flaubert flatly denies that Félicité’s having confused the vision of her stuffed parrot with that of the Holy Spirit, while on her death bed, is in any way ironic. Fortunately such cases are relatively rare and can be examined on a case-by-case basis.
\item[5] See Philippe Hamon, 129. Booth eschews terms such as “romantic” or “general” irony and applies to irony various combinations of the terms “stable,” “unstable,” “local” and “infinite” to irony.
\end{itemize}
Ingénue irony has not received much attention in the critical literature. To my knowledge, there is no single work of criticism dedicated to the literary figure of the ingénue, although it does receive sporadic mention. The list of literary ingénus, however, is relatively long and contains quite a few French characters, most notably in works by Cyrano de Bergerac, Pascal, Molière, Prévost, Marivaux. There are others, to be sure, particularly if one were to include characters that are ingénu-like. Yet the ingénue was not always used as a figure for irony. In fact, the most frequent use of ingénue irony appears to be limited to a relatively short period, and it is associated most notably with the conte philosophique. As for the term “ingénue,” it has a definition in Littré which I will give below, but there is no corresponding entry in dictionaries of American English. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, for example, lists only the feminine form, “ingenue” or “ingénue,” which is defined as “a naïve girl or young woman,” and “the stage role of an ingenue: an actress playing such a role.” This reflects a more specialized usage. Nor does there appear to be agreement on the spelling of the term. Some authors use the capitalized form, Ingénu(e), most likely as a reference to Voltaire’s character who possesses characteristics given in the French definition. Other Anglo-American scholars borrow the French term.
In this chapter, I will discuss irony produced by characters I am designating as prominent ingénus in French literature. The fictional characters I have chosen for discussion are either genuine ingénus, or ingénu-like, and all come from the eighteenth century. The ingénu receives only sporadic attention in the theoretical discussion of irony and is seldom examined in a literary context. One advantage to examining a character’s actual production of irony in a work of literature is that it allows one to consider the irony within the fictional context in which it is carried out. Irony produced by the ingénu, I will argue, depends on factors of both situation and rhetoric, making ingénu irony a combination of situational and verbal irony. Because of limitations of experience and intellect, the ingénu is incapable of acting in full accordance with either the social or linguistic conventions of society, in which case irony produced by the character is typically the result of incongruity between the speech or behavior of the ingénu and those conventions. By definition, an ingénu lacks sophistication and refinement, which is made evident by his judgment and speech. Among the various rhetorical devices most common to eighteenth-century irony, such as raillery and banter, the ingénu is more prone to use burlesque, particularly of the low variety. Burlesque is a form of imitation and is very similar to parody. The use of low burlesque requires little sophistication and is thus well suited for the ingénu. Related to burlesque is argument by reductio ad absurdum, and each case of ingénu irony I will examine conforms to this style of argumentation to varying degrees. I will argue that irony used as a means of argument is also indicative of its use during the eighteenth century. For example, ingénu irony is well suited for the **conte**
because the object of the author is often to disprove or discredit an opposing point
of view in favor of his own. The ironies are therefore simple and provide a stable
plane of reference that enables the reader to reconstruct them. Finally, because the
ingénu as a character lacks *vraisemblance*, except in the case of children, the
character appears to belong to the *conte*, as opposed to the novel. Voltaire, for
example, preferred the *conte* because the genre allowed for communication with
the reader in order to instruct the latter and provide a moral lesson. Both the
ingénu and the *conte* suited Voltaire’s purposes. The ingénu lacks a complex
psychology which allows the author to direct the character in any manner he
chooses, especially in the *conte* which has none of the confinements of the novel
in terms of its tendency towards realism. In other words, Voltaire preferred the
*conte* because the genre had few, if any rules. For this reason, the ingénu appears
to rise and fall with the *conte*. I will begin by examining the characteristics of the
ingénu and treatment of this character in the critical literature.

D. C. Muecke has given the ingénu a place among four principal modes of
verbal irony, and appears to be alone among prominent theorists of irony to refer
explicitly to the term. In his *The Compass of Irony*, these four modes comprise a
general classification of ironies that Muecke divides “according to the part played
by the ironist himself in relation to his irony” and the extent to which “we hear the
voice of the ironist himself” (*Compass* 61). Muecke identifies the archetype of the
ingénu as the child who proclaims that the emperor has no clothes in Hans
Christian Andersen’s memorable fable in which “mere common sense or even
simple innocence or ignorance may suffice to see through the woven complexities
of hypocrisy . . . or pierce the protective tissues of convention and idées reçues” (91). A secondary definition of “ingénu” in the Littré underscores this point: “[q]ui laisse voir avec naïveté ses sentiments” (qtd. in Clark 278). Ingénu irony is unlike the other three modes in Muecke’s classification because many of its properties are derived from the characteristics of the ingénu himself. While the other modes of irony involve the use of narratological or rhetorical tactics, ingénu irony is based on the psychological and behavioral traits of the character who portrays the ingénu. The simplicity of the character prevents the production of irony as the result of ruse or design.

Because the ingénu as a device used in the production of irony will principally take the form of a character of fiction, it is necessary to focus attention on its behavioral and temperamental dispositions in order to determine the speech and actions that contribute to the irony it produces. Ingénus are most frequently described as childlike, but taking Andersen’s fable to be an exception, they are seldom children, according to one theorist. Typically, these traits are determined by the character’s limited knowledge and experience. George Test observes,

the innocent childlike nature of the Ingenu is perhaps his most obvious and charming characteristic. . . . More usual is the Ingenu produced by a background that fails to prepare him for the world in which he finds himself, or one so gripped by a set of values that he cannot synchronize with the values of the world. (205-06)

Some of the essential features of the ingénu are present in children; in principal these are innocence and naïveté. Because irony is usually the result of the juxtaposition of two incongruous entities or propositions, one can see the power of the ingénu in this capacity because its character is defined by how it does not
fit into “normal” classifications. Ingénu irony works by putting what is “normal” in opposition with the character who is not “normal.”

Children do not bear the same responsibility for their actions that adults do. Furthermore, they are typically unaware of even having any responsibility. One may conclude that it is by virtue of this fact, then, that the child could proclaim, without thought of suffering retribution, that the emperor was naked in Andersen’s fable because the ingénu child was altogether unaware of being bound by any convention or law that might dictate that one must never cast the emperor in a bad (or in this case, embarrassing) light, even as the result of speaking the truth. Candor such as this, that which is engendered by genuine ignorance, is typical of the ingénu and is another important characteristic. The Littré is helpful on this point, as well. For the primary definition of “ingénu,” one reads “Né libre et qui n’a jamais été dans une servitude légitime par opposition à affranchi, comme libre s’oppose à l’esclave” (qtd. in Clark 279). The ingénu is often presented as an outsider or a foreigner, one who is, usually through ignorance, outside the reach of conventions that control the behavior of everyone else. These conventions are, of course, ubiquitous within a given society, and govern a wide range of behaviors and discourses.

It is obviously not correct to assume that innocence and naiveté are traits only of children, or even in characters that are expressly constructed to appear childlike. The sources of naiveté are common knowledge, and furthermore, do not necessarily stem from an overall lack of experience or intelligence. For example, I once was told by a nearly-retired university professor that he discovered, after
what in all likelihood had been long practice, that some of his students were
cheating by using cell phones to access information on the Internet while taking
exams. Of course, he had no knowledge (nor even the inclination to discover) that
technology had advanced to the degree to which such a thing was possible, and
thought nothing was sinister about a few of his students having cell phones on
front of them at exam time. Yet one can imagine the attendant irony if he were to
think to himself that the cell phones only presented a source of potential
distraction to his students, and therefore a hindrance to their performance on the
exam. It may be the case, then, that an ingénu is presented to the reader as one
who is typical in most every degree, but perhaps has an insufficient worldliness in
certain crucial respects.

Innocence is another factor that contributes to the idea that ingénu irony is
the result of the characteristics of the ingénu itself, and is not the result of some
additional rhetorical maneuver on the part of the author. The ingénu does not
dissimulate, and there is no insidiousness or cunning associated with his actions.
For this reason in particular, ingénu irony is distinguished from what Muecke
calls “self-disparaging irony” in his classification of ironic modes. Self-
disparaging irony has a long and well-known history, and is most often associated
with the style of argument used by Socrates. His primary tactic of argumentation
has been much discussed: Socrates will create an ironic echo by conceding the
merit of his opponent’s views with false flattery and feigned and exaggerated
approval. According to Muecke, self-disparaging irony can be identified because

[t]he ironist is present . . . in disguise, as a person with certain
characteristics. . . . But his disguise is meant to be penetrated, and our
judgment is not directed against the ignorance or naivety of the speaker but against the object of irony. (Compass 97)

One might add, considering the Platonic dialogues, that even though there are no markers to indicate Socrates’s disingenuousness, the reader is nevertheless aware of his tactics, if only by sheer repetition from one dialogue to the next. Socratic irony is employed in a truth-seeking effort; it is meant to be detected to all but the victim, who is primarily identified as Socrates’s dialogical counterpart. The critical difference between Socrates and a typical ingénue is that the former is disingenuous and dissimulates his naïveté, while the latter is incapable of this tactic.

Because verbal irony is typically tropological resulting from an ambiguous message, the ingénue is unequipped to make an utterance of this type intentionally while remaining in character. In this regard, verbal irony as the result of a statement made by an ingénue will have a different formulation than that which is produced by an oblique reference that is masked by the pretense of making an alternate, more “innocent” reference. For example, readers will accept more readily that irony is employed by a devious character such as Rodolphe Boulanger. During his memorable seduction of Emma Bovary which takes place during the Comices agricoles, he says to her, “Eh non! pourquoi déclamer contre les passions? Ne sont-elles pas la seule belle chose qu’il y ait sur la terre, la source de l’héroïsme, de l’enthousiasme, de la poésie, de la musique, des arts, de tout enfin?” (Flaubert, Madame Bovary 211). The ostensible meaning of these words refers to romantic sentiment that will likely appeal to Emma’s sensibilities. But the actual or intended meaning of the words is empty. Rodolphe is simply
remaining in character, having conjured up a quasi-romantic plaintive that for him has only instrumental value. Yet Flaubert is able to hit a broad range of targets with his irony while taking cover behind the speech of a scoundrel who is simply trying to trick Emma into sleeping with him. Flaubert is banking on the possibility that the reader will take the words at face value, if only momentarily, then makes certain the reader is able to capture the irony further on by juxtaposing Rodolphe’s speech with that of the speakers of the Comices agricoles, who are in the process of awarding prizes. But the sense of the literal meaning of the speech, which might otherwise refer to lofty sentiment, will be tainted by the reader’s prior interpretation of Rodolphe’s empty words which are used in his not-so estimable cause. This describes one possible device for irony that is available to an author who wishes to remain neutral and otherwise hidden from the reader, and the character will deflect some of the blame for the intended irony. However, such is not the case for the ingénu whose innocence and artlessness work to restrict the reader from taking his or her words at anything more than face value.

As I mentioned, verbal irony that is engendered by the ingénu is to a greater or lesser degree the result of situation. Consequently, we may think of ingénu irony as a combination of both situational and verbal irony. An author only has to place the ingénu in a particular environment so that he may act as an observer assigned with the task of reporting to the reader what he sees. The characteristics of the ingénu are important to the production of irony in a manner that is not directly related to what he says and in this, the child in Anderson’s fable is a helpful example. Irony comes in part from the fact that of all the people
able to state the obvious, it was in the end a child, who is presumably the weakest
and least equipped to speak truth in the face of power. Ingénu irony is based on
this incongruity. Moreover, an author relies on the innocence and candor of the
ingénu whose observations, as they are verbally expressed, are not couched in
typical discourse and therefore not what the reader expects to hear in a given
situation. The basis of this incongruity may vary, but in most cases it is due to the
fact that the ingénu does not normally participate in the speech community with
which he is communicating and is not, therefore, bound by the rules of
conventional discourse others are following. In most cases, the ingénu’s
statements will appear to be a crude oversimplification, often resembling
burlesque, or understatement of the issue at hand. Both of these situational and
verbal elements in combination lead to ingénu irony in a broad range of examples,
in varying degrees.

Ingénus who take the form of visitors are common to eighteenth-century
literature. Voltaire used them prominently in several of his contes, and also in his
own reporting on English society in his Lettres philosophiques. I shall discuss
Voltaire’s use of the ingénu further on. I have chosen to comment first on
examples of ingénu irony that can be found in the observations made by the
characters Rica and Usbek in Lettres Persanes. I should point out that I do not
consider Rica and Usbek to be genuine ingénus, but rather ingénu-like.
Nevertheless, examples of irony produced by these characters are clear and
illustrative of ingénu irony as it is produced by burlesque. The fact that the
protagonists are Persians creates a distance both real and figurative that removes
them from French culture to such a degree that they may as well be from “outer space,” in the words of Judith Shklar. She argues that the French readers certainly felt a strong impact by seeing themselves through the eyes of an outsider, and adds: “[m]erciless ridicule of the most cherished illusions is the epitome of intellectual radicalism, and Montesquieu’s first readers fully appreciated his daring” (Shklar 31). Shklar stresses the point that the work was offered as more of a means by which French society might undergo self-examination than for fomenting a revolution. Jean Starobinski, commenting on Lettres Persanes, suggests that this effort captures the overall strategy employed by Montesquieu:

Le mouvement négateur de la critique est libération; il importe d’abord d’arracher les masques, de couvrir de ridicule les fantasmes et les superstitions. C’est le moment de l’ironie et des Lettres Persanes. L’étonnement de Rica et d’Usbek oblige les Français à s’étonner à leur tour. Ces usages, ces coutumes, ces croyances paraissent insensés aux visiteurs orientaux; mais quel est pour nous leur sens et leur raison? (Montesquieu par lui-même 60)

The irony that Starobinski describes is based on the incongruity between descriptions of Parisian society provided by the two Persian visitors, and the interpretation of these descriptions by eighteenth-century French readers. Because verbal irony entails an ambiguous or double-sensed message, there must be both an ostensible and intended meaning in statements made in the letters of Rica and Usbek. Ostensibly, in addition to much raillery and banter, the letters contain descriptions of various entities and some occasionally accompanying commentary. As I stated above, the content of these letters is in some manner at odds with the reader’s knowledge of the entities described in them. This, then, compels the reader to determine the author’s intended meaning. An important
question to consider, with regard to verbal irony that comes from the ingénue, is the manner in which this secondary meaning is created. A discussion of some of the letters will help to provide clarification of this issue.

The Parisian manners and customs discussed in *Lettres Persanes* are frequently the object of humorous caricature. Stephen Warner, in his work on comedy among eighteenth-century French *philosophes*, elucidates one such example. A likely commentary on the superficiality of Parisian society, Lettre XXX provides an example that is, he claims, “sustained by comedy as a polemical and investigative tool, above all the use of irony as a mode of critical challenge and contestation” (20; author’s emphasis). The often-commented letter, written by Rica, gives an account of another Persian visiting Paris who has created a sensation simply by virtue of his somewhat exotic appearance:

Les habitants de Paris sont d’une curiosité qui va jusqu’à l’extravagence. Lorsque j’arrivai, je fus regardé comme si j’avais été envoyé du Ciel; vieillards, hommes, femmes, enfants, tous voulaient me voir. Si je sortais, tout le monde se mettait aux fenêtres; si j’étais aux Tuilleries, je voyais aussitôt un cercle se former autour de moi; les femmes mêmes faisaient un arc-de-ciel, nuancé de mille couleurs, qui m’entourait; si j’étais au spectacle, je trouvais d’abord cent lorgnettes dressées contre ma figure: enfin jamais homme n’a tant été vu que moi. Je souriais quelquefois d’entendre des gens qui n’étaient presque jamais sortis de leur chambre, qui disaient entre eux: “il faut avouer qu’il a l’air bien persan.” Chose admirable! je trouvais de mes portraits partout; je me voyais multiplié dans toutes les boutiques, sur toutes les cheminées: tant on craignait de ne m’avoir pas assez vu. Tant d’honneurs ne laissent pas d’être à charge: je ne me croyais pas un homme si curieux et si rare; et quoique j’aie très bonne opinion de moi, je ne me serais jamais imaginé que je dusse troubler le repos d’une grande ville où je n’étais point connu. Cela me fit résoudre à quitter l’habit persan et à en endosser un à l’européenne, pour voir s’il resterait encore dans ma physionomie quelque chose d’admirable. Cet essai me fit connaître ce que je valais réellement: libre de tous les ornements étrangers, je me vis apprécié au plus juste. J’eus sujet de me plaindre de mon tailleur, qui m’avait fait perdre en un instant l’attention et l’estime
Voyeurism moves in both directions in this passage: the Parisians are observing the Persian visitor who is in turn observing them. What is most striking, however, is the reversal of roles: the outsider, namely the Persian, appears to be the sensible and rational one, while those with whom the eighteenth-century French reader shares an intimate familiarity appear to be out of the ordinary, and perhaps even ridiculous. Montesquieu correctly assumes, I believe, that this narrative tactic will give pause to the reader, who might then wonder whom to trust in the role of observer—a twist of irony to be sure! Apart from the raillery throughout the letter, because the Persian traveler gives such frank and unmitigated description of the Parisians, omitting any explanation or rationalization for their bizarre conduct, an arguably more accurate portrait of their social behavior is rendered.

There are certain methods at work in the passage that generalize the discussion in order to avoid talking about specific and identifiable entities. One in particular is the use of metonymy and metaphor: “cent lorgnettes dressées contre ma figure” and “les femmes mêmes faisaient un arc-de-ciel, nuancé de mille couleurs, qui m’entourait.” The two descriptions decontextualize the episode and depersonalize the people in them. The descriptions, such as they are, transform the Parisians described into objects that are more readily, and thus more likely to be taken as an object of ridicule, as the reader is confronted with naked action performed by unknown individuals. The use of metonymy also underscores the
fact that particulars have been elevated to a level of abstraction. The reader no longer has the idea that people are surrounding the Persian and staring at him, but rather that some entity is. The reader is therefore unable to share an affinity with those described in the letter, making it less likely she or he will be able to identify with them, and perhaps provide an explanation or rationalization for their behavior. Seen outside of an identifiable framework, which might offer some familiarity to the reader, the people and events described take on an absurd air, which is the basis of the irony in this passage.

The bantering tone of his letter is perhaps enough to exclude the author, Rica from being labeled a true ingénu, but there are other aspects of his description of the Parisians that are typical of those given by ingénus. For example, actions are described without any regard to motive, nor are they given explanation. No person is identified, which would render an aspect of familiarity to readers so that they may place themselves in the context of the events in order to better understand them. Starobinski makes a similar observation with regard to well-known French figures evoked in Lettres Persanes:

Sitôt qu’il n’est plus question de ces personnages exceptionnels, on constatera que dans la France, qu’observent les voyageurs persans, l’individu, dépouillé de toute identité personnelle, n’existe que dans des gestes et des discours typiques, qui le caractérisent comme représentation d’une catégorie: L’éclipse du nom met au nu le rôle social, la fonction, le comportement générique. (“Les Lettres Persanes” 88)

Others have noted Montesquieu’s tendency to place the plane of discussion in the abstract. The two protagonists have more to offer to the didactic purpose of Lettres Persanes than serving in the capacity of observer. Part of the intrigue that unfolds over the course of the exchange of letters, as many have pointed out, is
what occurs in Usbek’s harem. There is inconsistency in his character since the
tone of his letters describing his experiences in Parisian society gives him the
appearance of innocence and candor. On the other hand, he remains something of
a despot as he conducts the affairs of his own home. Werner suggests that
Usbek’s domestic intrigue will serve as a “reprehensive and embodiment” of a
political system against which Montesquieu intended to measure his own:

Montesquieu’s examination of eighteenth-century Persia is connected with
a typology of political systems and beliefs. It confirms the existence of a
form of government based on caprice at whose center is untrammeled
power of a single ruler unbidden to laws or rules, one who owes allegiance
only to his own will or desire. This type of political system is called
despotism. (8)

It doesn’t take French readers long, according to Werner, to regard their own
system of government in the same light as the Persian model that is unfolding
throughout the pages of Lettres Persanes. He continues:

Information on Regency France, whether court practices at Versailles or
the deportment of Frenchmen encountered in the streets of Paris, is equally
instructive. It leads to conclusions about the organization of a society
whose beliefs and institutions, though not Islamic, can also be understood
through ordering principles previously applied to Persia . . . The French
monarchy is corrupt and slothful, at odds with the welfare of the
individual citizens. Readers are to take it as an ironic dédoublement of the
Asiatic society to which it bore a startling, and surely unflattering,
resemblance. (8)

Irony takes the form of a shock or surprise when the reader discovers that, as a
work, Lettres Persanes is allegorical; the work is as much about France as it is
about the two characters and their personal histories.

The element of surprise was essential to many forms of irony during the
period, observes Élisabeth Bourguinat in her work on the history of persiflage in
eighteenth-century France. According to her study, burlesque was initially a
frequent component of persiflage, the former term having been historically defined as

une espèce de ridicule [qui] consiste dans la disconvenance de l’idée qu’on donne d’une chose d’avec son idée véritable. . . . Or cette disconvenance se fait en deux manières, l’une en parlant abasement des choses les plus relevées, et l’autre en parlant magnifiquement des choses les plus basses. (Bourguinat 24-25)

As an early-eighteenth-century mode of irony, l’amphigouri saw relatively wide use. This mode of burlesque was typically obscenity-laden, but also included slang, foreign phrases, and expressions that were otherwise excluded from “La grande littérature,” according to Bourguinat. This describes the type of language an ingénu would be prone to use. The careful arrangement of the discordant vocabulary, she says, worked to “rompre l’unité de ton, et . . . surprendre le lecteur par des sortes de dissonances inopinés qui obligeront de rire” (25). Later in the century, as she points out, burlesque was employed for more than its comedic effect, although the effectiveness of the genre in delivering irony was only in proportion to the shock or surprise it created. In addition to lexical incongruity, the newly evolved form of burlesque also involved the juxtaposition of ideas that had previously been considered entirely unrelated. According to Bourguinat, the comparison of these ideas was often used to initiate philosophical reflection on the part of readers: “le rapprochement de ce qui avait toujours été maintenu éloigné fait apparaître ‘de nouveaux rapports que l’esprit n’avait-peut-être pas aperçus.’” She continues, speaking directly about Lettres Persanes:

Deux voyageurs persans visitent l’Europe, et comparent ce qu’ils voient aux institutions de leur pays; il leur arrive bien souvent de décrire la vie européenne à travers des termes qui ont quelque chose de burlesque, par leur inadéquation à la réalité sociale ou coutumes, notamment religieuses,
que les lecteurs de Montesquieu connaissent bien. S’ébauchent ainsi des comparaisons entre la religion de Mahomet et la religion catholique, entre le sort réservé aux femmes en Orient et en Occident, entre les divers régimes politiques; le burlesque correspond à un “choc de cultures” qui conduit nécessairement à une réflexion philosophique. (164-65)

Religion is discussed in many of the letters, and a similar tactic is employed among them which causes the reader to equate his own religion with that of the Persian visitors. Letter XXXV is typical of many of these, and provides a clear example of Montesquieu’s methods. The manner in which the Catholic religion is described approaches low burlesque, which comes naturally to the ingénu because his descriptions are bereft of artifice, rhetorical decoration or sophistication, taking the form rather of crude exaggeration. Rica and Usbek are notable exceptions, but the ingénu is typically uneducated, and by definition lack sophistication. One would expect the ingénu to be crass, or at least incapable of nuanced description.

