

The End of Irony or the Irony of Ends

Part I - The End of Irony or the End of History

The Announcement

Within days of the Sept 11th events, Graydon Carter, editor of the upscale periodical *Vanity Fair* pronounced, “It’s the end of the age of irony.”¹ Thereby he set the tone for a discussion that would continue in the following weeks attempting to articulate what was fundamentally new in the post Sept 11 era. I have to admit that my own reactions following the Sept 11 tragedy were somewhat different. Having just returned from a European vacation, I spied the emptiness of the New York landscape as my plane touched down. There was a sense of cognitive dissonance - the familiar was gone and there seemed to be nothing at all in its place. Yet nowhere did I detect anything resembling the End of Irony.

Any discussion about irony inevitably seems to trip over the definition of the subject, for the notion of “irony” is as slippery as it is omnipresent. The word itself is derived from the ancient Greek *eirōn*, referring to a dissembler, or a wily user of understatement in a comedy. From its origins in comedy it has become a widely used literary device by which the literal meaning of a statement is different from or even the opposite of its intended meaning. The purpose of employing irony in drama and literature is to provoke the audience to reflect upon the naiveté, hypocrisy or mendacity of the characters. In more recent years the use of irony has stepped out of the province of literature and has been expanded to describe the human condition as a whole. The sheer variety of modes of the human condition that can be described as ironic makes it difficult to pin down what is meant by the concept. Compounding the difficulty of any discussion is that irony is easily confused with sarcasm, cynicism, parody and other rhetorical devices.

Fortunately, it is not necessary to delve in to the deeper meanings of “irony” in order to deconstruct the “End of Irony” thesis. Whatever else Carter may have intended to say, it is clear enough that in his mind the Sept 11 events had stripped away the veil of illusion from the cultural scene. There was no longer any room for self-doubts and recriminations, particularly about the superiority of our way of life. Light-minded chatter and playfulness with cherished values were no longer a legitimate part of the cultural agenda. And anyone who did not instinctively understand this and was reluctant to “get with the program” however that is defined, was either in the best case irrelevant or in the worst cases a traitor.

The subtext behind Carter’s use of “irony” is that if one is ironic, one cannot be “sincere”. This debased usage of “irony” became apparent when the “The End of the Age of Irony” was equated with the advent of a new “Age of Earnestness” in the columns

¹ Quoted by Seth Mnookin, “In Disaster’s Aftermath, Once-Cocky Media Culture Disses the Age of Irony”, *Inside.com*, Sept. 18, 2001.

The End of Irony or the Irony of Ends

of the mainstream press. A further debasement of the discussion announced itself when “earnestness” became equated with unthinking “patriotism”. This sentiment was explicitly stated by one Bruce Tinsley, author of the right wing comic strip “Mallard Fillmore”, when he said that what happened on Sept 11 was “not so much the death of an age of irony as the appearance of a new respect for patriotism and religion”. As if to illustrate Tinsley’s point, Graydon Carter’s magazine, *Vanity Fair*, recently departed from its usual celebrity cover photo spread in order to feature George W. Bush and key members of his war cabinet in a suitably earnest pose.

Despite its unpromising beginnings, one could hold out some hope that the dynamics of a discussion over a supposed “end of irony” might give rise to a critical examination of our culture whose implications may ultimately prove salutary. However, it soon became clear that any such expectation involved an inflated notion of the reflective capacity of the American intelligentsia. Conversely, we had also underestimated the degree to which the empty-headed bulldogs of the punditocracy would dominate any such discussion. There were nonetheless a few refreshing takes on Carter’s pronouncements. One piece by Laurel Wellman of the *San Francisco Chronicle* was particularly good. Wellman wrote,

“Naturally, it came as a blow to learn I was soon to be unemployed. I mean when you’ve trained your whole life to work as an ironist, only to learn that irony is suddenly no longer in demand – well, it’s a tough break.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have dropped out of law school.”²

Wellman’s chagrin, and dare I say tone of irony, was not however the dominant attitude in the post Sept 11 days. Far more representative was a piece by Roger Rosenblatt in *Time Magazine*. He picks up Carter’s theme and literally runs with it, writing, “One good thing could come from this horror: It could spell the end of the age of irony.” Rosenblatt is in fact prepared to drink a glass of champagne to the demise of his nemesis, as he continues his tirade with the following *bon mot*:

“For 30 years – roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright – the good folks in charge of America’s intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. With a giggle and a smirk, our chattering classes – our columnists and pop culture makers – declared that detachment and personal whimsy were the necessary tools for an oh – so – cool life.”³

With Rosenblatt’s piece we witness the identification of Carter’s intemperate remarks with the full-blown political and cultural ethos of right-wing Republicanism. One needn’t even scratch the surface of Rosenblatt’s remarks to uncover the cultural agenda that blames all evils on the sins of a “permissive” society.