In Letter XXXV, Usbek relates several of his observations about the Catholic church to his cousin, who is a dervish, the Islamic equivalent of a priest:

Que penses-tu des chrétiens, sublime dervis? Crois-tu qu’au jour du Jugement ils seront comme les infidèles Turcs, qui serviront d’ânes aux Juifs et les mèneront au grand trot en Enfer? Je sais bien qu’ils n’iront point dans le séjour des Prophètes, et que le grand Hali n’est point venu pour eux. Mais, parce qu’ils n’ont pas été assez heureux pour trouver des mosquées dans leur pays, et que Dieu les punisse pour n’avoir pas pratiqué une religion qu’il ne leur a pas fait connaître? Je puis te le dire: j’ai souvent examiné ces Chrétiens, je les ai interrogés pour voir s’ils avaient quelque idée du grand Hali, qui était le plus beau de tous les hommes: j’ai trouvé qu’ils n’en avaient jamais ouï parler. (75-76)

The passage creates a mirror image as the reader might well acknowledge that she or he would similarly describe the Muslim religion if the situation were put in reverse. This has the effect of rendering religion something relative to a culture
instead of transcendent and sublime. Starobinski comments on Montesquieu’s practice of making use of Rica and Usbek’s lack of familiarity with French linguistic convention, creating a sort of “aphasie volontaire” that obliges à un détour, tantôt par la matérialité redécouverte, tantôt par les équivalents étrangers des mots français: prêtre devient dervis, église devient mosquée. L’effet est double: d’une part, l’on a pu désigner ce qu’il eût été dangeureux de nommer ouvertement; d’autre part, l’on a désacralisé les objets et les êtres jusque-là sacrés, en les rassaisissant dans la langue profane, ou dans celle d’une religion concourrante. Que disparaissa le code linguistique où s’inscrit la conviction religieuse, il ne restera plus que la description des gestes requis par la rite, dépouillés de la justification qu’ils reçoivent par la “chaine” qui unit les cérémonies, les dogmes, et les “autres vérités.” (“Les Lettres Persanes” 91-92)

Desacrilization can be considered another form of burlesque in light of this letter, in the manner in which one speaks basely or with insufficient grandeur of something magnificent or sublime. Yet, it is difficult to find much out of the ordinary with regard to the language used to describe Catholicism in Letter XXXV. The negative effect of Usbek’s descriptions of the Catholic church does not come about because they are in any way crass or unrefined. But what leads to desacrilization has roughly the same cause; Usbek does not know any better and can only make meaningful comparisons by what he does know. He goes at some length to compare directly Catholicism to his own Muslim religion, which was likely blasphemous to eighteenth-century French readers:

D’ailleurs, si l’on examine de près leur religion, on trouvera comme une semence de nos dogmes. J’ai souvent admiré les secrets de la Providence, qui semble les avoir voulu préparer par là à la conversion générale. . . . Leur baptême est l’image de nos ablutions légales, et les Chrétiens n’errent que dans l’efficacité qu’ils donnent à cette première ablation, qu’ils croient devoir suffire pour toutes les autres. Leur prêtres et leurs moines prient comme nous sept fois le jour. Ils espèrent de jouir d’un paradis où ils goûteront mille délices par le moyen de la résurrection des corps. Ils ont, comme nous, des jeûnes marqués, des mortifications
avec lesquelles ils espèrent fléchir la miséricorde divine. Ils rendent un
culte aux bons Anges et se méfient des mauvais. Ils ont une sainte
crédulité pour les miracles que Dieu opère par le ministère de ses
serviteurs. Ils reconnaissent, comme nous, l’insuffisance des leurs mérites
et le besoin qu’ils ont d’un intercesseur auprès de Dieu. Je vois partout le
Mahométisme, quoique je n’y trouve point Mahomet. (76)

Montesquieu’s assumed role as a mere editor who just happens to be in
possession of private correspondence and documents is not enough to protect him
from being identified as the author of *Lettres Persanes*. However, by purporting
that the author of the letters is someone other than himself, he creates enough
distance between himself and their content to allow the reader to assume, at least
with some measure of plausibility, that the point of view expressed in the letters is
not his own. For eighteenth-century French readers, the ideas expressed, and the
blasphemous comparisons being made could at least plausibly be construed as
having come from an outsider who does not know any better. Montesquieu’s ruse
is not meant to be convincing—it is doubtful that any reader would assume that he
was not the author of *Lettres Persanes*—but it does allow him to assume a
secondary role. Moreover, Montesquieu’s assumed posture as “editor” puts him in
a position to simply “publish” Usbek’s letter as it was written. This of course
means that Montesquieu actually writes the letter as Usbek would have, as an
ingénu without sophistication, a device which allows for a blunt comparison of
Catholicism and the Muslim religion. Irony in general proved to be an effective
veil to protect an eighteenth-century author who wished to criticize institutions of
power and escape censorship or even imprisonment, though it was not a fool-
proof method.
Starobinski points out that despite the apparent absence of an author, who he says is placed in a self-restricted role as mere editor in possession of numerous letters, the reader nevertheless

a tôt fait de sentir que, dans ces voix plurielles, dans ces sujets qui ont successivement raison selon leur raison particulières, un auteur caché et omniprésent se complait à confronter les passions opposées, les dogmes et la critique du dogme, en sorte que triomphe insensiblement une raison qui résulte de la perception des rapports. (“Les Lettres Persanes” 84; author’s emphasis)

According to Starobinski, the fact that Rica and Usbek are visitors far removed from French culture enables them to see in a manner that is uninhibited, allowing them to make observation at will and in the manner they choose (“Les Lettres Persanes” 87). The crux of the matter, in my view, is to determine to what Starobinski refers as “questions accessoires,” which for the moment appear to amount to nothing more than linguistic baggage. The fact that Rica and Usbek do not participate in the same speech community as the French reader of Lettres Persanes allows them to be free “à faire bref, à élaguer, à couper court, à rendre inutiles préambles et développements” in the linguistic rendering of their observations. The simplified discourse that results is more likely to catch the reader’s attention if only by virtue of its novelty.

Part of the effectiveness of using the characters Rica and Usbek is that they are able to achieve a higher level of abstraction resulting from their simplistic and uncensored discourse in which the accidental or unessential aspects of entities are left out of their description. One should assume that Montesquieu believed that part of the prefatory and otherwise routine verbal accompaniment related to discourse about certain aspects of French society and culture implied
rationalization or other kinds of sophistic undergirding for the negative aspects of these things. Starobinski illustrates how the role of Rica and Usbek was to expose the weakness of these belief systems:

Mais pour faire tomber les masques de l’hypocrisie et de préjugés, il a fallu faire entrer dans Paris des personnes masquées. Le travesti persan de Rica et d’Usbek sert, en quelque façon, de “réactif”: une sorte de contagion fait que les faux Persans propagent le sentiment de faux; des qu’ils s’avisent d’examiner une de nos certitudes, elle nous devient aussitôt hypothétique, comme si leur regard avait le don de transformer ce qu’il rencontre: une fois vus par ces étrangers, les objets n’ont plus pour nous la même consistence: ils sonnent faux. (Montesquieu par lui-même 62-63)

That the protagonists are able to perform this function so effectively stems from the similarities they share with the ingénus. As outsiders of the Parisian culture they describe, these characters lack the manner of expression that, as I have shown, often functions as rationalization for hypocritical, immoral, or unjust social conventions. One additional advantage of the ingénus is that the character is better able to be noticed. Montesquieu could very well have written a typical treatise containing criticism of the French political system and of corrupting aspects of French society. Just as the characters stand out from the French society they describe, so does the manner of their description which is unique and not couched in discourse that by its familiarity is easily ignored. Because Rica and Usbek are characters of a novel, Montesquieu had to make them believable as a concession to vraisemblance. The fact that they are visitors to a different culture gave Rica and Usbek certain attributes of the ingénus, but they are not a full embodiment of the character, as one finds in the conte.
The history of the ingénu in French literature of the eighteenth century is unique because it is influenced by the fact that one of Voltaire’s contes philosophiques bears the name of this literary figure. In the search for the archetype of the ingénu, critics cannot be blamed for giving greater attention to the protagonist of L’Ingénu, simply by virtue of the title of the work. L’Ingénu is one of the last of Voltaire’s conte philosophiques, a genre that Voltaire most likely invented. It will be of great importance, as we develop the image of the ingénu as it is employed as a device for the production of irony, to examine Voltaire’s role as conteur in this conte, and how that function differs from that of novelist such as Montesquieu. Dorothy McGhee claims that the conte philosophique has its origins in second-century Latin texts, and that while one can say that the genre did not originate with Voltaire during the eighteenth century, in his work “it did assume such distinctly philosophical characteristics that the term came to be identified especially with that period” (17). On the other side of the debate, there are those who point out that the hybrid genre of the conte philosophique was not very conspicuous before, or even after Voltaire. According to Roger Pearson, for example, “The Voltarian conte [philosophique] is sui generis, a unique blend of fiction and philosophical debate which bears certain resemblances to the work of other writers but none the less was and has remained without close parallel” (7). This is important to the ingénu who seems to rise and fall in the manner of the popularity of the conte as a genre of literature.

Several claim that among Voltaire’s contes, L’Ingénu comes closest to the novel, an emerging genre for which Voltaire reputedly had little use. In his “Essai
sur la poésie épique” he wrote, “si quelques romans nouveaux paraissent encore, et s’ils font pour un certain temps l’amusement de la jeunesse frivole, les vrais gens de lettres les méprisent” (qtd. in Clouston 46). One of the reasons for which Voltaire preferred the conte philosophique over the novel appears to be paradoxical at first glance. It is precisely because the characters and events of the story were so far-fetched in the conte philosophique that Voltaire’s utilitarian purpose of ethical or metaphysical instruction was simplified, and more easily deemed reliable by the reader. In Le Taureau Blanc, he writes:

Je veux qu’un conte soit fondé sur la vraisemblance, et qu’il ne ressemble pas à un rêve. Je désire qu’il n’ait rien de trivial ni d’extravagant. Je voudrais surtout que, sous la voile de la fable, il laissât entrevoir aux yeux exercés quelque vérité fine qui échappe au vulgaire. (qtd. in Mason 55)

According to Pearson, who is comparing Candide to Rousseau’s La Nouvelle Héloïse, “Voltaire would hope that Candide, for all its fantasy and artifice, rings true, where the grand manner of supposedly more realistic fiction like La Nouvelle Héloïse does not. Voltaire’s contes philosophiques are modern allegories which, by seeking never to pull the wool of fiction over our eyes, promote the cause of reason and clear-sightedness” (14). The issue of trust is also perhaps associated with the lack of narrative distance between the conteur and his readers. The reader will more easily bond with a conteur who is on the scene and openly displays an ideology that the two may likely share. On the other hand, the devices employed by the novelist work to remove her- or himself from the scene of narration and hence out of contact with the reader.

Dating back to its origins as a genre, the conte has traditionally been considered both allegorical and instructional, and it is in these two features where
it differs in important respects from the novel. In the first place, an author or creator of an allegory makes no pretense that the ostensible meaning should be taken literally, or even insist that it ring true. By definition, allegories are only symbolic representations of human experience. Secondly, the instructional aspect of the conte implies a purpose; the author has a predetermined message to deliver and has a desired effect on the reader in mind. This can be the case as well with the novel, as I have shown above in the example of Lettres Persanes, but typically a novelist, because of a growing concern to give fiction the illusion of being real, must take certain measures to maintain her or his distance, and in some cases remain hidden from the reader altogether in order to maintain a pretense of realism. At the very least, then, one may conclude that the conte differs from the novel in terms of the directness in the line of communication between the author and the reader. While the conteur seems to almost engage the reader directly, the novelist feels discomfort about the idea of her or his perceived presence in the text. Actions by an author to relieve this discomfort will alter the form of irony. I take up this topic in Chapter 3.

Another important consideration with regard to Voltaire’s use of the ingénue is that he employs the figure for satire, rather than for the production of verbal irony per se. Looking at general irony in eighteenth-century French literature, the most prominent examples seem to take the form of parody and satire. However, both of these genres operate on different levels and in different contexts than does simple verbal irony, according to Linda Hutcheon. With this distinction there is a corresponding difference in the apprehension of each.
Verbal irony is a trope, making it different from parody, which is a genre. This difference, Hutcheon points out, is one of scope “[parodie] se définit normalement non pas comme phénomène intratextuel [like irony] mais en tant que modalité du canon de l’intertextualité” (“Ironie, satire, parodie” 143). Parody also has a more stable target because it is limited to existing texts and literary conventions:

la parodie effectue une superposition de textes. Au niveau de sa structure formelle, un texte parodique est l’articulation d’un synthèse, d’une incorporation d’un texte parodé . . . dans un texte parodiant, d’un enchâssement du vieux dans le neuf. Mais cet dédoublement parodique ne fonctionne que pour marquer la différence. (143)

Satire, Hutcheon continues, differs from parody only in terms of its target. Parody mimics other literary texts with the intent to mock them while satire exposes human vices and other foolish behavior or beliefs, and subjects them to ridicule. There are, as a result, three different competences needed for the decoding of each of irony, parody, and satire: linguistic competence for irony; knowledge of genre and literary convention for parody; and ideological competence for satire.

That Voltaire is using Candide as a platform for expressing his own opinions about various issues or events is a matter of general agreement; he is considered to have been on the offensive throughout much of the work. In his examination of Voltaire’s use of irony, Haydn Mason concludes that the author actually had little regard for dramatic form as it had been associated with the great tragedies of the previous century. According to Mason, Voltaire uses irony as a form of raillery, and it should be considered first and foremost as a mode of attack in the form of ridicule. He quotes from one of Voltaire’s letters:

Prêchez et écrivez, combattez, convertissez, rendez les fanatiques si odieux et si misérables que le gouvernement soit honteux de les soutenir.
Mason claims that Voltaire would later change his attitude toward irony, if only slightly. The author realized that invective was off-putting and that the playfulness and jocundity surrounding irony was more captivating. This was important to Voltaire because he used the device in writing he desired to be thought-provoking (Mason 57-59).

One may derive the general theme of Candide simply from examination of the names of its two principal characters. The protagonist, whose name from the Latin “candidus” implies honesty and straightforwardness, is a character who is initially unaffected by life’s experiences. The character of Candide fits the description of an ingénue in a variety of ways, as is demonstrated throughout the work, but particularly in the beginning when he is in the initial stages of what is considered by many to be a formative process. Scholars have likened his character to an embodiment of the empiricist philosophy of Locke: “one might allude to Candide as a metaphor of Locke’s tabula rasa: born pure and unblemished by life’s imprints,” according to Bettina Knapp (174). Or as Pearson puts it, “Candide is, as his name etymologically suggests, a piece of white paper on which experience comes to write itself” (116). It is because of the protagonist’s illumination at the end of the story, as he utters the memorable phrase “il faut cultiver notre jardin,” that Candide is labeled by some commentators as a “conte de formation” in addition to a conte philosophique. Pearson argues that Voltaire uses the structure of a chivalric romance for the structural model of Candide, in which
The hero, in pursuit of his beloved, undergoes a series of ordeals by which he proves himself worthy of her. . . . Needless to say, much of the comedy in Candide derives from the exaggerated, accumulated, and incongruous nature of these ordeals. There is no question of the Providentialist view being taken seriously. “Tous les événements sont enchaînés dans le meilleur des mondes possibles,” proclaims Pangloss to the bitter end: but both his sequence of events and implied definition of happiness as consisting in the consumption of “des cédrats confits et des pistaches” are absurd. (115)

Paradoxically, and also ironically, it is Candide, and not the teacher and “grand homme” Pangloss who is better able to learn to cope with evil, shown in Voltaire’s work to be an attendant aspect of life.

An important role for Candide throughout the conte, is to appear to be a seemingly fervent follower of the philosophy of Optimism, as it is espoused and disseminated by the other principal character, Pangloss (whose name from Greek is “all tongue,” or “all talk”). Among scholars of Voltaire who have debated this question, Cassandra Mabe argues most convincingly that the notion of philosophical systems, and “ivory tower” philosophers as they are satirically represented by the character of Pangloss, are the primary targets for Voltaire’s irony in Candide. For example, she alludes to the episode in which Candide, on a voyage, encounters Pangloss, who has been disfigured by venereal disease. For Mabe, this episode represents the overall theme of the work:

Hélas! Dit [Pangloss], c’est l’amour; l’amour, le consolateur du genre humain, le conservateur de l’univers, l’âme de tous les êtres sensibles, le tendre amour. –Hélas! dit Candide, je l’ai connu, cet amour, ce souverain des cœurs, cette âme de notre âme; il ne m’a jamais valu qu’un baiser et vingt coups de pied au cul. Comment cette belle cause a-t-elle pu produire en vous un effet si abominable?

Pangloss répondit en ces termes: Ô mon cher Candide! Vous avez connu Paquette . . . j’ai goûté dans ses bras des délices du paradis, qui ont produit ces tourments d’enfer dont vous me voyez dévoré; elle en était infectée, elle en est peut-être morte. Paquette tenait ce présent d’un
cordelier très savant, qui avait remonté à la source; car il l’avait eue d’une vielle comtesse, qui l’avait réçue d’un captaine de cavalerie, qui la devait à une marquise, qui la tenait d’un page, qui l’avit réçue d’un jesuite, qui, étant novice, l’avait eue en droite ligne d’un des compagnons de Christophe Colomb. Pour moi, je ne la donnerai à personne, car je me meurs.

–Ô Pangloss! s’écrira Candide, voilà une étrange généologie! n’est-ce pas le diable qui en fut la souche? –Point du tout, répliqua ce grand homme; c’était une chose indispensable dans le meilleur des mondes, un ingédient nécessaire; car si Colomb n’avait pas attrapé, dans une île de l’Amérique, cette maladie qui empoisonne la source de la génération . . . nous n’aurions ni le chocolat ni le cochenille . . . (Candide 153)

The episode is ironic on many levels and extends to many victims, not the least of which is Pangloss and the Optimistic philosophy he espouses. Mabe observes that tracing the path of the disease through the Church, the military, and the nobility indirectly implicates each group for hypocrisy and the ill effects they spread—like a disease—to the society at large. But Pangloss, who represents “ivory tower philosophers” such as Pope and Leibniz, gets the worst of it. Mabe concludes, “[w]e thus witness the demise of Pangloss, who, since he is dying, will not give the disease, or his infectious philosophy to anyone else . . .” (84). The application of Optimistic philosophy is also ironic in this passage. In espousing such a philosophy, typically one speaks of the negative effects associated with an event as necessary in order to bring about a greater and more general good. Here, the spread of venereal disease brings only the trivial benefits of chocolate and a certain breed of insect. In Pangloss’s juxtaposition, the negative effects are far worse than the benefits, by any reasonable measure. It is an absurd exaggeration to count as a benefit what Pangloss states them to be. This type of exaggeration is associated with burlesque.
According to Stephen Werner, the series of episodes that makes up the story of Candide reflects Voltaire’s penchant for the burlesque and comedy, but also contains elements of malice and sadism in macabre descriptions that are, he argues, needed to counterbalance the hubris of those who rely on philosophical systems that offer what were perceived to be facile explanations, or rationalizations about human suffering in the face of evil. Says Werner, “[l]essons of philosophy are to be derived from this introduction to horror. They concern warnings about the vanity of metaphysical systems and blinkered theoricians, reminders of the impossibility of resolving issues like the problem of evil” (55). Part of Voltaire’s personal feelings toward evil were shaped by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and in particular, according to Voltaire scholars, the proclamation by the Jesuit Malgrida, in the aftermath of the tragedy, that the earthquake had come as a result of God’s punishment for vice and sin among the population of Lisbon. The Lisbon earthquake will play an instructive role Voltaire’s conte as the episodes surrounding its fictional depiction offer to the reader evidence of Candide’s formative progress, which is then placed in ironic juxtaposition with Pangloss’s steadfastness within his rigid philosophical system, which appears to the reader to be increasingly absurd in light of the events of the story, as they unfold.

As the protagonists arrive in the port of Lisbon, the earthquake has unleashed rough seas, and the ship they are aboard is in danger of foundering. While Pangloss is busy philosophizing about the origins of the earthquake, the Anabaptist has himself fallen into the sea as the result of his attempt to rescue a
sailor from falling overboard. The sailor, despite the Anabaptist’s selfless action, makes no effort whatsoever to save him. It is Candide, rather, who attempts to go to his aid:

Candide approche, voit son bienfaiteur qui reparaît un moment et qui est englouti pour jamais. Il veut se jeter après lui dans la mer; le philosophe Pangloss l’en empêche, en lui prouvant que la rade de Lisbonne avait été formée exprès pour que cet anabaptiste s’y noyait. Tandis qu’il le prouvait a priori, le vaisseau s’entrouvre, tout périt à la réserve de Pangloss, de Candide, et de ce brutal de matelot qui avait noyé le vertueux anabaptiste. (155)

Placed once more in ironic juxtaposition with the inaction of Pangloss, Candide’s instinctual reaction to do something in order to save the Anabaptist suggests that deeds are worth more than thought or words in a dire situation. Voltaire uses the episode to provide a lesson in practical ethics for his readers. Pangloss’s philosophizing does nothing that could in any way be helpful to the situation, which is urgent enough to demand heroic action. Metaphorically, his efforts are shown to be even more futile as he searches for a priori (and not concrete) causes of the earthquake. Even if such a thing were possible, it is hard to imagine how an explanation of an earthquake involving pure deductive reasoning would be in any way helpful. Finally, the absurd rationalization that the Anabaptist was somehow meant to drown in the waters off Lisbon reveals a certain cowardice on the part of Pangloss; he seems more than willing to hide behind a philosophy of inaction that prevents him from doing the right thing. That he has used his philosophy to dissuade another from trying to save a life suggests that he is even immoral. On the other hand, Candide, unencumbered with a philosophical system that requires calculation before action, is willing and able to do what is necessary. In this case,
an ethics based on intuition or common sense is what the situation requires. The reader notices that the ingénue is more capable of doing the right thing. Certainly Voltaire must have intended to illustrate this point.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, Pangloss’s philosophical discoursing puts the protagonists into even further danger. He is overheard by an Inquisitor who deduces from the philosopher’s arguments that he does not believe in free will, and denies, therefore, the existence of Original Sin. Though he makes an attempt, Pangloss is unable to convince his captors that he does indeed believe in a free will that is consistent with absolute necessity before Lisbon’s wise men decide to make the two prisoners the subjects of an auto-da-fé:

On vint lier après le dîner le docteur Pangloss et son disciple Candide, l’un pour avoir parlé, et l’autre pour avoir écouté avec un air d’approbation... Ils marchèrent en procession ainsi vêtus, ils entendirent un sermon très pathétique, suivi d’une belle musique en faux bourdon. Candide fut fessé en cadence, pendant qu’on chantait... et Pangloss fut pendu, quoique ce ne soit pas la coutume. Le même jour la terre trembla de nouveau avec un fracas épouvantable.

Candide, épouvanté, interdit, éperdu, tout sanglant, tout palpitant, se disait à lui-même: “Si c’est ici le meilleur des mondes possibles, que sont donc les autres”? (158)

Pearson suggests that episodes in Candide such as the Lisbon auto-da-fé serve as “a way of indicting the spineless acquiescence of human beings in the ‘fables’ of power which govern them,” in which “absurd cruelty provides a spectacle... for passive and unthinking collaborators in the fictions of authority” (133). By this point in the story, Candide has begun to show his skepticism toward the Optimistic philosophy of Pangloss and also the tenets of the religion such as those that call for the implementation of the absurd and cruel auto-da-fé. His statement “Si c’est le meilleur des mondes...” is perhaps taken by readers as an entreaty to
those whose adherence to systems of belief make such pointless cruelty possible. 
Candide, who as an ingénu remains unaffected (perhaps a better word is “unspoiled”) by these systems, appears to the reader as the only one sensible enough to see the world such as it is. With his remark on this occasion, Candide fits Muecke’s description of an ingénu cited above; he appears to be alone in witnessing the atrocity, absurdity, and hypocrisy of the circumstances surrounding the earthquake and the auto-da-fé, which are accepted by others perhaps as conventional wisdom. At the very least he is the only one to have evinced any sort of objection to these events. As an ingénu, or to take Voltaire’s conception of the character as a tabula rasa, Candide has not been inculcated with the systems of belief that allow its followers to rationalize the horrific cruelty that often comes about by their adherence to such systems. In this regard, Candide maintains the childlike innocence fundamental to an ingénu.

Candide’s formation continues as his adventures take him to Eldorado. Despite the absence of violence and suffering there, he decides to leave the idyllic surroundings that resemble Eden even more than did the castle of Baron de Thunder-ten-tronckh, from which he was banished in the first chapter. Candide’s decision to leave Eldorado is symbolic, according to many commentators: “No longer able to cope with a world of extreme purity, light, goodness, and innocence, Candide rejected the very notion of perfect happiness. Hadn’t Adam and Eve also opted to leave . . . the Garden of Eden? Voltaire must have mused,” writes Bettina Knapp (184). Pearson compares Candide’s and his companion, Cacambo’s reason to those affecting Adam and Eve: “Sex and vanity are the
instruments of the Fall as Candide and Cacambo leave Eldorado in pursuit of their sweethearts and in order to show off their riches” (120). Hence, Candide’s “Fall” in deciding to quit Eldorado marks the moment when one might say that his instruction has come to a fruition. Candide, having had first-hand knowledge of evil, has a much better awareness of what it is. In this regard, his character loses a sense of innocence, which is perhaps analogous to the story of Adam and Eve, who were banished from the Garden of Eden. Much in the manner of the two biblical characters, Candide has learned to discern good from evil.

Candide’s education is completed and demonstrated in the final chapter of the story when Candide appears to have broken definitively with Pangloss’s philosophy. Optimism, the concept at which Voltaire has aimed his irony, has been disproved by a process similar to *reductio ad absurdum* in logic. In this form of argument in formal logic, if one wishes to prove that a certain proposition is false, one may do so by first assuming that the proposition is true. However, if this assumption then leads to a contradiction at the end of the argument—as has been suspected from the beginning—one has proven that the proposition is false. The rhetorical use of *reductio ad absurdum* is related to burlesque because the mode of argumentation typically involves making a particular position absurd by showing it in its extreme case. Voltaire uses this method of argumentation, without perhaps the same mathematical precision of formal logic, but with the same result. In the beginning of Candide, there was nothing to counter Pangloss’s philosophizing. As the story progressed, his repeated efforts to explain horrifically cruel events with his philosophy of Optimism clearly fail, and his philosophy is
rendered patently absurd. Pearson argues that Voltaire uses the structure of a chivalric romance as a model for Candide, in which

[the hero, in pursuit of his beloved, undergoes a series of ordeals by which he proves himself worthy of her. . . . Needless to say, much of the comedy in Candide derives from the exaggerated, accumulated, and incongruous nature of these ordeals. [T]here is no question of the Providentialist view being taken seriously. “Tous les événements sont enchaînés dans le meilleur des mondes possibles,” proclaims Pangloss to the bitter end: but both his sequence of events and implied definition of happiness as consisting in the consumption of “pistaches” are absurd. (115)

As a device for irony, the character of Candide proves effective to the extent that the reader has seen evidence of his formation. From the beginning, the simpleton and ingénue has evolved into the purveyor of a realistic and sensible philosophy of coping with evil in the world which culminates at the end of the story with his sensible and practical pledge to stick to gardening.

In L’Ingénu, as in Zadig and Micromégas, and also in the same manner as Montesquieu, Voltaire employs an outsider to be an observer and critic of society. Pearson identifies one of the targets of Voltaire’s satire to be the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which put an end to religious tolerance, and spawned an increase of state-sponsored repression (170-71). What is also perhaps indicated by the use of a native of the Huron tribe was a reversal in his attitude towards the conception of Rousseau’s “l’homme sauvage,” which is characterized in Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité. Voltaire had made this concept of Rousseau’s an object of criticism and ridicule earlier, particularly in Candide. In the often-quoted letter to Rousseau dated 1755, in a tone that is transparently flippant and sarcastic, Voltaire wrote these memorable words: “On n’a jamais employé tant d’esprit à
vouloir nous rendre bêtes; on prend envie de marcher à quatre pattes quand on lit votre ouvrage” (Œuvres 35). The character, l’Ingénu, is portrayed by Voltaire as handsome, cultivated, and a speaker of no fewer than three languages. He has a thirst for acquiring knowledge and seeks to become cultivated. His character is an intended contrast to Rousseau’s idealistic image of human beings in a pre-societal state of nature: “nos âmes se sont corrompues à mesure que nos sciences et nos arts se sont avancés à la perfection” (Rousseau 41). Yet, despite his urbanity, and even though he was born of French parents, the Huron is enough of an outsider to the Breton society to be convincing in the role of ingénu. Perhaps he is not the tabula rasa that was Candide, but l’Ingénu does go through a process of formation that will come to fruition, according to Pearson, after a “progression from superstition to enlightenment—like the history of a nation” (177). For Voltaire, the enlightened person’s intellectual outlook was tempered by sentimentality. The presence of this latter aspect, according to several scholars, puts this conte more into the realm of a novel than any of Voltaire’s previous works.

The protagonist of L’Ingénu is capable of irony similar to that produced by Candide. In one episode that illustrates how irony operates in the work, l’Ingénu, by virtue of his naïveté, is able to expose a weakness in the most elaborate reasoning put forth by a Jansenist with whom the Huron shares a prison cell. In a theological discussion with Gordon about the origin of sin and the nature of God, the latter is unable to satisfy the most simple inquiry from an ingénu. After Gordon asks l’Ingénu what he thinks about the soul and how one acquires knowledge, and about free will, the latter replies:
Rien . . . si je pensais quelque chose, c’est que nous sommes sous la puissance de l’Être éternel comme les astres et les éléments; qu’il fait tout en nous, que nous sommes de petites roues de la machine immense dont il est l’âme; qu’il agit par des lois générales et non par des vues particulières; cela seul me paraît intelligible, tout le reste est pour moi un abîme de ténèbres.
–Mais, mon fils, ce serait faire Dieu auteur du péché!
–Mais, mon père, votre grâce efficace ferait Dieu auteur du péché aussi: car il est certain que tous ceux à qui cette grâce serait refusée pécheraient; et qui nous livre au mal n’est-il pas l’auteur du mal? (314-15)

Although l’Ingénu demonstrates a keen ability to reason in this passage, this does not disqualify him from the status of ingénu, such as I have described the figure thus far, nor is his intelligent query incompatible with being considered naïve. It does show that the native Huron is not steeped in the theological discourse and accepted “truths” that have permitted Gordon to rationalize acceptance of his own point of view. As anyone who has had teaching experience knows, the most difficult questions sometimes come from “naïve” students who have not yet adopted the conventional truths or discourse that have become part of a particular discipline. Sometimes these conventions are necessary and justifiable, but occasionally (perhaps frequently) they are not. Clearly Gordon is hard-pressed to answer: “Cette naïveté embarrassait fort le bonhomme; il sentait qu’il faisait de vains efforts pour se tirer de ce bourbier, et il entassait tant de paroles qui parassaient avoir du sens et qui n’en avaient point . . . que l’Ingénu en avait pitié” (315). At the end of subsequent discussions, Gordon will proclaim incredulously that l’Ingénu may well have had the better of him in their debate despite his lacking a formal education. His statement elucidates the irony of the situation, as well
Quoi! dit-il en lui-même, j’ai consomé cinquante ans à m’instruire, et je crains de ne pouvoir atteindre au bon sens naturel de cet enfant presque sauvage! Je tremble d’avoir laborieusement fortifié des préjugés; il n’écoute que la simple nature. (318)

One of several messages delivered by Voltaire in *L’Ingénu*, according to Pearson, is that “[c]uriosity, common sense, a willingness to concede error, and the courage of one’s convictions, are all the qualifications one needs for the metamorphosis from brute to man” (178). These qualities do not come to a person as a result of formal education or the quality of refinement. These are traits that require no special knowledge or training and might well be possessed by an ingénu. Perhaps Voltaire intends to make the stronger, not to mention ironic, point that sophisticated knowledge and refinement can become barriers to the preferred qualities of open-mindedness, common sense, and humility.

The exchange between l’Ingénu and Gordon cited above also underscores one of my general assertions that much of ingénu irony is situational as well as verbal. There is little one can say about l’Ingénu’s questioning—here of Gordon, but throughout the conte as well—with regard to rhetorical or narrative device. His questions are straightforward and consequently lack the ambiguity or oblique reference that are typically found in instances of verbal irony. Without a double-sensed message, irony must arise from an incongruity produced by a situation, or set of circumstances. In this case, Voltaire has placed his device, namely the ingénu, in a position to ask questions of his interlocutors that are often embarrassing and that produce effects similar to those I have been describing. Occasionally, the interlocutors will actually show that they recognize the irony, as Gordon has done. Muecke’s comments on ingénu irony are relatively brief
compared to the attention he gives to other forms of irony, nevertheless; he seems to have had this idea in mind:

The ingénu by his questions or responses may bring about an exposure without being aware of having done so. Such instances represent the borderline between or, more often, a combination of Ingénu irony and what I have called Dramatized irony in which the ironist withdraws completely leaving the victim to expose himself directly to the reader. (Compass 92)

There are aspects of both verbal and situational irony in ingénu irony. I would argue that ingénu irony is felt to be ironic precisely because the irony is produced when an individual with specific qualities and has been placed in a particular situation. Moreover, ingénu’s qualities have an effect on what he says. Let us assume that the Huron had received a formal education. From where, then, would the irony come? The discussion between him and Gordon would be taken as mere debate between two equals. The exchange between the two men is ironic because of an imbalance of power. As a “savage,” the Huron is not supposed to vanquish a man of learning, such as Gordon is purported to be, in a debate. The success of irony depends on incongruity, which in this case is created by an imbalance between the ingénu and the more established and powerful centers of society. Ingénu irony appears to be a quite simple concept as there appears to be little more to it than this dynamic.

As I briefly mentioned above, irony in Voltaire often appears in the form of raillery or banter that contains much blame and ridicule used by the author principally as a form of attack against his opponents. Voltaire was to use irony later in his career as a means to sugar coat his attacks; “[p]oint d’injure; beaucoup d’ironie et de gaieté. Les injures revoltent; l’ironie fait rentrer les gens en eux-
mêmes, la gaieté désarme” (Voltaire, Correspondence; qtd. in Mason 53). In this manner, he places himself in opposition to established and accepted systems of belief, then uses irony to render them absurd, and in a humorous and arguably more captivating way. Voltaire does not himself propose his own system of belief to replace the one he attacks because he generally did not believe in these types of systems and it would have been either hypocritical or contradictory for him to do so. It is true that Voltaire gives to the reader some indication of the important principles necessary for living a good life, or, to speak specifically about the works I’ve examined, for coping with the evil that is an attendant part of the world. The irony produced by Voltaire is, according to Wayne Booth, stable in so far as the reader may with confidence deduce Voltaire’s intentions (Rhetoric of Irony 1-14). As Voltaire considers his targets to be in some manner illegitimate, he is able to use his role as conteur to direct the reader’s attention as he wishes. This role is distinguished from the role of novelist, according to Pearson, in which the intended message is not transparent to the reader. The reason for this, as I have noted, is that the novelist tries to dupe the reader in some manner in order to convince her or him that fiction corresponds to the real world. Haydn Mason compares Voltaire to Diderot and considers the latter to be among the avant-garde writers of the novel. With regard to the ironies produced by each, Mason concludes:

il existe un sens fondamental à découvrir derrière le sens littéral. L’homme sait peu de chose, mais il en sait quelques-unes. Chez Diderot, par contre, rien n’est sûr. La présence du narrateur voltarien nous sert de guide en jugeant les événements et les personnages. Le narrateur de Jacques le fataliste, au contraire, ne suscite aucune confiance; c’est le procédé qui compte, non pas la constance de celui qui raconte. (61)
Another aspect of stable irony is that it will function as a corrective and, according to Booth, “once a reconstruction of the [intended] meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions” (Rhetoric of Irony 6). This classical form of irony is opposed to general or Romantic irony, which will be the subject of the next chapter.

Classical irony appears to leave the literary scene with the advent of several factors that compelled authors to play a less visible role in the works they create (Critique 75). This kind of irony, particularly in the forms of satire and parody, has a stable target in the form of the work it imitates. The irony is easily reconstructed by the direct comparison of discrete elements of irony and its target. Once irony becomes more generalized and intratextual instead of intertextual, it is less likely to be resolved as there is no single target or intended meaning to be reconstructed. The advent of the novel, perhaps at the expense of the conte as a genre, brought about changes in the form of devices to produce irony that also concealed the ironist from the reader. Furthermore, there were changes in the scope of irony as its focus was turned on the author and her or his role in the process of artistic creation. Moreover, the author was considered to be less of the principal authority with regard to the meaning and interpretation of her or his work. Nor was the distance between author and character as close as it had been in the conte. For these reasons, and the last in particular, the ingénu will see a much more limited role in future versions of irony.

1 Following D.C. Muecke, I have decided to use the French version of the term without underlining. The term does not make direct reference to Voltaire’s character and therefore does not require capitalization.
2 I have the Latin translation is thanks to Bettina Knapp’s scholarship in her *Voltaire Revisited*. I will later benefit again from her scholarship in the etymology of the name “Pangloss.”

3 For example, if someone argues that higher wages cost jobs, she or he is in fact arguing for lower wages in order to keep jobs. But this argument taken to the extreme is that one should pay no wages at all. This is of course absurd because the benefit of a job is to earn a wage.
Chapter 3: The Ironist Incognito

The ironist incognito is an apt label for the production of irony during the nineteenth century, when classical and traditional modes were being replaced by romantic and other modern forms. The term “incognito” refers to a person who has been able to perform an action while remaining unrecognized. An ironist incognito, therefore, performs her or his craft without being detected. During this period, irony becomes more than simply a mode of discourse and broadens into an all-encompassing philosophical dilemma that becomes a preoccupation among authors who feel compelled to address issues related to their own presence in the literary works they create. As a rule, irony conforms to the intellectual climate and to the literary conventions of a particular time period. In the nineteenth century, irony is an expression of the author’s self-consciousness, which partially explains the desire to conceal her or his role of ironist from the reader. Irony is also constituted to reflect the nature of the philosophical questions raised by intellectuals during the period about the individual and society, free will and determinism, and the relationship between objective and subjective points of view, which are for the most part unanswerable. One experiences these irresolvable issues as conflicts, so it is not surprising that these problems would be represented in the form of irony. The structure of irony resembles that of conflict;
in irony there are two simultaneous messages that are contradictory or incongruent, while a conflict involves making a choice between mutually exclusive propositions. This is “irony as an expressive form of the metaphysical vision, the fruit of the growing suspicion that life is essentially meaningless,” according to one commentator (Glicksburg 13). That which distinguishes irony of the nineteenth century from its earlier and simpler forms, I will argue, is based on the fact that these conflicts have no apparent resolution. Moreover, I will show that open-ended irony of this type will compel an ironist to develop devices that do not lead to a resolution or reconstruction of the irony and that allow him to produce irony furtively in order to avoid association with a definitive position.

There were other factors in play that had an effect on irony. Philippe Hamon characterizes the period of the early-to mid-nineteenth century France as “l’ère du soupçon” and cites a passage from Baudelaire’s “Salon de 1846” in support of this characterization; “Le doute et l’absence de foi et de naïveté, est un vice particulier de ce siècle. . . . La naïveté, qui est la domination du tempérament dans la manière, est un privilège dont tous sont privés” (qtd. in Hamon 133). An absence of naïveté equates to a generalized suspiciousness that one interprets as an indication of a society that will question and look with a jaded eye upon its own values, social hierarchies, and the like. Another literary tendency of the period, according to Hamon, is that of a “polyphonie constitutive du réel.” This tendency, he shows, is indicative of a preoccupation with the positioning of authorial voice in a manner that was not in line with prior literary convention:

Plus question d’une hierarchie de voix dominée par un Verbe et par quelque site d’énonciation unitaire. . . . On entre dans l’ère du charivari
This irony is no longer directed by a single voice against an easily identifiable target, as it had been during much of the previous century. I will argue that this “polyphonie” enables an author to create several points of enunciation within a text with the intention to create ambiguous messages. Irony is of course created as a result of incongruities between the multiple messages. To this end, an ironist uses a device to disguise his role from the reader while creating a doubling of voice and point of view within the narration.

Another factor of influence was the novel, which begins to hold a predominant position among the other genres of literature, presenting different issues to the author. Lilian Furst, for example, discusses the novel, which had been on the rise, perhaps on a parallel trajectory to that of the newly discovered artistic freedom of the epoch that was exemplified by artists who had begun to shed the old and outmoded literary conventions left over from the Classical period. She argues,

The extraordinary flexibility of the novel as a literary form allows it to move beyond its overt fabulation to a collateral metafictional level where its apprehension to itself as an aesthetic artifact can be voiced. . . . And because the novel, more than any other genre, has the freedom to enlarge its spaces, it has the greatest aptitude for irony. . . . It is indeed arguable that the novel is an intrinsically ironic genre because it tends to foster a radical scrutiny of its own fictive constructs. (46)

Self-criticism that takes this form suggests general or romantic irony. General irony is marked by an author’s incorporation of doubt about her or his ability to render a complete and true account of the real world in a work of fiction, which is
due largely to the former’s inherently contradictory nature. An author who attempts to portray reality in art represents the ironic predicament, which has universal effect. Muecke discusses these ambiguous circumstances in terms of a tension created:

The only possibility open for the real artist is to stand apart from his work and at the same time incorporate this awareness of his ironic position into the work itself and so create something which will, if a novel, not simply be a story complete with the author and the narrating, the reader and the reading, the style and the choosing of the style, the fiction and the distance from fact, so that we shall regard it as being ambivalently both art and life. (Irony 20)

Romantic and other general forms of irony are often discussed in terms of the artist’s reaction to her or his predicament, and works of literature will reflect this in a variety of ways. In some, the reader may detect anxiety from the author, while in others, the prevalent attitude is one of insouciance, or even disdain. Authors are typically loathe to shine a light on their own irony and will take measures to conceal the voice and point from which the irony originates. In the case of the novel, the reasons for this are fairly obvious; the exigencies of vraisemblence and realism work to limit the author’s tendency of destroying an illusion he has created, which is often the result of injecting himself and his commentary into the work in an overly intrusive manner. An author will then go to certain lengths to disguise his role of commentator and critic of his own work.

Verbal irony that is the result of a double-sensed message typically involves an author who, in the role of ironist, is making commentary on the ostensible message the narrator delivers. This requires narrative distance. While an in-depth discussion of narrative distance would take us outside the scope of the
present study, a brief outline of various positions taken by theorists on the topic is necessary. Narrative distance is treated in a literal sense when one considers the physical space between speaker and listener in mimetic presentation, which is of course relatively short, depending on the medium. Narrative distance is typically taken as a metaphorical notion because one often discusses the relationship between author, text, and reader, and points of view in abstract terms. For example, the notion has been discussed by Wayne Booth and Gerald Prince, who characterize distance as moral and intellectual differences, as well as differences of perspective and temporality between various combinations of the author, narrator, character, and reader (*Rhetoric of Fiction* 155-157; *Narratology* 10-13). Gérard Genette argues that narrative that is to a greater degree mimetic, or goes to further lengths to create the illusion of mimesis, creates less distance between the work and reader than works that are purely diegetic (*Nouveau discours* 30-33). Walter Ong, S. J. states this fact explicitly: “[a]s mimesis loses ground in poetic and other aesthetic theory and performance, irony gains ground” (22). Ong observes that pre- and nonliterary cultures, in which the exchange of ideas takes place orally, there is in place a sense of greater mutual understanding and cooperation between addresser and addressee. The advent of writing, and especially printing, put an end to this close relationship, and ushered in a condition of unreliability which, Ong says, “is the essence of irony” (27). Ong does not identify the mitigating factors that come between author and reader; he states only that these are typically not present in communication between speaker and listener in oral cultures. Of course, narrative distance does not imply that the
author is hidden from the reader, or that irony is present, but it does make these situations possible, and is furthermore a necessary condition for them.

I showed in the previous chapter that Voltaire, in the role of conteur, was clearly visible to the reader while conveying irony. Voltaire often signaled an ironic intention by accompanying his irony with raillery or banter, as he was prone to do throughout his career. His preference for derisive rhetoric gave him the reputation for combativeness, especially in dealing with these contemporaries with whom he repeatedly disagreed. More importantly, there is no mistaking the hand of Voltaire as he guides the reader to reconstruct stable ironies using a readily available system of values he is advocating. As I remarked, Voltaire achieves this by creating a juxtaposition of two ideas in which the idea under attack is, by virtue of direct comparison, revealed to be patently absurd. Classical and more traditional forms of irony, such as those conveyed by Voltaire, are stable and often, if not always, function as correctives. These ironies are simple, according to Muecke, because “we pass from an apprehension of the ironic incongruity to a more or less immediate recognition of the invalidity of the ironist’s pretended or the victim’s confidently held view. Psychic tension is generated but rapidly released” (Compass 25). The rapid conclusion that an irony is present stems from what Muecke describes as an apparent absurdity of opinion or behavior. Voltaire’s narrator is reliable, which is why the reader is able to make definitive judgments with regard to irony. However, in a quite different manner, the author-as-ironist who wishes to remain hidden from the reader’s view will
employ a narrative device that is typical of verbal irony. Consequently, the
author-as-ironist will employ a narrator who is, to some degree, unreliable.

The unreliable narrator is associated with much irony of the period under
discussion. Booth defines the unreliable narrator as one who does not speak or
behave according to a set of norms held by the implied author (Rhet. of Fiction
158). No doubt, there are a wide variety of criteria that one may use to establish
norms of this type, and even Booth seems unable to come up with anything
definitive. Nevertheless, as he implies, readers are able with some measure of
consistency to evaluate and sense a disconnect between what they read and what
they know about the author who wrote it. To illustrate this point, Booth discusses
an example from an appeal from a hunger relief organization. Part of the message
reads “Ignore the hungry and they’ll go away” (Rhetoric of Irony 35).
Presumably, one who receives this message will take into account that a hunger
relief organization would not advocate an “out of sight, out of mind” philosophy
with regard to the people it tries to help. In other words, the receiver will discount
the possibility that the ostensible message can come from the putative author.
Booth concludes that the message is ironic “through psychological pressures
which [he] will not even pretend to understand or explain” because “the author of
the printed statement cannot be that kind of person” (Rhet. of Irony 35). In truth,
it seems a whole host of issues present themselves to a reader who makes the type
of judgment Booth is making, and I do not believe that they are in any way too
complex for him to understand or explain, just too numerous to be thoroughly
identified.
Given that the irony associated with the example in question is a simple one, the reader does not have much difficulty in reconstructing the intended message, as it comes from a group that advocates in favor of a certain position. In examples of irony that are typical of the nineteenth century, however, the narrator is often less credible and predictable, and advocacy of a particular belief system is much less evident, if it is evident at all. Moreover, some works of literature during the period show a tendency toward self-parody. This type of self-referential writing, however, risks becoming self-destructive because the illusion of mimetic representation is lost. An author who feels uncomfortable about this will go to great lengths to hide his role as ironist from his readers. On the other hand, some authors seem to take pleasure in having created a rupture between the actual world and the fictive world which represents it. These two attitudes, in my view, represent each extreme of an author’s possible reaction to the predicament raised by romantic and other modern forms of irony.

Occasionally an author will use the narrator to undermine his creative project in an overt, rather than covert manner and as a consequence, little or no reader judgment about the presence of irony is required. This practice is indicative of a more general irony that began to emerge toward the beginning of the nineteenth century and as Lloyd Bishop comments, “Jacques le fataliste was indeed a model for future romantic ironists fond of sporting with their literary creation and of flaunting their artistic freedom over the text precisely as they were creating it” (21). One of the best and most notorious examples of this type of unreliable of narrator is found in Diderot’s Jacques le fataliste. The main story, or
what there is of one, is told in the first-person by one of the protagonists, whose exploits are reported to the reader by the principal narrator who occasionally interjects his own commentary. But the story never comes to any apparent resolution. For the reader of Jacques le fataliste, the experience becomes highly ironic thanks to the patent unreliability of the narrator, and the opening to this “novel” lets the reader know right away whether the narrator is to be trusted; obviously he can not be: “Comment s’étaient-ils rencontrés? Par hasard, comme tout le monde. Comment s’appelaient-ils? Que vous importe. D’où venaient-ils? Du lieu le plus prochain. Où allaient-ils? Est-ce que l’on sait où l’on va?” (475).

The principal narrator not only gives the reader an indication that he is going to be unreliable, he is downright combative and will continue his aggressive posture throughout the work. The reader concludes, naturally, that what is to follow will be nothing at all like the conventional novel to which she or he has become accustomed. Furthermore, the narrator is willing to divulge the author’s intentions to the reader, which are typically guarded in secret. The transparency of irony in Jacques le fataliste will be of a different nature than irony in works in which the author-as-ironist operates clandestinely. But it is a different sort of irony altogether when a narrator states the author’s ironic intention to the reader, as Diderot does throughout his work. A comparison of the difference between Diderot’s irony and irony that comes after him will be informative for the present purpose. I will argue that Diderot only describes irony in Jacques le fataliste. He is writing about the tension an author feels from her or his own sense of artistic freedom and creativity in the face of literary convention, which will soon become
common themes of irony. If Diderot practices irony, he does so only indirectly, which might take the form of one who says “isn’t it ironic that . . . .” Such a portrayal contains no double-sensed message, nor is there a mechanism to conceal the “ironist” from the readers view, so it is not clear if one can say the Diderot practices irony.

Much has been written about the structure of *Jacques le fataliste*, which is said to parody the novel, a nascent literary form of the time. As Lloyd Bishop puts it, “[t]he supreme paradox of *Jacques le fataliste* is the irony the text aims at itself. The fictional illusion constantly self-destructs” (4). Commentators often point to the narrative structure of the work in which a sardonic narrator makes frequent interruptions that undermine the coherence and sense of unity a work of fiction is normally supposed to create. “In 1796,” writes Arthur Wilson, “*Jacques le fataliste* was published in Paris and readers ever since have been ejaculating, ‘Qu’est-ce que c’est que ça?’ . . . On first reading, as one critic has observed, it almost invariably irritates” (667). Robert Mauzi looks at this author / narrator / reader relationship as part of the work’s form, one that symbolizes the fortuitous and arbitrary relationship between humankind and fate, which is moreover, determined by some “grand rouleau” that has been written above. Diderot wrote a novel, submits Mauzi, to show the reader that “les romans nous trompent, car ils donnent à croire que le romancier peut prendre place du destin et reconstruire un univers dont les significations seraient miraculeusement pleines, . . .” (91). Lilian Furst offers a similar interpretation of the work, one which anticipates a few of the difficulties that are encountered by the reader of *Jacques le fataliste*: “[t]he
lack of sure standards, the unreliability of evidence, the uncertainty of all judgments, and the discrepancy between expectation and outcome: these are the recurrent motifs of *Jacques le fataliste*” (168). The reader is said to be “frustrated,” “disillusioned,” or even “offended” by the narrator’s frequent and undue interruptions. The reader, anticipating a resolution to an evolving story, learns very early that none is forthcoming (at least not within a conventional frame of time) and is left to her or his own devices after the narrator’s sudden and perhaps unwelcome intrusions leave the story hanging in the balance.

A memorable narratorial intrusion occurs near the beginning of the work. Jacques and his master have spent the night at an inn and have resumed their journey the next morning. The previous night, Jacques, in an act of retribution, had played a practical joke on a group of brigands who were also staying at the inn. While on the road, the protagonists suddenly hear the clamor of men on horseback behind them. The reader naturally concludes from the noise that the brigands are in headlong pursuit of the protagonists—this no doubt from having been conditioned by the conventional storytelling that one finds in novels. Then there is an abrupt intrusion by the narrator:

*Vous [reader] allez croire que c’étaient les gens d’auberge, leurs valets et les brigands dont nous avons parlé. Vous allez croire que le matin on avait enfoncé leur porte faute de clefs . . . que cette petite armée tombera sur Jacques et son maître . . . mais nos voyageurs n’étaient point suivis. (484-85)*

There is little doubt that *Jacques le fataliste* is felt to be ironic, but it is far less obvious just what the subject of irony is. If the work, which has been offered under the pretext of being a novel, is considered ironic because the conventional
form of the genre has been undermined, this should come as no surprise to the reader because Diderot’s narrator mentions this explicitly on several occasions. In speaking about this particular passage, the narrator claims further on that, “il est bien évident que je ne fais pas un roman, puisque je néglige ce qu’un romancier ne manquerait pas d’employer” (485). The narrator makes reference to the fact that intrigue is missing because no story ever has a predictable resolution—which is, after all, what a convention is.

Conventions are continually disregarded. For example, the reader is even prompted by the narrator to furnish a resolution to the putative central story of the narrative, namely Jacques’s love affairs:

Et moi, je m’arrête, parce que je vous ai dit de ces deux personnages tout ce que j’en sais. –Et les amours de Jacques? Jacques a dit cent fois qu’il était écrit là-haut qu’il n’en finirait pas l’histoire, et je vois que Jacques avait raison. Je vois, lecteur, que cela vous fâche; eh bien reprenez son récit où il l’a laissé, et continuez-le à votre fantaisie . . .; voyez Jacques, questionnez-le: il ne se fera pas tirer l’oreille pour vous satisfaire; cela le désennuiera. (708)

No narrator is more unreliable, it would seem, than one who walks out on the job before the job is done. If Diderot sets out to subvert the novel as a genre, what could be more destructive than to discredit the act of creation by divulging to the reader that the author has no special standing in determining the outcome of a story? If the reader is equally capable to determine plot, as the narrator implies, what purpose does the author then serve? There are many paradoxes brought about by both the content and style of Jacques le fataliste, and commentators like Bishop are correct to point out that the ultimate paradox of the work is the fact that the fictional illusion that is created seems continually to self-destruct (24). In
this case, I will argue, there is another paradox created involving the participation of the reader. It is interesting to consider the source of reader frustration that comes from being offered the task of providing a conclusion to the story of Jacques’s love affair. Once one rejects as important the trivial matters such as the reader’s feeling cheated as a result of having purchased a book that is incomplete, or the annoyance of having to complete a task which is the responsibility of another, there seems to be very little else to justify her or his disappointment. This is at least in part because the reader’s disappointment is paradoxical: she or he shows disappointment in not receiving the “veritable” conclusion of the story while at the same time being certain (mostly from having been reminded by the narrator) that what the author may choose is completely and utterly arbitrary. This paradox illustrates the greatest irony of the work, in my view.

To undermine one’s own literary project in the manner in which Diderot has done is illustrative of modern forms of irony. Bishop, who echoes the judgment rendered by several commentators, calls the work “a model for future romantic ironists fond of sporting with their own literary creation and of flaunting their artistic freedom over the text precisely as they were creating it” (21). No doubt, irony is present in Jacques le fataliste, but one might raise the question about Diderot’s role as an ironist, if in fact he even plays one, as there is a difference, in my view, between a depiction and the actual practice of irony. An important question is whether an author is able simultaneously to produce irony while overtly divulging an ironic intention. The force of irony depends on it’s having been concealed and later discovered by a recipient, which is prevented
from occurring when the irony is divulged to out rightly to the reader in the 
beginning. There are examples I will discuss further on that provide a compelling 
argument that the magnitude of irony is linked to the subtlety with which it is 
purveyed. At the very least, the intensity of irony is attenuated when its existence 
is indicated by an author. Ironies extending from the intrusions of Diderot’s 
narrator cannot be characterized as verbal irony, such as it is typically defined, 
because there is no double-sensed message used to convey ostensible and 
intended messages that are incongruous. Aside from an occasional ironic double- 
entendre, there are few examples of verbal irony in the work. Other elements 
common to verbal irony are missing as well. For example, there are no 
accomplices who share a common bond of knowledge with the author-as-ironist. 
There are no victims who are left out of this communication between the author 
and his accomplices. There is no intended message waiting to be reconstructed as 
a result of an instance of irony, and this stems from the fact that Diderot has not 
used a device to establish another point of view that is in opposition to whatever 
ostensible message might be found in the work. In cases where the ironist is mum 
about the presence of irony, content has been clandestinely injected into the 
narrative which enables the reader to reconstruct a meaning that is in ironic 
opposition to the ostensible meaning of the message. In Jacques le fataliste, 
however, there is only chaos because Diderot has not established an identifiable 
and stable point of view within the narrative to counter the confusion that appears 
on the surface, and this is what many commentators of Diderot claim is modern 
about the work. On the other hand, because the author has his narrator direct the
reader’s attention to the ironies in the work, and to an even greater degree than does Voltaire, irony is not the product of a reconstruction. It comes to the reader ready-made, or as a depiction. Readers do not participate in the irony because Diderot has already reconstructed the ironic message for them. The reader, then, is merely a spectator of the irony, not an accomplice.

There is a multitude of devices available to an author who wishes to inject ironic commentary into the narrative without being identified as its source. During the Romantic period, an author’s presence in his work of literature typically sends the message, either directly or indirectly, that he is aware of creating an illusion but Diderot, as I have just shown, appears to take great delight in destroying these illusions. Diderot, it appears, acts with the spirit of an anarchist, at least with regard to literary convention. However, other artists are more self-critical. In a discussion of Benjamin Constant, for example, René Bourgeois makes the observation that “chaque écrivain, dans l’acte même de la création littéraire, s’analyse en se racontant, et se juge en se peignant,” and that this in essence describes what has been called the “dédoublement constantien” (90). The protagonist of Adolphe represents one reaction of the self-conscious Romantic author in the face of the inherent conflict that exists between his limitless aspirations and the limitations of representation that have always been in place. As an example of this struggle, the character of Adolphe is said to mirror the author, Constant.

Gary Handwerk characterizes romantic irony as “a response to the unrealizability of the Absolute as a tangible presence of self-consciousness” (21).
Bishop casts the concept in historical terms: “romantic irony [is] the tension between the romantic author’s search for the Ideal or the Absolute and the simultaneous awareness of the search’s futility” (12 author’s emphasis). This attitude stems from the Romantic’s reaction to the end of the Enlightenment which was typified by many self-reflective literary works, such as those by Chateaubriand and Musset. Bishop goes on to say that the Romantic ironist acts with both an awareness of the limitations of creativity, but also with an enthusiasm for achieving “full artistic justice to the task he has set himself” (Bishop 4). This attitude accounts for an author’s discernable self-consciousness, which can be shown to stem from a dual intention in the creation of a work of literature. On the one hand, the author seeks to create a coherent representation of reality. On the other, she or he is aware that this task is impossible given perceived imperfections of language as a means of representation, confining literary conventions that distort the depiction of the reality, and the fact that contingency and chaos in the world resist an accurate and true description. The dilemma facing the author is seen as ironic because there is incongruity between the artistic aspirations that I’ve just outlined and the impossibility of the artist realizing them in the real world. Many have characterized an author’s attempt to reconcile these opposing forces as a form of schizophrenia.

A principal theme developed in Adolphe is the protagonist’s inability to actualize his intentions with regard to his love affair with Ellénore. Each time Adolphe appears to show a resolve to carry out his intention of breaking it off with her, it either his own weakness or some unforeseen set of circumstances that
prevents him from actually doing so. The unpredictability of events surrounding his relationship with Ellénore come to symbolize the chaotic experience of life. Adolphe assumes that he has more effect on these events that determine his existence than he actually does—which again underscores the fact that Adolphe shares the Romantic artist’s predicament, and Constant’s apparent reaction to it. Adolphe’s confession of his weakness with regard to his situation with Ellénore provides a double-sensed message that is conducive to irony:

C’est ici surtout, je le sens, que l’on m’accusera de faiblesses. Je voulais être libre, et je le pouvais avec l’approbation générale; je le devais, peut-être; la conduite d’Ellénore m’y autorisait et semblait me contraindre. Mais ne savais-je pas qu’Ellénore, au fond de son cœur, n’avait pas cessé de m’aimer? Pouvais-je la punir des imprudences que je la faisais commettre, et froidement hypocrite, chercher un prétexte dans ces imprudences pour l’abandonner sans pitié? (66)

This passage is illustrative of many throughout the story that depict Adolphe’s inability to act, and is the culmination of much hand-wringing and equivocation with regard to his split with Ellénore. The description in the passage of his passive-aggressive behavior, furthermore, seems to underscore his timidity and self-inflicted paralysis. One the one hand, the narrator is giving a report to the reader of Adolphe’s thoughts at a particular moment of the diegesis. The doubling of narrative voice paints another picture as well, that of the Romantic author, Constant, who feels anxiety in face of a new-found freedom of artistic creation. Bourgeois calls Constant’s disposition a “paresse ironique” that reflects a lack of volition of an author who “voudrait à la fois être immobile et en mouvement” (94). This outcome of this disposition, according to Bourgeois, leads an artist to frequent and prolonged self-reflection. The penchant for passivity is far from what
is needed, he adds, in order to confront a “libérté active qui définit l’ironie romantique.” As for Constant, “spectateur de [lui]-même,” he is either too cautious or too passive: “Si le jeu attire celui que la réalité hostile repousse, il exige aussi un effort, une participation active de l’acteur, et Benjamin Constant y refuse souvent” (Bourgeois 95).

The passage provides a clear example of Constant’s dédoublement, and the device Constant uses to produce it is not especially complex. Most narration in the story has an internal focalization of voice; the narrative unfolds and is told from Adolphe’s perspective. However, the attentive reader notices that the referents of the personal pronouns are often ambiguous. The first-person pronoun may be said to represent either Adolphe or the author, Constant, while the third-person pronoun has as its referent an undesignated personage who is part of the story, or the reader. It follows that the statement “je le sens que l’on m’accusera de faiblesses” will have two different meanings depending on the destination of the message. If the message is to the reader, the focalization of narrative voice will have changed from Adolphe to the narrator who is addressing the reader. The switching of voice and point of view allows Constant to criticize his own work while appearing at the same time to be moving the story along and avoid making an explicit intrusion into the diegesis. Otherwise, he might arouse the reader’s suspicions even further. In this manner, the device of dédoublement becomes an alibi, although it is not a particularly subtle or complicated one. Constant is able to deliver irony while remaining incognito.
One reaction to the ironic dilemma facing the artist caught between the desire to portray the Ideal and the inability to do so is contemplation and self-conscious criticism. Another is laughter. Much of Baudelaire’s poetry is dedicated to irony, particularly since it involves frequent juxtaposition of contradictory themes that, when taken together, are incongruous: spleen and ideal, beauty and ugliness, God and Satan, to name a few of the most common. His attitude toward the Romantic poet’s ironic predicament seems to be that of a mocking and disdainful laughter. For example, Baudelaire says of the ‘rire’,

Le rire est satanique, il est donc profondément humain. Il est dans l’homme la conséquence de l’idée de sa propre supériorité; et, en effet, comme le rire est essentiellement humain, il est essentiellement contradictoire, c’est-à-dire qu’il est à la fois signe d’une grandeur infinie et d’une misère infinie relativement à l’Être absolu dont il possède la conception, grandeur infinie relativement aux animaux. C’est donc du choc perpétuel de ces deux infinis que se dégage le rire. (qtd. in Decaunes, 184-85)

This characterization is indicative of the uncertainty and ambiguity of the artist’s existence in the world. According to Baudelaire’s conception given in the passage, the artist feels at once superior as a creative force but also subject to forces superior to him, evidenced by his inability to overcome a number of limitations of expression and representation. This again is a generalized irony indicative of romantic and other modern forms, and describes the artist’s predicament. According to Bishop, Baudelaire’s reaction to irony is reflected in the desire to ascend to the ecstatic heights of the Ideal placed in immediate juxtaposition with the joy of descent: “Plonger au fond du goufre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu’importe? (“Le Voyage,” VIII 7). Irony is the prominent theme in Baudelaire’s poetry as the poet repeatedly assumes contradictory postures simultaneously: “Je

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suis comme le roi d’un pays pluvieux,/ Riche, mais impuissant, jeune et pourtant
très vieux” (“Spleen LXXVII,” 1-2). These ironies have hierarchical structure, as
was described in reference to simple irony, where the ironist’s covert intended
meaning is accepted at the expense of the ostensible message. The relationship of
contradictory or incongruous messages in modern irony often leads to a paradox
that has no apparent resolution.

Paul de Man casts the notion of narrative distance in Baudelaire in terms
of superiority. De Man takes for a starting point the poet’s version of
dédoublement outlined in Baudelaire’s “De l’essence de rire”:

la puissance du rire est dans le rieur et nullement dans l’objet du rire. Ce
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 . . . la force de se dédoubler
rapidement et d’assister comme spectateur désintéressé aux phénomènes
de son moi.” (qtd. in de Man 213)

Dédoublement such as this, says de Man, is an essential part of Baudelaire’s
irony. But he insists that Baudelaire did not mean for this to be an intersubjective
relationship, but rather between humans and nature, which are essentially
different from one another:

Within the realm of intersubjectivity one would indeed speak of difference
in terms of superiority of one subject over another, with the implications
of will to power, of violence and possession which come into play when a
person is laughing at someone else . . . But when the concept of
“superiority” is still being used when the self is engaged in a relationship
not to other subjects, but to what is precisely not a self, then the so-called
superiority merely designates the distance constitutive of all acts of
reflection.” (de Man 212-13)

This is the irony of the “comique absolu” which, according to Baudelaire,
differentiates the artist and philosopher from the rest of humanity. It is “an effort
of consciousness that differentiates himself from the non-human world” (de Man

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Part of Baudelaire’s assumed disguise, frankly, is his belief that he, in the capacity of poet, is in some manner above the rest of humanity, or least engaged in activity that others do not seem capable of comprehending. The attitude of superiority is portrayed in the poem “L’Albatross,” in which Baudelaire equates the poet with what is the most awkward of birds when it is outside of its element, on the ground among “ordinary” people: “Exilé sur le sol des nuées / Ses ailes de géant l’empêchent de marcher” (15-16). The albatross is a most graceful bird in flight, up in the sky, which signifies the loftiness of thought Baudelaire attributes to the artist and poet. But once on the ground, the albatross is vulnerable to being captured by sailors. Out of his element, the bird becomes for them an object of amusement and ridicule:

Ce voyageur aïlé, comme il est gauche et veule!
Lui, naguère si beau, qu’il est comique et laid!
L’un agace son bec avec un brûle-gueule,
L’autre mime, en boitant, l’infirme qui volait! (9-12)

De Man’s description of intersubjective superiority can be applied to this passage. The very things that enable the albatross to be so beautiful and graceful in the air, namely its giant wings, are also what make the bird clumsy while it is on the ground. Similarly, what sets the poet and philosopher apart from others is a capacity for a doubling of consciousness and self-reflection. Just as the poet is not suited to inhabit the mundane world, others are not prone to self-reflection and the life of the poet. This is the message Baudelaire offers to the reader in his poem “Au lecteur” in the very beginning of Les fleurs du mal. The poet urges the reader to overcome ennui and the comfort of leading a life in strict accordance to convention and idées réçues–hence to become a kindred spirit with the poet.
The distance between poet and reader, as it is metaphorically described in “L’Albatros,” as well as by de Man, is not in itself ironic. The distance does, however, provide the poet the rhetorical conditions necessary for irony. Because of the superiority bestowed to the philosopher and poet, Baudelaire is both removed, and in a sense hidden from his readers by what can be described as an intellectual or spiritual distance. Moreover, the capacity of doubling and self-reflection possessed by philosophers and poets enables them to simultaneously create an alternate point of view, which puts distance between their own consciousness and the outside world. This disposition, as I have shown, is what Baudelaire meant by “le comique absolu.”

The distancing of voice and differentiating of point of view allows the Baudelaire to portray the multiple perspectives in his poetry. One poem in particular is especially well-suited for an examination on this score:

“L’Héautontimorouménos.” In the poem, doubling is suggested at the very beginning: “Je te frapperai sans colère / Et sans haine, comme un boucher” (1-2). Although the reader does not yet know the identity of the addressee, it becomes clear a little further on that the narrator is speaking to himself:

Je suis le sinistre miroir
Où la mégère se regarde
Je suis la plaie et le couteau!
Je suis le soufflet et la joue!
Je suis les membres et la roue,
Et la victime et le bourreau!

Je suis dans mon cœur le vampire, (19-25)
One may characterize the poem as conveying a series of movements in which Baudelaire attempts to destroy his own created illusions by carrying out a process of self-torture and self-victimization, both explicitly and implicitly. What might be taken for mimetic representation in the opening verses—one is initially compelled to imagine that the poet is striking a woman—is destroyed as soon as the reader learns that the poet himself receives the blow, which is offered as a symbol of the poet being critical of his own poetry. Karen Harrington, in a discussion of the fragmentation of poetic voice in Baudelaire’s poetry, describes this maneuver as ironic distancing, which moves away from mimetic representation associated with “le comique signatif” and becomes associated with “le comique absolu” (180). Baudelaire characterizes “le comique absolu” as “a fall from grace,” according to Harrington, to which the poet reacts negatively by “emphasizing an ambivalent and often self-deprecating position, which is essentially ironic” (180). Baudelaire sets out to demonstrate the superiority of “le comique absolu” to “le comique signatif” in the poem by undermining the straight-forward and self-contained interpretation given on the level of mimetic representation. This seems to be done from a feeling of insouciant superiority that is manifested as a laugh:

Je suis de mon cœur le vam pire,
Un de ces grands abandonnés
Au rire éternel condamnés,
Et qui ne peuvent pas sourire! (25-28)

The “rire éternel” is undoubtedly one of “le comique absolu,” to which all are condemned. By virtue of its opposition in the stanza, then, the sourire must denote mimetic representation, which is associated with “le comique signatif.”
Baudelaire’s inclination is toward superiority, which is the inclination to create the duality of poetic voice that leads to doubling and self-reflection.

Baudelaire’s desire, or perhaps even compulsion to erect and subsequently destroy mimetic representation is reflected in the fourth stanza:

\[
\text{Ne suis-je pas un faux accord} \\
\text{Dans la divine symphonie,} \\
\text{Grâce à cette vorace ironie} \\
\text{Qui me secoue et qui me mord? (13-16)}
\]

Robert Wilcocks argues that the “faux accord” refers to the consciousness of humankind, and on a personal level, the poet’s awareness of the consequences of this consciousness. There is also an awareness that this image “symboliz[e] the fundamental dichotomy between man who is conscious and self-reflecting, and the universe which is neither of these” (571). Wilcocks puts the poet’s separation from the universe in religious terms; he is separated from God. The poet’s consciousness recognizes that there is no harmony between himself and the godhead leads to “an awareness of separation and isolation from the Creator.” This gives the poet only a glimpse of the ideal realm which is swiftly destroyed by the intrusion of the real world that he must inhabit (572-73). The wavering between creation and destruction, or in Baudelaire’s terms “spleen” and “idéal,” suggested by the verb “secouer” in the final verse of the stanza, is the basis of much of Baudelaire’s irony.

In the representation of his own ironic predicament, Baudelaire undertakes a type of meta-discussion in “L’Héautontimoroménos.” The splitting of narrative voice gives representation to each of “le comique signicatif” and “le comique absolu.” The textual voice of “le comique signicatif” that attempts a mimetic
depiction of events is made the victim by the ironizing voice of “le comique absolu,” which comes from a different narrative point of view emanating from somewhere outside of the text. Yet, even with the fragmentation of poetic voice, one cannot assume that the voices have separate identities. The splitting of poetic voice here in Baudelaire is very similar to the “dédoublement constantien” discussed above, the only difference being the attitude expressed toward the artist’s dilemma: Baudelaire’s disdainful superiority and Constant’s apologetic self-consciousness.

That Arthur Rimbaud tried to make poetic voice and language objective has been the subject of much discussion about the poet. Scholars consider the “Lettres du voyant”—both of them written within three days in May, 1871—to be Rimbaud’s literary manifesto, and they are the only insight into his poetics that were written by the poet himself. The “Lettres” show a lack of sophistication, according to many critics, particularly with regard to the brief survey he offers of all poetry that has come before him. Nevertheless it is this poetry against which he formulates his own poetic vision. One gleans from the “Lettres” that Rimbaud’s poetry is to be ground-breaking, apparently by virtue of how and in what respects it is contrary to the style of poetry that has preceded him. Despite the perhaps limited value that is derived from Rimbaud’s hasty and dismissive criticism in the “Lettres,” there are some definitive positions the poet has taken with regard to poetics.

The crux of Rimbaud’s project outlined in his “Lettres” is to sever the link present in Romantic lyric poetry between the speaking or narrating subject and the
One must discard all prior convention in poetry, which, as he implies, is done by breaking the link between the narrating and textual voices of a poem. This rupture would have the effect of splitting the narrative and textual voices, and also of creating conditions ripe for the production of irony—although the latter is not likely to have been Rimbaud’s primary intention. Rather, he intends to create a de-centered subject, one that had, in effect, multiple points of view and voice, an effort that was in certain respects similar to a concomitant tendency for polyphony in novels. It would be possible for one of these poetic voices to contradict, or negate the other, as is often the case in “Une saison en enfer” in which a multiplicity of poetic voice allows Rimbaud to put various themes into direct opposition. For example, conventional poetry is juxtaposed to with the young poet’s new and anti-conventional style. Much of Rimbaud’s poetry deals with the content of dreams in which conventional meanings of words become distorted when seen as the content of, what we would now call, the subconscious. Some of Rimbaud’s poetry could be construed as an attempt by one poetic voice to achieve the poet’s notion of “objective” poetry, while the other voice serves to remind the reader that while one might catch a glimpse of the new
poetry, the project will inevitably fall short. This is how I will interpret the poem “Aube.”

Rimbaud does not actually render a substantive definition of objective poetry in the “Lettres” but rather implies that it is some future project that can only be, at least for the moment, characterized by its opposition to subjective poetry. As scholars of Rimbaud have pointed out, there is a marked tendency for the poet to define himself and his poetry primarily in contrast to others. Speaking of the “Lettres du voyant,” C. A. Hackett, for example, remarks that Rimbaud “seems to need his [predecessors and contemporaries] even while rejecting them,” and says that this is a “psychological mechanism that will operate his whole life” (Classical Introduction 13). This places Rimbaud in an apparently paradoxical dilemma: he works to reject that which he requires in order to determine his literary (perhaps also his personal) identity. His reaction to the dilemma appears to inform his irony. At one level, Rimbaud makes parody of the subject-centered poetry that he so strongly rejects in the “Lettres.” But in so doing, by creating the rupture between textual and speaking subject, Rimbaud merely illustrates ironic predicament that he is in. There is nothing affirmed by the fragmentation of voices; he merely destroys what he requires to set his poetry apart. This is a form of auto-irony. Irony, as we have discussed, requires an ironist, a reader to serve as an accomplice, and another as a victim. Hermann Wetzel proposes a definition of auto-irony in a discussion of Une saison en enfer: “l’auteur est son premier lecteur, cet auteur / lecteur, aussi bien que tout lecteur externe, peut être un destinataire à la fois complice et victime de sa propre ironie” (120). What Wetzel
finds most striking in his study of *Une saison en enfer*, is that it does not support any particular ideology or religious belief. Parody is not an applicable label to describe irony in the work because there is no stable point from which to undermine an opposing position.

Objective poetry, according to Rimbaud was distinct from, and in direct opposition to, the subject-centered discourse predominant among the Romantics in which, as one commentator of Rimbaud puts it, “poets had never really made their poems: poems had been made for them, and came ready-formed in their minds.” This, he says, created a tendency among them to be passive receptors of a certain poetic vision to be put into verse, rather than the creators of the visions (Hackett, *Rimbaud* 24-25). To create objective poetry was the result of “la voyance,” or becoming a “voyant.” Hackett reminds us that the concept of “voyant” had existed and been discussed for some time prior to the “Lettres,” perhaps going back to the Old Testament, and that Rimbaud was simply outlining his own version (*Critical*, see chap. 2). Rimbaud’s declaration: “Je me travaille à me rendre voyant,” implies, among other things, debauchery, drug use, virtually any behavior that went beyond the limits of societal convention. In their notes to the “Lettres du voyant” written to Rimbaud’s teacher, Georges Izambard, Suzanne Bernard and André Guyaux argue that objective poetry is created when the poet “peut sortir de lui-même pour arriver à l’inconnu” (*Rimbaud Oeuvres* 547). They point out that Rimbaud’s self-inflicted “encrapulement” amounted to his being “en état de grève: il se refuse d’être travailleur–et, en second lieu, en état de rupture avec la Société et ses conventions” (*Rimbaud Oeuvres* 546). To be a
voyant meant undergoing a transformation of one’s life, in addition to a conscious transformation of one’s literary craft. However, this is arguably not an intellectually substantive position; it is one of pure revolt. Rimbaud showed innovation in poetry in a variety of ways, but in this regard, there is no sign of anything that is affirmed, or taken by the poet as “true.” This ironic posture, I believe, is illustrated in the poem, “Aube,” which can be interpreted as an example of auto-irony, and in the use of a device that allows the poet to deliver his irony without being detected.

It is key to understanding Rimbaud’s “Aube” that one recognize the poem as one of only two in the Illuminations that begins with the first-person pronoun, “je”—the other being “Ville.” The infrequency with which Rimbaud uses the first-person pronoun in his poetry serves to underscore the importance of the speaker’s role and perceptions in this poem, and one might make the argument that the poem is, in large measure, about Rimbaud’s conception of the distinction of narrative and textual voice. A brief outline of a possible interpretation of “Aube” seems useful before an analysis of irony in the poem. “Aube” is a prose poem and is said to the most accessible of Rimbaud’s works:

J’ai embrassé l’aube d’été.
–La première entreprise fut, dans le sentier déjà empli des frais blêmes éclats, une fleur qui me dit son nom.
Je ris au wasserfall blond qui s’échevela à travers les sapins: à la cime argentée je reconnus la déesse.
Alors je levai un à un les voiles. Dans l’allée, en agitant les bras. Par la plaine, où je l’ai dénoncée au coq.
À la grand’ville elle fuyait parmi les clochers et les
dômes, et courant comme un mendiant sur les quais de
marbre, je la chassais.
En haut de la route, près d’un bois de lauriers, je l’ai
entourée avec voiles amassés, et j’ai senti un peu son
immense corps. L’aube et l’enfant tombèrent au bas du bois.
Au réveil il était midi. (284)

“Aube,” appears at first glance to be a straightforward retrospective narrative
about a series of events that culminate with the opening line of the poem, “J’ai
embrassé l’aube d’été.” The poem begins in darkness where nothing moves until
the poet has passed as he is walking along, an indication that the poet has usurped
the dawn as it is now he who awakens nature. Nature responds to the poet’s
movement, which is an illustration of Rimbaud’s desire to make the poet active,
rather than passive in the act of both seeing and poetic creation. The poet reacts
arrogantly to his apparent success, “La première entreprise fut . . . une fleur qui
me dit son nom,” which suggests extraordinary power; the poet is also able to
communicate with nature. The dénouement comes most likely at the midpoint of
the poem as the poet has come into the light–perhaps a suggestion that the poet
himself has awakened at dawn–and recognizes the goddess of the dawn at the
summit of a ridge. This represents a radical reversal as it is now the previously-
superior poet who must look upward to see her from his inferior position below.
The reversal is made complete when the poet, who “comme un mendiant,” is in
pursuit of the dawn. After a lengthy chase, he manages to capture her, but can
only grasp a very small part of her immensity, an indication that the knowledge
that comes from the goddess is too much for the poet to comprehend. At that
moment, the poem ends, the poet presumably having been awakened from sleep.
However, to read “Aube” as if it were a typical subject-centered poem, in which there is linearity in the unfolding of events reported as they are experienced by a single, homogenous subject, fails to capture a deeper interpretation.

In another possible reading of the poem, one may interpret the opening “J’ai embrassé l’aube d’été,” as a parodic gesture, because the narrating subject and subject within the poem are linked, as is the case in typical lyrical poetry of which Rimbaud was critical. As a result of parody, Rimbaud posits an ambiguity of poetic voice and point of view which creates a rupture between the narrating subject and the subject within the text. The opening verse is quite possibly pronounced in the aftermath of a dream, in which the body of the poem is then taken to be the dream’s content. This creates a dédoublement: on one level, there is a fully conscious speaker who is awake and commenting on his experiences as they were taking place in a dream. But there is another self who is the subject of the dream reporting events as they unfold on a semi-conscious level. Another indication of doubling and a division of the subject is indicated primarily through shifts in verb tense throughout the poem. Looking at “Aube,” one notices that the first two instances of the first-person pronoun occur with the passé composé: “J’ai embrassé l’aube d’été,” and further down, “J’ai marché.” Further on, however, the first-person pronoun is coupled with the passé simple: “Je ris au wasserfall blond,” and “Je reconnus la déese.” In her analysis of the fragmentation of poetic voice in “Aube,” Karen Dillman has examined the mixture of tenses in “Aube” and notes that because the verbs in the passé composé are related to the present by virtue of the present-tense auxiliary verb “avoir,” a link is created between the
event that took place in the past and the recounting of the event in the present (77-96). This temporal uniformity, she argues, constitutes the subjective narrator / narrative relationship typical of romantic lyrical poetry, in part because it eliminates temporal distance between the narrating and textual subject. Later in the poem, the appearance of the first-person pronoun ‘je’ with verbs that occur in the in the passé simple creates a rupture in this relationship because the passé simple does not have the same grammatical and temporal relationship to the present that the passé composé has. Rimbaud takes the manipulation of tenses a step further. In the verse “J’ai marché, réveillant les haleines vives et tièdes; et les pierres regardèrent, et les ailes se levèrent sans bruit,” there is a mixture of the passé composé with the passé simple which serves to sever the link between the speaking subject and the objects in the surrounding landscape. Dillman concludes that the shifting back and forth between the two forms of the past tense divides the poem in such a way as to make a linear reading, which depends on a uniform flow of time, impossible. The shifts of verb tense, she says, “create the possibility of several distinct narratives which intersect at certain points, or the possibility of different phases of one narrative which are not told from the same point of view” (115). This particular form of “dédoublement” of poetic voice has ties to the disengaged subject that emerges from Rimbaud’s memorable “Je est un autre” conceived in the “Lettres du voyant” in order to illustrate the possibility of the self becoming another.

The question of irony in “Aube” is related to the question of parody. If one agrees that a straightforward and linear reading is impossible because of the
mixture of verb tenses, the opening verse should be taken as pretense: Rimbaud has made only a gesture toward a unity of the first-person subject throughout the poem, much like the subjective poetry of the Romantics that the criticized.

Dillman points out,

[t]he personal identity of the ‘je’ is emphasized by the use of the passé composé, which lends the ‘je’ a personal history; it serves as a lien vivant between past and present . . . The ‘je’ acts ‘en témoin’, and is thus presented as a participant in the past event, and the narrator . . . of that event in the present. (77-78)

The insertion of the first-person pronoun in passé simple serves to split the subject into two separate entities, by breaking the grammatical bond between past and present, which serves to make impossible a straightforward interpretation—that of the narrating subject recounting his own experiences. In this sense, Rimbaud has undercut his own created illusion, similar to other examples of romantic irony.

The question of whether or not “Aube” attains the status of “objective” poetry that Rimbaud desired it to have is difficult to answer, particularly because the poet never offers a definitive characterization of what that type of poetry would look like. But the issue has bearing on the interpretation of “Aube” because there remains the question of whether Rimbaud has affirmed a particular position as the result of irony. Hermann Wetzel coins the term “ironie féroce” as it applies to several poems in Une saison en enfer. He describes the concept by making a comparison to parody:

à la différence de la parodie, les pré-textes, dans un texte ironique, ne sont plus visés à des fins de dévalorisation, mais cités. La citation permet une attitude polyvalente envers l’énoncé cité; elle n’est pas seulement et exclusivement négative, mais distanciée et négative. (119)
The ubiquity of contradiction and reversal in *Une saison en enfer*, according to Wetzel, does not operate in the manner of, for example, Socratic irony, in which feigned ignorance and contradiction work to conceal the truth, or a particular belief system thought to be true. Rimbaud does not wish to adhere to any truth, nor does he desire to affirm a belief system. There is no stable point of view or standard from which Rimbaud may incorporate the object of his parody in order to subject it to ridicule by direct comparison. He defines objective poetry as a negative.

In “Aube,” the inner contradiction and reversals reflect an inconstancy and a wavering in the poet’s attempt at unity with nature and his discovery of the unknown. There is no apparent resolution to the poem; one does not know whether the poet has or has not usurped the goddess of the dawn. By the last verse, he has been awakened as he was seemingly on the brink of a discovery of the immensity of her knowledge. One may interpret the failed attempt to capture the dawn to be illustrative of the poet’s failed attempt at “objective” poetry, and the lack of complete success at becoming a “voyant.” The destruction of temporal unity of the subject “je” caused by the changes in tense causes a de-centered subject, but this is at odds with progression of time in the poem—the poem begins in darkness, presumably before the dawn, and ends at noon. Dillman notes that the paragraph divisions of the poem are not matched by a corresponding change in tense with regard to the subject “je” (115). This, she says, further destroys any unity of the subject which suggests “the loss of a coherent narrative voice and of a recognizable speaking subject” (115-16). This corresponds to a subject who is
everywhere and nowhere. In other words, there are multiple points of view to recount the story of the poet’s chasing the dawn, but there is no one subject in particular. The constructions made from the various points of view of the subject are continually constructed but never complete. The view offered by “objective” poetry remains a mystery that the poet attempts to solve over and over again in an ironically constant pattern of construction and demolition.

Flaubert took advantage of multiple points of view in his novels for the production of irony. Part of his mastery comes from an ability to slip imperceptibly from descriptions that are subjectively rendered by his characters to descriptions that are rendered from the point of view of the narrator himself. Free indirect discourse allows the author to integrate the speech and thought of his characters into the story, but without strict requirements with regard to his fidelity to the actual content of what is said or thought. This allows the narrator to inject his own point of view into the story, but in the guise of his character. Flaubert is well-known for being particularly skillful in this narrative maneuver, which he often practices with great subtlety. For example, in the aftermath of the ball at Vaubyessard, Emma is all the more discontent with her surroundings. As she looks out the window, she notices one of the hired hands: “Le garçon de la poste, qui, chaque matin, venait panser la jument, traversait le corridor avec ses gros sabots; sa blouse avait des trous, ses pieds étaient nus dans ses chaussons. C’était là le groom en culotte courte dont il fallait se contenter!” (120). Much of the irony in Madame Bovary is based on the incongruity between Emma’s romanticized daydreams and what to her is the oppressive boredom of her actual life. Flaubert
is at this point able to announce what is to be a principal theme of his book as the narrator “innocently” recounts the thinking of his character. In other words, even if Flaubert, through his narrator, is making commentary on the actions of the characters he has created, he is able to do so without the reader becoming aware that the focalization of the narration has shifted from internal to external. The subtleness with which the shift is made allows the author to play the role of ironist without being easily detected. Flaubert cleverly employs a variety of narrative techniques to mask this voice of irony. Those who study Flaubert often begin with the author’s affirmation about his role as artist: “L’artiste doit être dans son œuvre comme Dieu dans la Création, invisible et tout puissant, qu’on le sente partout, mais on ne le voit pas” (qtd. in Brombert 6). This assertion underlies much of Flaubert’s irony and presents the clearest characterization of an ironist who operates incognito. It is not particularly controversial to assert that Flaubert frequently employs irony to a great extent in his works. While the reader may “sense” irony everywhere throughout Madame Bovary, it is another matter to actually see Flaubert’s hand in the irony. The difference between “sensing” and “seeing” is manifest in ambiguous messages that are common to Flaubert’s novels, and can be construed as the difference between ostensible and intended meanings of narrative utterances. Irony stems from the incongruity of these meanings.

Flaubert is incessantly ironic about Emma and her “bovarisme” in Madame Bovary, and, as I have stated, his technique of choice to convey irony is free indirect discourse. Consider the following example:
Because the passage depicts one of Emma’s many daydreams, the reader, by now accustomed to her wistfulness, must decide whether the content could have been conjured up by Emma herself, in which case the narrator is giving a straightforward rendition of her thoughts; or whether the narrator is representing the author’s point of view in what is only ostensibly a rendition of Emma’s thoughts. Viewed correctly, this passage has a rich capacity for irony, but this depends, of course, on the reader’s judgment. Genette has remarked that one of Flaubert’s tendencies in conveying irony in passages that elucidate Emma’s daydreams is to load descriptions with an overabundance of detail which compels the reader to consider that such precision is not plausible in narration that faithfully represents her point of view. Genette often makes his case using passages from Emma’s daydreams that occur during her illness that is the result of Rodolphe’s abandonment. The representation of these daydreams contain distancing modalizers such as “elle croyait voir,” and the like, and the modalizers, leave little doubt that the dreams are hallucinatory. According to Genette, the precision of the descriptions rendered in her dreams do not fit the weakened state of her mind during the illness, so the reader may assume that someone is speaking for her (“Silences de Flaubert” 225-26). But it should be duly noted that Flaubert, through his narrator, seldom relents in his role as ironist, even when events are straightforwardly related in “neutral” description. In these hallucinatory episodes, one might say that it is easier for the reader to assess that irony is expressed.
indirectly since the modalizers are in fact a version of indirect discourse. The “croire-voir” aspect of the modalizers seems to allow Flaubert to flout literary convention that stipulates that indirect discourse must be a close approximation to what the character is likely to have said. Flaubert is then free to insert material into the narrative that seems far fetched, and thus ripe for irony. Nevertheless, the fact that Emma is able, here, to depict her imaginary husband in a Scottish cottage with an overabundance of precise detail—down to the fancy cuffs of his shirt—should, plausibly, make the reader suspicious. If the reader is at this point still unable to consider the passage to be ironic, she or he is able, at the very least, to determine that someone other than Emma is doing the speaking. The attentive reader will suspect that there is another narrative point of view that is hidden behind the ostensible rendition of Emma’s daydream.

An interesting point is raised by this example when one attempts to determine how much irony is due to the passage as it appears in the text, and how much is created as a result of bringing extradiegetic factors into consideration. The reader must look outside the immediate verbal rendering of Emma’s thoughts in order to locate the genesis of irony. Perhaps the most straightforward interpretation suggests that the daydream is ironic because despite the fact that it is an intended escape from the drudgery of her life in Yonville, its content doesn’t present anything that most people would find to be particularly more satisfying than the life Emma now has (Culler, Flaubert 197). In this case, one should perhaps clarify that only those who don’t adhere to the system of quasi-Bourgeois values that Flaubert is obviously criticizing would find the passage
ironic. In other words, the passage is ironic only according to one collective point of view within the readership in particular. In weighing the passage strictly in terms of its semantic content, one notices an incongruity between the wealth of detail present in the rendered description of her daydream, and the paucity of elements denoted that are in any way important and actually improve her condition—which is the purpose of the daydream, in the first place. The reader who comes to these same conclusions does so without any overt indication of the presence of irony by the author, who is intent to remain silent and anonymous. But given the potential existence of other factors that may render the passage ironic—and in an altogether different manner—it seems fair to ask whether this straightforward semantic interpretation of irony is the only one that Flaubert intended. Perhaps he intended for irony at multiple levels of interpretation.

In his own discussion of the passage, Vaheed Ramazani states that “[h]ere Emma thinks in clichés so precise and so ordered that one cannot help but see her plaintive wish as mere authorial pretext for the ironic juxtaposition of descriptive details borrowed directly from some anonymous anterior text” (70). If this passage is also parodic, there are a number of factors that contribute to the irony that are left unstated. First, since the reader has been made aware of Emma’s penchant for reading romance novels, it follows that the narrator could be merely reporting her thoughts as she paraphrases one of the novels. The reader, then, would likely conclude that Emma is merely irrational in thinking that she can actually live out the improbable reality that is presented by a typical romance novel. In this case, the reader would not consider the passage to be ironic. But if,
through his narrator, Flaubert is paraphrasing some long-forgotten romance novel, the intertextual allusion injects invisible semantic content into the passage. In order to capture the full reach of irony, the reader would have to consider the nature and reputation of the work alluded to, or of romance novels in general and, furthermore, what Flaubert thought about them. This single passage is ironic simultaneously at both an intra- and extra-textual level, which, incidentally, brings out what many have taken to be the theme of *Madame Bovary*: Flaubert appears to be using Emma Bovary as a vehicle for deriding certain aspects of Romanticism, a tactic which surpasses the scope of the diegesis and becomes metatextual.

One may raise additional questions about the nature of verbal irony from the preceding example. Given that Flaubert disguises his irony, and uses no immediately recognizable marker of ironic tone or style, how does the reader grasp the intended irony, nevertheless? That the passage is narrated in free indirect discourse cannot be in itself a sufficient indication since not all cases of the narrative mode are ironic. Muecke has discussed similar cases in the communication of verbal irony. Interestingly enough, the examples he chooses to analyze come from the stage, a situation in which an audience has much more than textual or verbal cues to arouse suspicion that irony is intended. For example, he draws upon a brief passage from Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara*:

UNDERSHAFT (to the foreman): Anything wrong, Bilton?
BILTON (with ironic calm): Gentleman walked into the shed and lit a cigarette, sir: that’s all.
Of course, as Muecke points out, the “ironic calm” ensues because, as everyone in
the audience can plainly see, a sign indicates that the shed contains explosives.

Muecke concludes,

[w]hat is ironical is not the calm but the planned incongruity of the calm
tone and the explosive situation. We must conclude that, sometimes at
least, we cannot tell whether an expression is or is not ironical unless we
know how it is related to its context in reality. (“Communication” 37)

Hence, this particular irony cannot be grasped from the verbal elements alone.

There is some discernable effect given to irony that stems directly from the
reader’s apprehension of it. The magnitude of irony, it would appear, has a direct
relation to how much effort the reader must make in order to uncover it. It follows
that irony which has been silently injected into the narrative must come from an
ironist that has taken measures to conceal his role. As I have said, Flaubert does
nothing to give an indication to the reader that he is being ironic.

With regard to the example from Madame Bovary that I have been
discussing, it is interesting to examine what would happen if indeed Flaubert were
to signal to his readers that he intended irony. For example, suppose Flaubert’s
narrator were to interject, before giving the content of the dream, “Emma, having
herself read many romance novels, incorporated one in particular into a
daydream. How foolish she is! Everyone knows that those books are a bunch of
nonsense!” Despite the fact that all of the conditions are otherwise the same—the
content of the dream stays the same—the irony is attenuated (if not lost) by the
narrator having announced the author’s ironic intention. Similarly, in taking
Muecke’s example from Shaw’s Major Barbara, if Bilton were to state with ironic
calm, “Gentleman went into the shed and lit a cigarette, sir, that’s all. I’m not
worried even though the shed contains explosives.” Here, the enunciation of his intent to remain calm despite the potentially explosive situation completely destroys any sense that “ironic calm” had in the original rendition of the play. These ironies are carried out not only by the presence of verbal cues, such as a double-sensed message, but also by a complex orchestration of facts and events, some of which arrive from outside of the diegesis. The examples demonstrate, moreover, that even cases that are typically characterized as verbal irony rely greatly on situation. Emma Bovary’s wistfulness is merely sad unless it evokes, in the manner of an ironic echo, the patently absurd elements of a romance novel. Similarly, Bilton’s stated intention to remain calm has no ironic meaning unless the shed contains explosives. And all of this irony would be lost if the author, Flaubert, was not hidden from the reader’s view.

Free indirect discourse was not the only means by which Flaubert was able to inject irony into his narratives. In a later work, “Un Coeur simple,” Flaubert does not appear to resort to the device at all (Denommé 574). This is not surprising considering the fact that Flaubert goes to great lengths to create a character who is simple, kind, naïve, yet faithful, giving, courageous and, most importantly, genuine. As a character, Félicité would lose believability if the reader were to detect biting irony hidden behind her judgment or speech, as is often the case in Madame Bovary. Critics have remarked a shift of Flaubert’s attitude at the time of his writing Trois contes due to both poor health and professional and personal set backs. Flaubert’s treatment of Félicité is described with words like
“tenderness” and “sympathy,” a far cry from his literary treatment of Emma Bovary.

Félicité, servant to a Norman bourgeois family, is a character markedly different from Emma. She is certainly not as intelligent, nor does she have the same complexity of emotions. Perhaps the most vivid example of her lack of intelligence is demonstrated during an episode in which she inquires from the local apothecary of the whereabouts of her nephew, Victor who had recently taken a long sea voyage, and about whom Félicité is consumed with worry. The following passage is indicative of Félicité’s limited capacity to understand the world around her: “Le pharmacien lui apprit que le bateau de Victor était arrivé à la Havane . . .,” and when Félicité presses him for details, its location and distance from them

[i]l atteignit son atlas, puis commença des explications sur les longitudes . . . Enfin, avec son porte-crayon, il indiqua dans les découpages d’une tache ovale un point noir, imperceptible, en ajoutant: “Voici.” Elle se pencha sur la carte; ce réseau de lignes coloriées fatiguait sa vue, sans rien apprendre; et Bourais l’invitant à dire ce qui l’embarrassait, elle pria de lui montrer la maison où demeurait Victor. (60)

Yet, even though Félicité’s ignorance is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the story, it is not her most characteristic trait. She is a loving and devoted servant the Mme. Aubain and her children. She suffers greatly, almost as would a mother, after the death of Virginie. She was heroic, showing composure, and putting herself at risk to divert the attention of an angry and charging bull in order to save members of the family from harm. Flaubert puts these events together into a portrait of Félicité that the reader may then examine in order to construct her or
his own impressions and sentiment toward the character, without much "guidance" from an author who remains well in the background.

It is hard to resist making a comparison between “Un coeur simple” and Madame Bovary in terms of the lives of the protagonists. For example, throughout the life of Félicité, as it is depicted, there is a progressive disappearance of people who are dear to her. Brombert remarks, “[a]utour de Félicité, progressivement, se fait vide. Et cependant ce vide, elle a le secret de le transformer en plénitude,” but that “[d]evant la perte et la déception, devant l’érosion de toutes choses, Félicité affirme la capacité invincible de l’amour. Elle est incorruptible: rien ne peut la rendre amère” (157). In other words, she possesses many characteristics of sainthood. As a possible reference, this is in stark contrast to Emma Bovary who has an appetite for acquiring material possessions but never finds satisfaction from them. Sainthood for Emma, amounts to nothing more than the acquisition of material objects: “Elle voulut devenir une sainte. Elle acheta des chapelets, elle porta des amulettes; elle souhaitait avoir dans sa chambre, au chevet de sa couche, un reliquaire enchâssé d’emeraudes, pour le baiser tous les soirs” (282).”

One does not “decide” to become a saint, nor does the mere buying of accoutrements. Félicité’s path to a sainthood, described as such, produces an ironic echo of Emma’s patently ridiculous attempts. It furthermore underscores a larger irony that Félicité is much better able to cope with life in general, and be content, despite the fact that few would be willing to change places with her. There is an entire dimension that she seems to be missing, which are qualities people would typically find to be desirable: intelligence, ambition, sophistication,
passion. Ironically through his character, though, Flaubert shows that these traits are not necessary for contentment. Ignorance is bliss, Flaubert seems to be suggesting.

There are any number of episodes one could take from Madame Bovary that illustrate Flaubert’s more active role in shaping the reader’s opinion of Emma. Denommé, in his comparison of Flaubert’s different treatment of his two heroines, selects a particularly illustrative one:

Quand elle se mettait à genoux sur son prie-Dieu gothique, elle adressait au Seigneur les mêmes paroles de suavité qu’elle murmurait jadis à son amant, dans les épanachements de l’adultère. C’était pour faire venir la croyance; mais aucune délectation ne descendait des cieux; et elle se relevait, les membres fatigués, avec le sentiment vague d’une immense duperie. (283-84)

The irony of the passage stems from Emma’s failure to see the self-evident basis for her frustration and discontentment with regard to religion. An attentive reader, however, concludes without much difficulty that the discontentment is a likely outcome, given her apparent lack of conviction (what is vital to religion) which is gleaned from her making oaths interchangeably between God and her lovers. This is the conclusion that Flaubert presumably intends the reader to draw when he has his narrator call attention to this fact. Denommé remarks that Félicité avoids the same treatment because “her aspirations are too indelibly imprinted with simplicity and innocence for them to become the brunt of the author’s exploitation” (575). In “Un coeur sample,” Flaubert seems to be more willing to allow the reader to arrive at her or his own conclusions. The hand of the author in the role of ironist is still present. It is he, after all, who is arranging the events of the story in order to portray the life of his protagonist. But his manner is not
nearly as intrusive as it is in the examples from Madame Bovary that have been examined.

For example, there is an often-commented episode in the life of Félicité that is pivotal to formulating the reader’s understanding and compassion for her. Walking along the road to Honfleur with the intention of seeing a taxidermist in order to have her beloved Loulou stuffed, a partially-deaf Félicité has unknowingly wandered into the path of an oncoming coach:

Derrière elle, dans un nuage de poussière et emporté par la descente, une malle-poste au grand galop se précipitait comme une trombe. En voyant cette femme qui ne se dérangait pas, le conducteur se dressa par dessus la capote, et le postillon criait aussi, pendant que ses quatre chevaux, qui ne pouvaient se retenir, accéléreraient leur train; . . . mais furieux [le conducteur releva le bras, et à pleine volée, avec son grand fouet, lui cingla du ventre au chignon un tel coup qu’elle tomba sur le dos. (71)

Here, the brutality of the event is realistically portrayed in stark language that shows no hint of additional authorial commentary or amplification. The reader is then likely to experience the immense injustice that occurs, bolstering the sense of reader sympathy for Félicité, particularly that of a reader who has experienced the entire body of the work containing a series of episodes that are demonstrative of Félicité’s simplicity and innocence. Irony in “Un coeur simple” is not directed at the protagonist, as was the case in Madame Bovary. As Félicité is put into juxtaposition with the bourgeois society of Pont-Levêque, the resulting amplification of the prejudice and narrow-mindedness of the latter comes to light by having been contrasted with her genuine goodness, innocence, and simplicity. As the reader has developed sympathy for Félicité over the course of the
narrative, the contrast she provides is enough to cast the bourgeoisie, a frequent

target of Flaubert’s irony, into a negative light.

Flaubert, in his role as ironist, recedes somewhat into the background in

“Un coeur simple” and in so doing, he places more faith in the reader to perceive

the irony. This is a tendency continued by authors up to the twentieth century,

which I will examine in the following chapter. Flaubert, more than the other

nineteenth-century authors I have discussed, directed his irony at institutions, and

at his own role as artist. There is irony in Madame Bovary, for example, directed

against the bourgeoisie, as well as against pseudo-science practiced by Homais,

and to some extent against the aristocracy, and to some extent against himself.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, irony begins to lose its

prominence in literature. Irony was, after all, associated with what were by then

outdated literary models. Pierre Schoentjes, writing in his history of irony, claims

that “[e]n France, au milieu du XIXème siècle, on considérait l’ironie dans un

prolongement d’un siècle des Lumières marqué par l’ironie flagellatrice de

Voltaire” (245). I have tried to show that the structure and use of irony had

nevertheless changed considerably over the course of the century, from the time it

was used by Voltaire. For whatever reason, ironists of the nineteenth century felt

compelled to disguise their role from the reader. The various devices used to

produce irony that I have examined in this chapter work, in effect, to double the

narrative or poetic voice in order to create ambiguities. This kind of irony is much

more complicated than that of Montesquieu and Voltaire, for example, who spoke

through their characters with virtual transparency. Moreover, classical forms of
irony during the eighteenth century indicated with clarity what their
reconstruction would look like, because the irony was produced to promote a
clearly identifiable and stable point of view. This was certainly not the case in the
nineteenth century when reason was, to some extent, replaced by emotion, and
literary convention based on imitation was replaced by the artist’s own
imagination. With the self becoming the locus of artistic creation, there is also an
accompanying realization in the artist of her or his own limitations, and this
becomes the source of much irony. Unlike the easily reconstructed ironies of the
previous century, the nineteenth-century artist produces irony that reflects
ambivalence without an apparent resolution. This is particularly true of Constant
and Baudelaire whose irony produces more an attitude or feeling than a definitive
proposition. What “truth” is to be reconstructed from a “dédoublément
constantien,” for example? The reader is unable to do much more than have a
sense of Constant’s anxiety and indecision, while sensing a kind of insouciant
superiority coming from Baudelaire’s irony.

Another form of ambivalence perhaps comes into play in the form of “la
blague.” Philippe Hamon argues that a considerable portion of nineteenth-century
French literature is based on “la blague” which he characterizes as a “discours de
la neutralisation généralisée des valeurs [et] de leur mise en ‘chari-vari’,” which
results in “un nivellement démocratique des valeurs” (142-44). The parti pris of
the author is less visible or even absent as a result, fitting the spirit of la blague in
taking nothing seriously. The narrative of the nineteenth-century novel reflects the
point of view of the character or even multiple points of view (la polyphonie)
which are not placed in hierarchical order, but rather looked upon with indifference (Hamon 144-45). This posture is in contrast with many eighteenth-century ironists who implied through their irony that one form of thought is superior to another and is more in line with Flaubert’s notion of the author who, like God, should be “présent partout et visible nulle part” in his work. Many characterize this directive as Flaubert’s vision of “la blague supérieure” which refers to God as creator of the world, who has set events into motion without leaving an apparent or detectible justification for what happens. This attitude is one of impassivity—often mistaken for cruelty—which informs much of Flaubert’s irony. In *Madame Bovary*, for example, Emma’s dreams are continuously crushed by a reality that is utterly indifferent. But it is not at all clear what Flaubert intends the reader to reconstruct from this irony. Many see the irony as self-inflicted. For example, Brombert interprets the pattern of longing and disappointment that is associated with Emma’s dreams as being related to artistic creation. Emma’s dreams are a “modèle, d’une forme qui n’est pas la vie mais sa représentation” (62). As things are continually described from her point of view, desire determines to a large extent what Emma sees, but the “real” world inevitably runs contrary to her desire. To consider Emma to be a metaphoric representation of the artist is to conclude that Flaubert has turned his irony toward himself and his own predicament in which his own artistic aspirations are bound to fail to adequately transform reality into art.

In the following chapter, what I call the idiosyncratic ironist will direct irony against those who take for granted the conditions that lead to irony. The
following of conventional wisdom and common sense, or the belief in a
correspondance between language and thought in the world—much of which has
been the target of Flaubert’s irony in his works—have led some to reject the notion
of irony on a universal scale. Idiosyncratic irony reflects much of the thinking of
the romantic ironist, but her or his irony is used as a means of revolt against the
imposition of “artificial” systems of thought.

1 There is a tendency among theorists, perhaps a misguided one, to use the terms “Romantic
irony,” “modern irony,” and “general irony” synonymously; Philippe Hamon acknowledges this
fact (129), as well as Booth (“Empire” 114-15). Moreover, Romantic irony is far more complex
than an author’s preoccupation with her or his presence in literary works. I take up the point in
Chapter 1 and later in this chapter. In writing about the ironist incognito, I am focusing attention
on the author’s attempts to stay hidden from the reader in her or his role as ironist.

2 Hugo addresses this idea in his Précis de Cromwell. The pressure to depict the actual world
with all its chaos, ugliness, and ennui is placed weighed against outmoded literary convention. The
juxtaposition of this new vision of reality with literary convention is the basis of much irony of
the period.

3 See especially Bakhtin’s Problems with Dostoevsky’s Poetics in which he argues that the author
invented the form of writing that adequately represented the idea of human freedom from the point
of view of the author. The author puts himself on the level of his characters by not demonstrating
any more knowledge of what happens to them than if he were in the diegesis. Moreover, by giving
the characters this kind of freedom, the author cannot endow them with any particular ideology.
Thus characters have their own point of view, and a collection of characters in a novels allows for
the existence of multiple points of consciousness and voice. This idea of polyphony is different
from that of Rimbaud in that the latter does not give his multiple subjects a coherent and
identifiable character.

4 This operates in the manner of the present perfect in English: “I have embraced the summer
dawn.”

5 I am opting for Gerald Prince’s translation of “style indirect libre” in his Dictionary of
Narratology as a matter of uniformity. The term “free indirect style” appears with some frequency
in the critical literature, and I do not intend to imply that there is a difference in meaning between
this and Prince’s term, nor does he.
Chapter 4: Idiosyncratic Irony: The case of *L’Étranger*

In this final chapter, I will examine the production of what I call idiosyncratic irony in *L’Étranger* by Albert Camus. I focus on this particular work because I believe it represents a tendency of twentieth-century thinking to place importance on the authenticity of individual experience over systems of thought and social and linguistic convention. In discussions about the protagonist, Meursault, critics are in general agreement that his eccentric and peculiar reaction to the events of his life portrayed in the novel is his most striking trait. Idiosyncratic irony refers to the type and character of irony that comes from the point of view of an individual or an outsider who does not behave according to what convention proscribes and does not appear to fit into her or his surroundings. In certain regards, idiosyncratic irony resembles ingénu irony, examined in Chapter 2, but there are important differences. Camus’s irony is particularly destructive and is aimed at the foundations of settled belief systems, language and discourse, and social institutions. This kind of irony is a far cry from that of Voltaire’s ingénu who attacks moral or philosophical positions from a stable point of view. Unlike the irony of Voltaire, which is corrective and used to illuminate a hypocrisy or the contradictory nature of the victim’s set of beliefs, Camus employs his protagonist to attack foundations of conventional thinking and
discourse which represent artificial standards of truth that often benefit the political and cultural establishment that puts them in place. Muecke offers a characterization of these victims as having been caught up in an “irony of dilemma” which he identifies as someone who “is a victim of an ironic situation precisely because of his confident assumption that he is not in an absurd one. . . . As victims we cannot escape the irony for as long as we believe or assume that we inhabit a rational or moral universe” (Compass 113-14). My interpretation of Camus’s use of Meursault as a device for this kind of irony comes from the fact that because Meursault is detached from the rest of society, he is therefore in a position to illustrate the importance of treating individual points of view and discourses with equanimity. Unlike the ingénu who has the capability to uncover truth behind false pretenses, idiosyncratic irony offers no such reconstruction. One is simply suspended in a position of ironic detachment, and having an awareness of this predicament is the manner in which one may cope with the Absurd.

I will also devote discussion about how irony is produced by Meursault in his capacity as narrator. Much has been said about Meursault’s idiosyncrasy, and in discussing irony that stems from his role as narrator, I do not intend to assign any specialized meaning to the term “idiosyncratic.” I refer simply to the word’s standard definition that designates behavior which is the result of a peculiar and original temperament; Meursault would be an extreme example of this characterization. The protagonist of L’Étranger can be described in a number of ways and has been variously labeled an Epicurean, truthful, a pagan, and a nihilist
among other things. As his temperament has an effect on narration, I will argue that irony in L’Étranger often results from a discrepancy between Meursault’s descriptions of events as they occur in the story and the reader’s interpretation of them. Meursault’s descriptions of these events and the people around him will similarly be at odds with conventional thinking and discourse. There are questions I will attempt to answer during discussion of L’Étranger about the type and scope of irony that Camus produces through his protagonist narrator. As is the case of ingénu irony, the idiosyncratic irony of L’Étranger does not comply to a rigid distinction between situational and verbal irony; it is a combination of both. Also like the ingénu, the unique characteristics of Meursault will have an influence on the interpretation of his statements and observations.

An important source of irony in L’Étranger, I will argue, comes from a juxtaposition of parts I and II of the novel. The second part of L’Étranger is considered by many to be a conventional or rational retelling of the events that are eccentrically recounted from Meursault’s point of view in the first part. Irony is created as a result of the failure of the second part to appear any more “true” or “right,” or to better capture what happens to Meursault, than the seemingly bizarre and peculiar version rendered by the protagonist himself. In fact the reader will likely discover that the rational or conventional reconstruction of part I is a distortion of events surrounding Meursault’s killing of the Arab. This irony has several targets: the inadequacies of language in public and conventional discourse, the judicial system, and conventional wisdom with regard to morality and ethics. Furthermore, this irony relates to certain assumptions about narration
from a privileged or retrospective point of view, which allows the narrator to see and know more than the characters, while ignoring the contingent nature of experience. I will discuss Jean-Paul Sartre’s *La Nausée* in relation to this idea, a novel which bears a strong resemblance to *L’Étranger* in this regard, as both works illustrate a failure of narration from a retrospective point of view to render a “true” or authentic representation of events. The irony illustrated by the failure of retrospective point of view is indicative of the twentieth-century tendency to place emphasis on individual experience, which was reflected by the growth in prominence of first-person narration.

Idiosyncratic irony is geared toward intellectual activity during the twentieth century because a great deal of thinking centered on the uniqueness of individual experience as opposed to reliance on systems of thought. Much philosophizing during the period was directed toward rejecting the foundations of well-established linguistic and metaphysical systems. According to Ernst Behler, criticism aimed at the groundlessness of these systems culminates in the postmodern age, which constitutes a “rejection of any totalized conception of truth in the sense of global philosophies of history, all-embracing systems of meaning, or uniform foundations of knowledge” (6). The nihilistic attitude displayed by Meursault coincides with the idea of the absurd nature of our relationship with world in which any attempt to discover by rational means an absolute meaning of life will fall short. There is some question as to whether Meursault accepts this predicament or whether he even reacts to it at all. At first glance, he does not appear to have any inclination whatsoever to show interest in
such philosophical matters. But one begins to form a different impression toward the end of the novel. I will argue that Meursault maintains an ironic distance between what he at least tacitly acknowledges to be an absurd universe and attempts by others to invent meaning by the imposition of conventional wisdom or of moral and metaphysical constructs. This will come out during his involvement with the judicial system and trial in the form of his often ironic observations. Sartre examines many of the same issues in La Nausée. Sartre’s implicit renunciation of narration form a retrospective point of view in his novel foreshadows that of Meursault’s narrative in the second part of L’Étranger, which portrays another failure of retrospective narration. In La Nausée, Antoine Roquentin displays a similar attitude at the moment he concedes failure in his attempt to write historical biography. His renunciation of the project contains an implicit judgment of the inadequacy of narrative from a retrospective point of view. This type of narration does not have an inherent functional property to impose the correct order onto a set of given events. Even a fictional reality, according to Sartre, should acknowledge and portray the contingency of human experience, and ought to reflect the point of view of the character who experiences it. The object of irony in Camus, and to a lesser extent in Sartre, is to show that there is no philosophical system, literary convention, or narrative point of view that refers to the “true” or “correct” version of the state of affairs. The victims of these authors’ irony are those who do not accept the pure contingency of experience and the Absurd. Typically these are intellectual and cultural centers who out of either hubris or habit, cling to systems of thought. These systems do
not exist in an absurd world or one of pure contingency. I will argue that the irony produced by Camus in *L’Étranger* provides a practical example of Richard Rorty’s theorizing of modern irony. Rorty argues a similar point about our inability to use language and description to render a “true” version of reality. I will discuss Rorty’s views as they relate to *L’Étranger* below.

There were precursory currents in literature, and the novel in particular, that initiated a self-critical posture among authors that lead to a focus on individual point of view in literature and in other intellectual endeavors. Germaine Brée, writing about the literary atmosphere surrounding the novel between the two world wars, claims that the direction the genre would eventually take had been initially staked out by the surrealists:

Dans les *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Breton fait procès de l’attitude réaliste et du psychologisme en particulier: “les jours de la littérature psychologique à affabulation romanesque sont comptés,” déclare-t-il, et il juge fastidieux les passages descriptifs grâce auxquels le romancier réaliste cherche à authentifier son histoire en lui donnant un cadre spécifique. (210)

This attitude would continue, argues Brée, among authors who attempted to capture what was thought of as a “nouvelle appréhension du réel,” by rejecting the long-standing practice of a “causalité psychologique comme élément de structuration d’une intrigue” (211). For example, there was an effort to disengage subjectivity in the novel from the Proustian *moi profond* that was considered an essence and not part of actual experience. Narration from the result of involuntary memory served to create a link between one’s present and past. One of the issues confronting authors of the period was the nature of reality and the manner in which it is represented in narrative, and this required a reexamination of narrative
point of view, among other things. In addition to an attempt to give a more authentic account of consciousness, there was an attempt at a more realistic use of language, one that reflected actual usage and not style. Céline, for example, made changes with regard to the conventional use of language in narrative in order to reflect the emotional experiences of the characters, says Brée, so that the reader can share the experiences. This amounts to the use of idiolect in narrative, in which Céline makes a distinction between private language and public discourse. One critic of Céline refers to this public discourse as “la parole des riches,” a language used to confirm their power and mask the unpleasantness of the reality depicted in the novel. This is put into contrast with “la parole des pauvres,” which has a greater capacity to describe accurately “reality” because it is not encumbered by an instrumental value of reference present in “la parole des riches” (Vitoux 94-95). There are other examples of French literature from the middle of the century which all similarly placed emphasis on narrative from the point of view of the individual. A number of these works placed individual experience and establishment norms into ironic juxtaposition in a variety of ways.

Sartre directed his criticism primarily against literary convention. He confronted the problems of narration in La Nausée with regard to point of view of narration, in which he illustrated the difficulty of being faithful to lived experience while at the same time putting it into narrative retrospectively. I will follow Sartre’s criticism here because unlike Camus, he addresses the philosophical issues surrounding the use of retrospective narration explicitly. As I have stated, both authors are in agreement about the illusion of objectivity
associated with this type of narration and each illustrates its failure. Roquentin realizes that the act of writing distorts the events of one’s life by failing to capture the totality of what was present in the actual lived experience. Putting events into narrative form may, for example, either augment or diminish their significance as it relates to this experience. Sartre argues that narrative as the result of retrospection often lends more intrigue to an experience, but at the same time, robs it of its contingency, which was present at the moment in the consciousness of the person living through the experience. Roquentin makes these observations in one of his journal entries in *La Nausée*:

> Voici ce que j’ai pensé: pour que l’événement le plus banal devienne une aventure, il faut et il suffit qu’on se mette à le raconter... Quand on vit, il n’arrive rien. Les décors changent, les gens entrent et sortent, voilà tout. Il n’y a jamais de commencements. Les jours s’ajoutent aux jours sans rime ni raison, c’est une addition interminable et monotone. ... Ça, c’est vivre. Mais quand on raconte la vie, tout change: seulement c’est un changement que personne ne remarque: la preuve c’est qu’on parle des histoires vraies. Comme s’il pouvait y avoir des histoires vraies; les événements se produisent dans un sens et nous les racontons dans un sens inverse. (58 author’s emphsis)

The dissimilarity between living events and recounting them amounts to a change in direction; one lives going forward but recounts a life by looking backward. To tell a story retrospectively, according to Sartre, is to give a certain finality to events that was not present in experience. In his journal, Roquentin illustrates this point:

> Il faisait nuit; la rue était déserte.” La phrase est jetée négligemment, elle a l’air superflue; mais nous ne nous y laissons pas prendre et nous la mettons de côté: c’est un renseignement dont nous comprendrons la valeur par la suite. Et nous avons le sentiment que le héros a vécu tous les détails de cette nuit comme des annociations, comme des promesses, ou même qu’il vivait seulement ceux qui étaient des promesses, aveugle et sourd pour tout ce qui n’annonçait pas l’aventure. Nous oublions que l’avenir
n’était pas encore là; le type se promenait dans une nuit sans présages, qui lui offrait pèle-mêle ses richesses monotones et il ne choisissait pas. (La Nausée 59)

He also notes that experience can be distorted by narrative that seeks to make sense out of the events that occur by imposing a certain order upon them, after the fact. This is often done at the expense of authenticity because the author, in the act of reconstruction, will often place these events a different sequence, or give them a different emphasis. Roquentin makes a similar observation to himself with regard to the distorting effects of his reconstruction of the life of the Marquis de Rollebon:

Ce sont des hypothèses honnêtes et qui rendent compte des faits: mais je sens si bien qu’elles viennent de moi, qu’elles sont tout simplement une manière d’unifier mes connaisances. . . . Lents, paresseux, maussades, les faits s’accomodent à leur rigeur de l’ordre que je veux leur donner; mais il leur reste extérieur. J’ai l’impression de faire un travail de pure imagination. (27)

The basis of Roquentin’s error is that he imposes his own order from outside with the mistaken belief—one that he will eventually abandon—that retrospection lends more truth or objectivity to the narrative. Moreover, the passage implies that Roquentin is unable to escape his individual point of view and is thus incapable of assuming a position of objectivity. Sartre of course vehemently disagrees with the notion that retrospection will lead to “truth” in narrative, as is shown here. Roquentin’s writing belongs to two similar genres: one is a journal having to do with his own experiences and the other is historical biography about the experiences of another person. It is instructive that Roquentin fails in each genre for similar reasons. As a result of writing retrospectively, Roquentin must impose an order in both cases, thus equating his own life with that of the Marquis de
Rollebon and in a sense bring the dead back to life by living for him. Nor is Roquentin capable of giving an authentic account of his own life writing retrospectively in his journal. He remarks, “J’ai voulu que les moments de ma vie se suivent et s’ordonnent comme ceux d’une vie qu’on se rappelle. Autant vaudrait tenter d’attraper le temps par la queue” (59). Sartre will take the same position with regard to the novel. By his criticism of the genre, he attempts to steer convention with regard to narrative point of view back in line with the current existentialist philosophizing that narrative should give priority to a character’s existence rather than providing her or him with an essence. He outlines this position in his criticism of François Mauriac.

Sartre is critical of Mauriac’s depiction of the life of Thérèse Desqueyroux and the role that fate is said to play in it. Mauriac, argues Sartre, does not determine with any precision whether the sense of fatality against which Thérèse struggles is part of her character, or whether it comes from a source that is outside of her control. Mauriac calls it, simply, “le destin,” but the term is too general, and thus insufficient, according to Sartre: “[n]e confondons pas destin et caractère. Le caractère, c’est encore nous, c’est l’ensemble des forces douces qui s’insinuent dans nos intentions et dérivent insensiblement nos efforts, toujours dans la même direction” (Situations I 36). But Thérèse’s fate is not portrayed entirely in this manner, nor is it experienced consistently from her point of view. Sartre is, moreover, critical of Mauriac’s tendency to intrude with regularity into the narrative to offer commentary from an “omniscient” point of view. The intrusions alter the perception of fate and have the effect of elevating it to an
overpowering, and inescapable, force. For Sartre, the two types of fate, each having different origins, are incompatible:

l’un [destin] peut être constaté du dedans par l’héroïne elle-même, l’autre requerrait une infinité d’observations faites du dehors par un témoin attentif à suivre les entreprises de Thérèse jusqu’à leurs extrèmes aboutissements. M. Mauriac le sait bien que, lorsqu’il veut nous faire voir Thérèse en prédestinée, il recourt à un artifice: il nous la montre telle qu’elle apparaîtra aux autres. (Situations I 37 author’s emphasis)

The omniscient point of view has the effect of predetermining Thérèse’s behavior, which prevents her character from experiencing the contingency in life as it is experienced. Nor does it convey an idea of the sense of freedom one has in dealing with contingency. The implicit argument in this critique is that narrative point of view should be placed within the diegesis so that the immediacy of the narrated events is captured. This will also provide the reader with a sense of the character’s becoming, which comes to her or him as a result of experiencing the story as it unfolds within the consciousness of the character. Otherwise, Thérèse becomes a mere object having a fixed essence:

Mais quand M. Mauriac, usant de toute son autorité de créateur, nous fait prendre ces vues extérieures pour la substance intime de ces créatures, il transforme celles-ci en choses. Seules les choses sont: elles n’ont que des dehors. Les consciences ne sont pas: elles se font. (Situations I 44 author’s emphasis)

Sartre also implies that an author should abstain from narrating from an “omniscient” or objective point of view, or one that is extradiegetic, because narration of those types create a temporal distortion of the events of a story. For example, if the narrator provides the reader with knowledge of what Thérèse will or will not do before she actually does it, and the reasons for her action or inaction, this implies that her character has been predetermined to an important
degree. In so doing, Mauriac has, according to Sartre, given an essence to his character, which takes her out of the realm of existential openness and deprives the reader of witnessing any of the character’s development. The narrative must fit a notion of “le destin” that Mauriac has already determined in advance. This invites the same criticism that Roquentin imposes upon himself; the life of Thérèse Desqueyroux undergoes the same kind of retrospective re-telling and reconstruction as does the life of the Marquis de Rollebon. Once again, the events of the story and how the character reacts to them are arranged to fit the author’s understanding and at the expense of a more authentic version of experience.

Richard Rorty addresses issues similar to those which Sartre raises, and casts his conclusions in terms of irony. An ironist, says Rorty, realizes that “anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed,” and is “always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves” (74-75). On the other hand, one who is not an ironist, according to Rorty, relies on “common sense” and takes for granted that the vocabulary to which she or he has become habituated is sufficient for description (75). While Rorty is taking a position within the discipline of philosophy, his definition of irony has application in other domains.¹ For example, it is possible that Sartre might have used Rorty’s characterization of the non-ironist to describe Mauriac’s narrative style, had it been written much earlier. Rorty’s ironist does not believe in essences because the very linguistic properties needed to establish such a notion are put into question. Implicit in Rorty’s criticism of metaphysical systems is his proposition that no grounding of beliefs that would make them “true” is even
possible. Essences require a final vocabulary, but the ironist believes that all vocabularies are contingent and depend on a particular point of view. In this case, the terms used for description are always subject to change depending on the point of view from which they come. This is not the same as pure relativism; it is only the realization that all descriptions rendered are subject to being redescribed. This position is similar to that of Mueke outlined above, as someone who avoids the irony of dilemma by looking at all points of view in equanimity. A non-ironist, according to Rorty, will seek refuge in metaphysics, in which there is an assumed relationship between the final vocabulary and reality, a relationship that is often taken for granted. Rorty claims that this view is mistaken. I will argue later that Rorty’s non-ironist and Camus’s victim of irony are virtually the same. For the non-ironist, “there are, out there in the world, real essences which it is our duty to discover and which we are disposed to assist in their discovery” (Rorty 75). A belief in essences, and the non-ironist’s certainty of our inherent ability to discover them, obviates the possibility that anything might look different by being redescribed. For Sartre, Mauriac is just this sort of non-ironist.

What can one conclude about Sartre’s commentary on point of view and narration and idiosyncratic irony? In La Nausée, as well as in the content of his criticism of Mauriac, Sartre addresses a significant philosophical problem that arises as a result of the hiatus between the moment an event takes place and the moment of its narration. According to Sartre, the present obliterates the past, as is put in evidence when Roquentin decides to abandon his history of the Marquis de Rollebon after a sudden attack of “nausea”: “Je jetai un regard anxieux autour de
moi: du présent, rien d’autre que du présent. . . . La vraie nature du présent se
dévoilait: il était ce qui existe, et tout ce qui n’était pas présent n’existait pas. Le
passé n’existait pas. Pas du tout. Ni dans les choses ni même dans ma pensée” (La
Nausée 124). Here, Sartre depicts irony according to Rorty’s definition because
he would agree that all events can be altered as a result of being rewritten. Sartre
rejects outright the idea of a privileged or transcendent point of view from which
an author may capture the essence of a thing or event described. The idea of a
“final vocabulary,” which would be the product of a superior authorial or
narrative position, inverts what Sartre considers to be the proper order of
existence and essence; a narrator should not confer an essence on an object or
person described. For Roquentin, the problem becomes even more immediate. His
inability to find a point of view from which to make a definitive description
threatens to result in his own self-effacement. In a well-known passage,
Roquentin describes in his journal an experience involving a large chestnut tree he
notices in a park in Bouville. Seized once again by a feeling of “nausea,” he fails
to describe, or even recognize what it is he sees:

J’étais tout à l’heure dans le jardin public. La racine du marronier
s’enfonçait dans la terre, juste au-dessous de mon banc. Je ne me rappelais
plus que c’était une racine. Les mots s’étaient évanouis et, avec eux la
signification des choses, leurs modes d’emploi, les faibles repères que les
hommes ont tracé à leur surface. J’étais assis, un peu voûté, la tête basse,
seul en face de cette masse noire et noueuse. (La Nausée 161)

Here, Roquentin demonstrates a reversal of Descartes’s Cogito argument—which
is a hallmark of Western philosophy and a foundation of much subsequent
thinking which persists to the present time—in which thinking entails existence.
For Descartes, to think about and apprehend an object clearly and distinctly is to
know its essence, which is tied to a mathematical or some other abstract property
that is held in the mind. These properties are guaranteed by a transcendent God
and appear universally to all thinking beings. Yet, explicit in Roquentin’s moment
of crisis is his inability to apprehend the roots of a chestnut tree with any clarity at
all, and there is only confusion and failure in each of his attempts to cast the
apparition into terms that he is able to comprehend. Implicit in the episode is that
Roquentin will never be able to establish a stable relationship between himself
and the chestnut tree (or any other object, for that matter) in its purely existent
state. He will realize this fact later on: “le monde des explications et des raisons
nest pas celle de l’existence” (164). After his initial and confused encounter with
the tree, Roquentin suddenly has an insight: “Jamais . . . je n’avais pressenti ce
que voulait dire ‘exister.’” This discovery leads him to understand his “nausea,”
and the realization that “[I]’essentiel c’est la contingence,” and that “[e]xister
c’est être là, simplement; les existants apparaissent, se laissent rencontrer, mais on
ne peut jamais déduire” (166 author’s emphasis). Both Sartre and Rorty reject
much of traditional Western philosophy because of its failure to put into question
the notion of being. Both claim that the idea of being has not been adequately
addressed. Rorty distinguishes between metaphysicians and ironists, in which the
former merely theorize within the tradition of what has preceded, while the ironist
will put the entire tradition into question (78-79). Irony of this magnitude, in
which the foundations of systems are put into question, is typical of modern
philosophizing in which systems of thought are constantly deconstructed.
Sartre’s literary criticism, while deeply philosophical in nature, is nevertheless about the act of writing and about narrative point of view in particular. The relation to Rorty’s definition of irony is nevertheless unmistakable; both are anti-essentialists. For a narrator to confer essences to objects or people is to make the claim that they should no longer be redescribed since the essence has already been given, or the “right” description has been found. But this is to assume what both would find repugnant, namely the notion that everything have been determined in advance and that truths are “out there” only to be discovered with a “truth bearing” point of view or manner of philosophizing. Roquentin eventually decries the writing of history because the act entails explanation of another person, an activity in which he has neither the ability nor the right to engage: “jamais un existant ne peut justifier l’existence d’un autre existant” (222). Because the writing of history entails finding the “true” description, and is therefore a pointless endeavor, he decides to write a novel. Sartre’s own novel contains very little in terms of the actual practice of irony; Sartre is not an ironist in this sense. Sartre’s views on point of view and narration will help in understanding the work of Camus who actually does practice irony in many of it. In L’Étranger, Camus illustrates the fallacies that stem from a reconstruction of narrated events, which has no more a valid claim to greater “objectivity” than Meursault’s “bizarre” or “confusing” narrative it is supposed to correct. The scope of irony is greater, however, because the implicit criticisms expressed through Camus’s irony extend to more than just the act of writing.
An examination of *L’Étranger* is useful to the present study of irony for a number of reasons. I have been arguing throughout that devices used for the production of irony must be made to adapt to the literary and intellectual environment in which the author is writing. *L’Étranger* is unique among the works I have examined because irony is conveyed directly as a result of first-person narration, which conforms to a tendency among twentieth-century authors to use this narrative mode. First-person narration presents many difficulties of its own to an author who wishes to convey irony with any subtlety, and Camus will employ mechanisms that allow for this. In the case of a first-person narrator such as the protagonist, Meursault, because perceptions and speech originate solely within the story from his point of view, it is much more difficult to create the narrative distance required for the production of irony. Narrative distance, as I have discussed, is a metaphorical notion that, in the case of verbal irony, creates the condition that enables a narrator to make objective commentary about the narrative while in the process of narrating. Verbal irony in third-person narrative is much easier to bring off and is often the result of the use of free indirect discourse in which an author is able to present a point of view simultaneously and surreptitiously along with that of a speaking character. Although Camus makes limited use of free indirect discourse, there are moments when he is able to produce verbal irony as a result of the tactic, which I will examine below. More often, narrative distance in *L’Étranger* is based on a subversion of conventions, either social, linguistic, or behavioral, that works to create separation between the protagonist narrator and his readers. In each instance when Meursault
demonstrates his “étrange” the reader will feel compelled to resort to her or his own experiences and familiarity with social norms during the act of interpretation. As a result, verbal irony in *L’Étranger* often results from a double-sensed message that arises from Meursault’s depiction of events that occur in the story, coupled with the reader’s interpretation of them. In order for this view to be tenable, reader interpretation must be considered part of the structure of the narrative. I will discuss this point further on.

Another manner in which irony in *L’Étranger* is particular to the twentieth century is tied to doubts it casts on the adequacy of language and discourse in general, and on public discourse in particular. Certain conclusions formed by the reader in an initial interpretation will later be called into question during the trial that takes place in the second part of the book. Put into Rorty’s formulation, Camus first compels the reader into an act of redescription of what at first appear to be utterly bizarre observations by the narrator, Meursault. However, during the trial, the reader will discover that the redescriptions of Meursault’s experiences that are put into the public vocabulary of the court carry no more weight of “truth” than Meursault’s private and “bizarre” narrative did in the first place. The reader rejects the final vocabulary of those in the judicial system. Moreover, Camus hopes to turn the reader into an ironist by calling into question the moral, psychological, and linguistic principles that went into the court’s rational redescription of Meursault’s initial narrative. By making the assumption that the reader shares in the public discourse of the court, Camus attempts to put the reader’s own vocabulary into question, and put her or him through an exercise of
self-criticism and self-examination. For his part, Camus prompts the reader to reconcile her- or himself with the Absurd.

Another point I would like to make with regard to Meursault is that he is not entirely passive and reluctant to make judgments, as one might be led to believe. He in fact engages in ironizing of his own at several points in the story, often by making commentary about people and events to which he is witness. In so doing, he is able to maintain an ironic distance between a realization of the Absurd world and the attempts by others to impose forcibly and artificially meaning and order. I discuss several examples of this further on.

A few details should be noted about the identity of the reader before I elaborate on her or his role in the production of irony in L’Étranger. Given the variety of terminology that incorporates both reader-response criticism and reception theory–some of it duplicative–a clear distinction between readers and implied readers cannot be made without controversy. In my discussion of L’Étranger, it will be necessary to distinguish between readers and receivers as they relate to the text at different levels of abstraction. Obviously, it is always possible that actual readers will have perhaps drastically different interpretations of a given work. Nevertheless, the production of irony in L’Étranger is derived from the expectation that a certain reader will react in a predictable manner to the actions of Meursault as well as to the manner in which he portrays these actions in his function as narrator. In other words, Camus wrote L’Étranger with a general idea of what kind of reader reaction his protagonist would evoke. This type of reader correlates to the concept of the implied reader, as Wolfgang Iser and others
have described it, that is said to be part of the structure of the text and is
controlled by the author:

It is generally recognized that literary texts take on their own reality by
being read, and this in turn means that texts must already contain certain
conditions of actualization that will allow their meaning to be assembled
in the responsive mind of the recipient. The concept of the implied reader
is therefore a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient
without necessarily defining him . . . (Iser 34)

Iser paid particular attention to how the implied reader is expected to react to
indeterminate aspects of the story that require reader judgment in order to be
understood. From the point of view of the author, however, the substance of
reader judgment is always predictable. For example, in the writing of a detective
story, the author relies on the fact that a reader familiar with the genre will be
inclined to follow all given leads in order to solve the mystery. With this in mind,
the author might include a red herring or something of the like in an attempt to
throw the reader off the track of the actual culprit. Manipulation of reader
judgment taking this form in a typical murder mystery is a calculated effort used
to bring about a surprise ending that is inherent to the structure of works of this
genre, in which the identity of the murderer is almost always unsuspected. Camus
similarly relies on the fact that readers of L’Étranger will measure Meursault’s
observations and actions against social and linguistic conventions that the author
shares with them. By structuring L’Étranger this way, Camus allows for the
intrusion of social and linguistic convention into the text, which the reader will
then put into juxtaposition with Meursault’s observations and behavior. As a
result, the reader of L’Étranger contributes directly to the production of irony.
There is considerable discussion of Camus’s influence on the implied reader in the critical literature on *L’Étranger*. In his article entitled “Meursault et la critique,” Philip Thody argues that all of the events recounted in Part I of *L’Étranger* are purposely left ambiguous with regard to the protagonist’s attitude. This obliges the reader to reconsider the work in order to reassess her or his initial attitude towards him. For example, the reader cannot fail to get the impression that Meursault often exhibits an almost implausible callousness toward other characters. However, Meursault’s cruel behavior in these instances is often attenuated almost immediately by an interior monologue that contains an explanation, or even slight remorse for the action in question. The ambiguity of Meursault’s character, according to Brian Fitch, is calculated in order to plant doubt within the reader about a negative judgment she or he might have made concerning the protagonist. Fitch contends that “Camus a voulu donner . . . au lecteur la possibilité, la liberté même, de se tromper sur le caractère de son personnage, pour ce qu’il se rende compte lors du procès qu’il a été tout près de se ranger du côté de ses juges” (*L’Étranger d’Albert Camus* 139). The reader will, according to Fitch, eventually align himself with the accused, Meursault, once there is a transition in the narrative which allows the reader to, in a sense, physically and emotionally take the place of the protagonist:

À partir du moment où, ayant quitté les deux femmes et se trouvant seul sur la plage. . . . Meursault observe que “le soleil tombait presque aplomb sur la sable et son éclat sur la mer était insoutenable,” le lecteur se trouve, à n’en plus douter, à la place du protagoniste, dans sa tête et dans sa peau. Et il suivra d’une façon continue ses moindres expériences jusqu’au moment du meurtre. L’absence de toute pensée réfléchie au seul profit des sensations ne le gêne plus ici parce que pour la première fois, le lecteur est à même d’apprécier pour lui-même l’effet de la lumière éblouissante du
soleil et de sa chaleur qui abolissent toute pensée et toute émotion. Auparavant, ne pas connaître de Meursault autre chose que ses réactions physiologiques faisait soupçonner qu’il n’avait pas de vie affective, tandis qu’ici le lecteur ne saurait pas s’attendre à autre chose. Et parce que son récit se réduit à l’évocation suivie et directe de ce qu’il éprouve, plus rien ne vient s’interposer entre Meursault et le lecteur qui vit pour la première fois la psychologie du personnage de l’intérieur et ne peut pas ne pas s’identifier à lui à part entière. (Fitch, L’Étranger d’Albert Camus 140-41)

This process of identification foreshadows what will happen to the reader during the trial when she or he once again sees the events from Meursault’s point of view. This in turn will cause the reader to reexamine prior judgments of him.

Taking a similar point of view in his article “Meursault and Narrative,” Gerald Prince shows that the narrative of L’Étranger is constructed in a manner that allows the reader to experience, virtually first hand, how the reconstructive vocabulary used by the examining magistrate and the prosecution fails to capture what actually happened. To demonstrate this conclusion, Prince points out that during the trial, those in the judicial system, and the prosecution in particular, attempt to reconstruct the events of the murder according to a restrictive and purely instrumental logic, rather than relying on the direct, and arguably more truth-bearing testimony of those who experienced them. Those who testify in favor of Meursault, according to Prince, are frustrated by the twisting of their words, and even Meursault feels as though he is excluded from the proceedings:

“En quelque sorte, on avait l’air de traiter cette affaire en dehors de moi. . . . Mon sort se réglait sans qu’on prenne mon avis” (140), and later (perhaps with a little ingénue irony): “Moi, j’écoute et j’entends qu’on me jugeait intelligent. Mais je ne comprenais pas bien comment les qualités d’un homme ordinaire pouvaient devenir des charges écrasantes contre un coupable” (142). The idea that the reader
is compelled to reread, or otherwise make a reassessment of what she or he has
taken away as an initial impression of Meursault, would be *prima facie* evidence
of the existence of multiple vocabularies, each recasting the events that lead to
Meursault’s killing of the Arab in different terms. The crux of the irony in
*L’Étranger* is that none of these vocabularies appears to be sufficient in rendering
a “true” account of what happened. By casting doubt on the existence of any
definitive description of events, Camus has shown himself to be an ironist,
according to Rorty’s definition as there is no final vocabulary with regard to the
case made against Meursault in court. The events leading to the killing of the
Arab on the beach may be told and retold from several points of view.
There remains the question, however, whether Camus *practices* irony in
*L’Étranger*. In other words, does Camus do more than merely describe the
inherently ironic condition of the world? In terms of idiosyncratic irony, an
answer to this question requires discussion of how Camus employs the character
of his protagonist narrator as a device for the production of irony.

The reader is reminded of Meursault’s apparent lack of psychological
depth throughout the narrative. What arises, according to one commentator, is a
“pre-reflective consciousness” that matter-of-factly describes the world, devoid of
any intentionality that would obliterate the distinction between subjective and
objective experience. This renders an image of one who “lacks any human
character,” who is “like a piece of flat colorless glass, allowing us to sense the
warmth of the sun and the smell of brine on the pillow, to crave a cigarette or a
cup of coffee . . . feel the flash of light from the blade of a knife . . . but we get no
feeling for the *significance* of anything” (Soloman 251 author’s emphasis).

Raymond Gay-Crosier argues that the lack of psychological depth exhibited by Meursault “dirige l’optique du lecteur . . . sur les nuances de l’acte discursif, donc sur le déploiement du texte, l’empêchant ainsi de juger le protagoniste à partir d’une logique de comportement normative” (Une étrangeté” 152). Gay-Crosier contends that reader logic doesn’t even come into play until the reader’s sensibility is shocked by the murder, and perhaps more precisely by the four additional shots Meursault empties into the Arab’s corpse. As I have argued, the ambiguity that surrounds Meursault’s previous actions leaves a residual doubt within the reader, who is subsequently unable to make a definitive judgment with regard to his character, even though the catalogue of his “unusual” behavior is by now substantial: his apparent lack of concern for his mother’s death, his refusal of an attractive job promotion to Paris, his odd and perhaps even cruel response to Marie’s question about love and marriage. On the one hand, due to the transparency of the manner in which the events are narrated, Gay-Crosier is correct to assert that there is a tendency to lose oneself in the unfolding story as it is read. The reader can easily take the place of the narrator and experience the events as Meursault does because nothing appears to intervene between them. As he implies, the reader is lulled to sleep by the narrator and thus mimics the persistent somnolence of the protagonist. On the other hand, Meursault’s unconventional reaction to certain events seems to require an explanation that a reader often feels compelled to furnish. Meursault’s behavior frequently requires a comparison to conventional standards of behavior that the reader is able to
provide. There are many memorable exchanges between Meursault and other characters in *L’Étranger* that are particularly illustrative of the reader’s interpretive role. In each case, Meursault shows a tendency to play an entirely different language game than his interlocutors, or to engage in behavior that is well outside of the norm. This fact underscores his “étrangé,” particularly since Meursault does not leave any indication or instruction to the reader as to how to go about the reconstruction of meaning.

Meursault’s responses to his interlocutors are often laconic and thus invite further explanation, given the circumstances in which they are made. For example, the director of the nursing home in Marengo asks Meursault if he wishes to see his mother: “Voulez-vous auparavant voir votre mère une dernière fois?” to which the protagonist responds with a simple and terse “non” (22). Meursault does not offer a reason for his demur, although social convention and the rules of conversation seem to require one. The nature of Meursault’s response indicates either an indifference to his mother’s death or a certain callousness to which the reader will become accustomed over the course of the story. The incongruity the reader senses between observed reactions of the protagonist and what conventional behavior requires creates distance between the protagonist and the reader. In this case, the reader expects Meursault to discuss directly his suffering at the loss of his mother, or to at least to evince something to the director in circumstances such as these that is indicative of grief. He does neither, so the reader is left to dismiss Meursault’s behavior as bizarre, indifferent, callous, or immoral. Important to the structure of verbal irony is the presence of a double-
sensed message. Arguably, Meursault portrays himself in the manner he does because Camus is certain that reader judgment like this one will take place, at least in the case of the implied reader. Given Meursault’s position of ironic detachment, as it is described above, narration of his bizarre behavior provides only the ostensible message, which Camus has wagered the reader will interpret— at least initially. Of course, as it is discovered during the trial when the reader slowly comes to identify with the protagonist, Meursault’s description of his own behavior is seen as not necessarily having been intended to be odd. At one point in the story, Meursault is offered an attractive job promotion which would give him the opportunity to live in Paris and allow him to travel. His boss adds some enticement to the offer, saying, “Vous êtes jeune, et il me semble que c’est une vie qui doit vous plaire” (63). Meursault’s response in the following exchange with his boss is enigmatic and ambiguous, and goes beyond simply declining the offer:

J’ai dit que oui mais que dans le fond cela m’était égal. Il m’a demandé alors si je n’étais pas intéressé par un changement de vie. J’ai répondu qu’on ne changeait jamais de vie, qu’en tout cas, toutes se valaient et que la mienne ici ne me déplaisait pas du tout. (63-64)

The reader is most likely struck initially by the mere refusal of such an attractive offer, which is echoed in the passage by Meursault’s boss whose question, since it is put in the form of a negative, contains the presumption that anyone would be interested in such a change of lifestyle. But there is more to this passage that puts Meursault at odds with conventional behavior than the refusal of a job promotion. There is ambiguity in Meursault’s response to his boss that stems from the different meanings that each intends of “changement de vie.” Clearly, Meursault’s
boss is referring to more superficial aspects that a change in lifestyle, moving from Algiers to Paris, would offer a man entering the prime years of his life, who would be able to enjoy the excitement of a large metropolitan center. His offer is meant to have a general appeal that, undoubtedly, the reader shares to a certain extent. One knows enough about Meursault at this point of the story to conclude that he is familiar with the differences between a life in Algiers and one in Paris. The fact that he responds by saying that “it doesn’t matter to him (if he were to relocate),” and that “one would be the same as the other,” indicates that he is not using the same criteria that his boss used when making the comparison of life in the two cities. Meursault’s observation that “on ne change jamais de vie” is on a deeper philosophical plane, indicating, perhaps, that a mere change of environment does not suffice to improve one’s life to any significant degree. The fact that Meursault’s boss responds in the manner in which he does—“[il] m’a dit que je répondais à côté, que je n’avais pas d’ambition et que cela était désastreux dans les affaires” (64)—demonstrates that he does not grasp the incongruity of the two points of view present in the conversation, despite his slight protestation that Meursault never gives a straight answer. If he were aware of the incongruity, one would think that he would at least acknowledge the philosophical undertones in Meursault’s answer. But he does not, and there is no reason why he should, since reference to any set of maxims of professional decorum would certainly render Meursault’s philosophical statement inappropriate in the context of the conversation. Thus, Meursault has distanced himself from the reader in each interpretation. On one level, the reader finds it odd that he has turned down a job
that a typical person, including the reader her- or himself, would take. At another level, the reader sees that Meursault has engaged in a manner of speaking that is not appropriate for the circumstances. In either case, once again the reader has been induced to reject Meursault’s point of view and judge him from the point of view of conventional wisdom, thus making her- or himself the victim of irony.

Meursault shows that his apparent detachment from the world around him can have an almost cruel effect. At one moment in the story, Marie asks him what he thinks about their relationship and the prospect of marriage:

Marie est venue me chercher et m’a demandé si je voulais me marier avec elle. J’ai dit que cela m’était égal et que nous pourrions le faire si elle le voulait. Elle a voulu savoir alors si je l’aimais. J’ai répondu comme je l’avais déjà fait une fois, que cela ne signifiait rien mais que sans doute je ne l’aimais pas. “Pourquoi m’épouser alors?” a-t-elle dit. Je lui ai expliqué que cela n’avait aucune importance et que si elle le désirait, nous pouvions nous marier. D’ailleurs, c’était elle qui le demandait et moi je me contentais de dire oui. Elle a observé alors que le mariage était une chose grave. J’ai répondu: “Non.” Elle s’est tue un moment et elle m’a regardé en silence. Puis elle a parlé. Elle voulait simplement savoir si je m’aimait et moi, je ne pouvais rien savoir sur ce point. Après un autre moment de silence, elle a murmuré que j’étais bizarre, qu’elle m’aimait sans doute à cause de cela mais que peut-être un jour je la dégouterais pour les mêmes raisons. (64-65)

Fitch concludes that this exchange is more disturbing to the reader than to the character, Marie. He states, “[i]ndeed, Marie’s conclusion that her lover is ‘bizarre’ may well seem to be a rather generous evaluation of his attitude!” (The Narcissistic Text 57). Meursault’s response, in this instance, makes little sense, logically speaking. First, he asserts that the concept of love has no meaning to him, but then adds nevertheless that, without a doubt, he doesn’t love her. This should come as a shock to the reader who has seen evidence that the protagonist
has some sympathy and compassion for others. For example, he tries to comfort
Salamano over the loss of his dog. This presents an even more striking example to
the reader of how Meursault’s responses do not conform to social and
conversational rules, again underscoring the distance between the protagonist and
the reader’s expectations based on her or his own experiences. It should be noted
that this particular episode among all the others is thought by some to cause a
definitive split between the reader and Meursault. However, Robert Champigny
argues that within the diegesis, Meursault lives an ordinary life in many respects,
and that he is bizarre only in the eyes of the reader (13-39). For example,
Meursault has friendly associations at work, he is well liked Chez Célèste, he
engages in small talk with workers at the nursing home, and is not too strange or
aloof to prevent Marie from falling in love with him. At times he expresses a
human regret for his behavior toward others. Generally, he appears content with
the life he has. The question remains about why it is the reader alone who holds a
negative opinion of Meursault. Champigny argues that this is caused not by what
Meursault might say to an interlocutor, but by the manner in which he says it.
Missing, says Champigny, are “des attitudes de l’autobiographie . . . [le lecteur]
s’attend à l’élimination des détails triviaux, il s’attend à des confiances, à un
certain genre d’analyses, de reflexions, d’interprétations, d’explications, voire de
jugements” (27). In other words, the reader expects a typical biography that
portrays the essence of a person based on analyses and interpretation of her or his
life, analyses that arise from retrospective judgment. As the reader tries to create
the missing essence by filling in details, she or he becomes a victim of irony.
Fitch argues that the purpose of episodes like the ones I have just examined is to allow the reader to form initial impressions about the protagonist that will only be undone later on, during the trial “[w]hat the reader of the trial scene is confronted with when the prosecution gives its reading of Meursault’s character is basically his own previous instinctive reaction to the protagonist” (The Narcissistic Text 59). This is, again, part of what Fitch labels the “reconstruction rationnelle” that the trial is said to exhibit. There is of course no irony that arises from the simple fact that the reader is unable to understand Meursault in a profound sense, and that he remains much of an enigma. What is true is that the reader, as well as those characters who have dealt with Meursault’s sometimes bizarre interpersonal behavior within the diegesis, may have rendered definitive judgments about the character based on a final vocabulary that belongs to their own belief system. In other words, they have relied on conventional models of social norms and discourse to cast their opinions in all aspects of life and are now applying them to a character in a novel. In terms of irony, once these conclusions formed, they are put to the test and ultimately invalidated during the trial.

The second part of L’Étranger “consiste en une reconstruction rationnelle ‘a posteriori’” which, according to Brian Fitch “ne correspond pas à la réalité que [Meursault] a vécue à partir du moment où il a reçu la nouvelle de la mort de sa mère” (L’Étranger d’Albert Camus 96). Of course, much of the rational reconstruction occurs during the trial when Meursault’s solipsistic narrative is recast into a public discourse and thus altered. This recasting satisfies a need of
human nature, according to Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, where there exists, in one’s confrontation with the universe, “[une] exigence de familiarité, [un] appétit de clarté” (qtd. in Fitch *L’Étranger d’Albert Camus* 94). The judge and jury, therefore, “préfèrent une interprétation des événements qui soit vraisemblable, mais fausse . . .” (Fitch, “Narrateur et narration” 13). The juxtaposition of Meursault’s private language with the public discourse of the trial leads to considerable irony, as I shall discuss momentarily.

The intervention of public discourse into the trial appears to come at the expense of Meursault’s point of view as the protagonist is now put in the position of reporting what others are saying about him. This is brought up several times by the protagonist narrator during the course of the court proceedings: “[m]ême sur un banc d’accusé, il est toujours intéressant d’entendre parler de soi,” (139) and he later adds that he finds one thing particularly annoying: whenever he tries to intervene in his own behalf, he is advised not to. He feels excluded: “[e]n quelque sorte, on avait l’air de traiter cette affaire en dehors de moi . . . Mon sort se réglait sans qu’on prenne mon avis” (140). Meursault’s lawyer even employs the first-person “je” when speaking about his client. This exclusion denies Meursault any participation in the reinterpretation of the events that he narrated in the first part of the novel. It would appear as though others have wrested the role of narrator away from Meursault. But appearances can be deceiving.

There is perhaps a no more poignant comparison of the contrasting points of view between the two parts of the novel than the moment when Meursault is asked by the judge about his motive for shooting the Arab. Meursault is for once
allowed to speak in his own behalf, if only for a moment, and declares in front of the court that it was the sun that made him commit the crime. His memorable response, as one knows, is met with laughter. Meursault’s answer to the judge’s question is indeed bizarre at face value, so the laughter comes as no surprise to the reader. The laughter represents a judgment about Meursault, something the reader did not encounter in the first part of the book while she or he was forming an impression of the protagonist. But judgment begins to move in both directions as there is an interesting turn of events that takes place during the trial. Meursault is made to appear more normal as the result of judgments he makes about others. I have noted the reflections he makes about his exclusion from the events of the trial. His lawyer, for example, appears ridiculous to him, and not as gifted as the prosecutor. These reflections, offered to the reader, are part of the character development of Meursault and should be considered to have been done by design. The reader might very well be mistaken to characterize Meursault as removed entirely from “normal” behavior, and this now has bearing on his reliability as a narrator, as he finally begins to make judgments about the events that surround him. If the reader is in agreement with Meursault, she or he is likely to find him more trustworthy and accept the conclusions he draws. In light of the fact that the reader no longer sees Meursault as completely withdrawn, the reader might take another look at her or his initial impression of the apparent ridiculousness of Meursault’s evocation of the sun as his motivation for killing the Arab.

For those in the courtroom, it is difficult to deny the fact that Meursault’s answer is truly unexpected and ridiculous, and by all rights, anyone present is
justified in laughing upon hearing it. Meursault’s response perhaps represents a
sort of dénouement in a series of bizarre and strange reactions to events he has
exhibited throughout the story. Nevertheless, the reader who has read about
Meursault’s experiences in the first part of the book knows that his explanation is
not altogether far-fetched; the reader is well-aware that the protagonist was
disoriented to a considerable degree by a combination of his sleepiness and the
sun’s brightness and heat. An attentive reader will have also noticed the manner in
which Meursault gave his answer to the court: “J’ai dit rapidement, en mêlant un
peu les mots . . . que c’était à cause du soleil” (146 my emphasis). The rapidity
and directness of Meursault’s response underscores the fact that the courtroom
rhetoric is at odds with his inclination for parsimony with words, evidenced by
this example, and all of the first part of L’Étranger. The possibility that Meursault
is telling the truth, at least as he sees it, introduces the possibility that the laughter
in the courtroom is itself the target of Camus’s irony.

One of the ways in which Camus produces irony in L’Étranger comes
from his having created the illusion that Meursault is no longer the narrator during
the trial. In his “Aspects de l’emploi du discours indirect libre dans L’Étranger,”
Fitch has noted that Meursault maintains control of the narration throughout all of
his involvement with the judicial system, including the court proceedings when he
appears to be left out. It is only within the diegesis that the lawyers are speaking
for Meursault, but it is the protagonist who continues to report what the
examining magistrate and the lawyers are saying. Fitch argues that when
Meursault speaks for these court officials with regard to his own case, he makes a
mockery of the language they use by recasting their words from his own point of view, creating a rhetorical echo in the form of free indirect discourse (82-83). For example, free indirect discourse is used to produce irony in the following episode, taken from Meursault’s interview with the examining magistrate after his arrest: “Il m’a dit . . . que tous les hommes croyaient en Dieu, même ceux qui se détournent de son visage. C’était là sa conviction et, s’il devait jamais en douter, sa vie n’aurait plus de sens. ‘Voulez-vous,’ s’est-il exclamé, ‘que ma vie n’ait pas de sens?’” (99). All three modes of reporting speech are present in this single example. The passage begins with a statement in indirect discourse, the second sentence is in free indirect discourse, which is repeated in the last sentence in direct discourse. Fitch has remarked that the instantiation of the similar thoughts in consecutive sentences, though in different modes of narration, serves to juxtapose them in the reader’s mind. There is ambiguity, he says, in the sentence in free indirect discourse that results from the following possible interpretations: “[o]n dirait que les paroles du juge font écho à celles du narrateur, tandis qu’en fait, elles font écho aux siennes propres, écho rhétorique, pour ainsi dire” (“Aspects de l’emploi ...” 86). Certainly, Meursault and the magistrate do not agree about religion, but this fact alone is not sufficient to produce irony. Just as in examples of Flaubert’s use of free indirect discourse I discussed earlier, we do not know how irony is produced in this instance without knowing the ironic intention of the author relayed through the narrator. In this case, in order to determine what is essentially ironic, one must focus on the communicative function of the exhortation made by the examining magistrate. If his words are
taken at face value, they are meant to be purely instrumental to convince
Meursault of something. Yet, given the metaphysical stance of the narrator that he
has demonstrated to this point of the story, the words ring hollow and have the
opposite effect of what was intended. Hence, from Meursault’s point of view,
they can’t be considered as being more than rhetorical flourish, which undermines
the illocutionary intent of the magistrate. Moreover, it is easy for the reader to
have the impression that the magistrate is desperate during this exchange. No
doubt he offers his views on religion to Meursault as a path to redemption, and
perhaps even a way to help clear himself of the crime, but the manner in which
the magistrate phrases his plea makes it look as though he is the one in need.
Specifically, if Meursault continues to turn away from God, it appears from this
exchange as though the magistrate’s beliefs are somehow put into jeopardy. He
has conferred the power to render his own life meaningless to Meursault with the
question “voulez-vous que ma vie n’ait pas de sens.” That Meursault in his role as
narrator is capable of verbal irony such as this indicates that he is not as detached
from the proceedings as appearances seem to suggest. Moreover, irony of this
kind requires participation from the reader, the latter being an accomplice to the
irony. This represents a realignment of allegiances. In the first part, the reader was
antagonistic to Meursault’s point of view. Now, the reader in the role as
accomplice has come around to seeing things from the perspective of the
protagonist.

Finally, one way to understand how irony is produced during the trial is to
distinguish between the implied reader of L’Étranger, and intradiegetic the
narratees of the court’s proceedings, for example the members of the jury. Both receive a description of Meursault and the murder he is said to have committed as it is cast into the reconstructive vocabulary of the court, but only the reader hears the narrative in the form of irony. The court does not appear to be at all interested in the actual murder, as the prosecution is fixated on Meursault’s apparently corrupt behavior in the period just prior to the killing. This behavior has been catalogued and discussed often enough: his showing no emotion at his mother’s funeral; his having begun a relationship with Marie the day following his mother’s burial; his having gone to a comedy film with her that evening. These facts, as they are summed up by the prosecutor, are recounted in Meursault’s narration, and thus filtered through his point of view. Unlike the jury in the diegesis who reacts to the instrumental value the words are meant to have, the reader receives the prosecutor’s words as Meursault is reflecting on them, quite possibly with the judgment that the arguments made against him do not adequately describe what lead to the killing. For example, Meursault takes up the events as Marie has just finished her testimony, containing accounts of their liaison, which is quite damning to him only because of its timing:

Le silence était complet dans la salle quand elle a eu fini. Le procureur s’est alors levé, très grave et d’une voix que j’ai trouvée vraiment émue, le doigt tendu vers moi, il a articulé lentement: “messieurs les jurés, le lendemain de la mort de sa mère, cet homme prenait des bains, commençait une liaison irrégulière, et allait rire devant un film comique. je n’ai rien plus à vous dire.” (134)

One can only interpret the moments of silence as a statement to indicate that “nothing more needs to be said,” and that the evidence as it has been presented, speaks for itself. The silence of the prosecutor indicates that the worldview he has
taken is “true” and that his characterization of Meursault is unassailable, and thus he has given a final version of the events. It is noteworthy that it is Marie who ultimately breaks the silence with her sobbing, as she is the only character within the diegesis (except Meursault, obviously) who realizes that the events could simply be told differently, and thus their meaning altered. Marie protests that she is being misunderstood with regard to her testimony; “[elle] a dit que ce n’était pas cela, qu’il y avait une autre chose, qu’on la forçait à dire le contraire de ce qu’elle pensait” (134). In other words, Marie implicitly understands that events are always able to be redescribed.

Like Sartre, Camus exposes the fallacy of a privileged point of view that posits a unity between language and the world it describes. The rational reconstruction of Meursault’s experiences during the trial fails to capture the essence of what happened. The message portrayed by the irony of Meursault’s trial one must resist an exhaustive and final interpretation of events in the world. But what alternative does Camus present? One might be tempted toward nihilism or paganism as a result of Meursault’s experiences. As I have argued, Camus’s irony is one that allows us to maintain a healthy and ironic distance between the realization of the Absurd and the attempts by others to impose a false metaphysical or moral order to human events. Camus’s irony offers the reader a way to cope with what were at the time the social and philosophical issues confronting his readers.

1 In fact, Rorty claims that divisions between disciplines are more or less accidental, and those who maintain that these distinctions should persist do so only out of habit. Ironists, on the other hand, invite such changes. Rorty discusses the matter in his Contingency, solidarity, and irony.
Conclusion

The sample of works containing irony I have examined, while relatively small, is nevertheless extensive enough to suggest that forms of irony are often dependent on variable factors determined by the social, intellectual, and literary climate of the age in which an author is writing. This study is obviously not inclusive of all types of irony, nor does its scope extend over the entirety of its use. It is also important to note that this rule does not apply universally; some types of irony, such as sarcasm, appear to be timeless and can be found in texts dating as far back as the ancient Greeks. If one establishes that irony may change over time, there is always a tendency to inquire about the direction or trajectory of this evolution. Of course one could no more predict the changes that will occur in irony than those that will occur in society in general. I do not propose to make a predictive theory of irony, only to suggest that a theorist should examine the environment in which an example of irony is created, as the two are inextricably linked. This task is complicated by the fact that current criticism does not tend to place the author in a position of authority in the interpretation of her or his work. Criticism today tends to place the reader’s interpretation on a level equal to or lesser than authorial intent. This presents a particularly difficult problem for the study of irony as many theories define the concept on the basis of intention.

Irony in the present time seems to have a bad name among certain groups
of people, as the notion has been opposed to terms like “dignity” and “commitment.”¹⁰ After the tragic events of September 2001, in particular, some social critics have been arguing for a suspension of what they characterize as a pervasive irony that has gripped the culture making it detached and cynical. These traits do not make our society any better, they claim. In the conclusion of The Compass of Irony, Muecke laments those who come out against irony. Among these are “the proponents and adherents of systems,” “hard-headed realists,” and “panacea-mongering technologists” who “find an enemy in the ironist and accuse him of flippancy, nihilism, or sitting on the fence” (247). I agree with Muecke, who considers irony as important moral activity performing an important function in society, prompting us to keep an open mind and being inquisitive. Irony is now and always has been a way of speaking truth to power.

Works Cited