Wellman, in the article previously cited has an apt reply to Rosenblatt,

² Laurel Wellman, “Ironically Speaking It’s All Over”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 25, 2001.

³ Roger Rosenblatt, “The Age of Irony Comes to an End”, *Time Magazine*, Sept 24, 2001.

The End of Irony or the Irony of Ends

“Irony though, has a long and honorable history as a rhetorical device. It isn’t, as its critics are taking this opportunity to claim, the nihilistic acceptance of the worst of human nature, the universal “ Whatever”. More often, it’s a rational response to consumer culture; all but the most credulous of us, once exposed to advertising, are budding ironists. And not so coincidentally, the ability to laugh at the difference between what we’re told and what we experience means we have to recognize that difference – in other words – think critically.”

This thoughtful piece by Wellman represented a distinct and dwindling minority of the public discourse. The center of gravity of this discussion was going very much in the opposite direction. Instead of informed criticism, cogitation over the end of irony quickly turned into a Manichean consideration of the struggle of good over evil. The bellicosity and stupidity of the latest twist in the discussion was illustrated by a piece in the Houston Chronicle:

“Absolute evil.

Not since the Nazi holocaust of World War II has the idea been so much on the public record.

Good.

Evil exists. It has an impact on the world.”

It is not enough however to identify good and evil. For polemical purposes, evil must be connected with what Roger Rosenblatt called “the chattering classes”. Nor do we have to wait long for this part of the argument:

“Our smug and utterly false sense of sophistication has helped to promote this devil’s work. The voice of sophistication within so many of us whispers that, to give credence to the notion of absolute evil is to allow superstition to intrude on our oh-so-rational modernity. Evil is hocus-pocus, the stuff of primitive folks around a campfire or the sermons of fire and-brimstone preachers. It isn’t a fit subject for smart, informed people to ponder, much less to discuss.”

The piece ends with the following prescription for how we can meet this crisis:

“The obligation is the clear one to face this evil head on. Absolute, unyielding force – the kind the Bush Administration and its coalition partners have promised – is the appropriate response to absolute evil.”⁴

By this time it is clear that we have traveled a long way from Graydon Carter’s proclamation of the end of irony. We have gone from the genteel pages of the super-sophisticated New York venue of Vanity Fair, to the war drums of the most backward voices emanating from what used to be the old South. But the atavistic and bloodthirsty call for absolute force is already contained in embryo in the Vanity Fair piece. And in the heated climate of post Sept 11 it did not take long for the ugliest voices to dominate the chorus. The Houston Chronicle piece also illustrates the parasitical relations that exist

⁴ David Langworthy, The Houston Chronicle, Oct. 15, 2001.

among these “chattering classes”. Carter begins the recitation, then Roger Rosenblatt, who clearly has no ideas of his own, echoes it while inserting it in a more consciously political direction, only to find himself outdone by the soprano of the choir, the semi-literate ravings of the Houston Chronicle. Is it any coincidence that Rosenblatt’s caricature of a liberal culture as an “oh – so – cool life” is aped by the Houston Chronicle’s depiction of an “oh-so-rational modernity”, right down to the faux hyphenation?

It was obvious that this discussion had hit rock bottom with nowhere else to go. These were simply not reflective times nor were the participants reflective people. But that was very much the point of proclaiming the End of Irony, was it not?

At this point, our reader may well ask, “Aren't the post-9.11 conservative forces just doing what they always do? They are using the attack as an excuse for eroding civil liberties, increasing the power of the surveillance state, re-arming, and for pressing on with their global dominance. All this irony stuff is just the conservative chattering classes trying to find some new ideological justification for a very old game? Why take them so seriously?”

I beg the indulgence of the reader while I try to demonstrate that beneath all the bombast, a significant turning point has taken place, one that deserves some serious thought. For despite its paucity of ideas, the “end of irony” exchange is motivated by profound historical forces of which the participants themselves have only the vaguest glimmer.

The Precedents

To gain some insight into the significance of this discussion, we should place it in the context of recent historical precedents. The proclamation of an “end” is by no means a completely new phenomenon in recent history. In fact, Theodore Adorno, who said, in the aftermath of the Second World War, that after Auschwitz, “it was no longer possible to write poetry,” prefigured the current intellectual discourse. Whatever point Adorno was trying to make was quickly overshadowed by the appropriation of his statement in the service of a polemic against modernity. Yet Adorno’s original formulation, far from an attempt to limit critical thought, was a challenge to rethink the assumptions of the Enlightenment, particularly the idea that progress works its way through the historical process. The more recent appropriation of Adorno’s thought however, has had a very different intent. Postmodernists have often cited Adorno’s view of Auschwitz to lend credence to their claim that a rational understanding of history - a “meta-narrative” – is no longer possible. Auschwitz and Adorno’s epigram are endlessly cited as if all questions about the Enlightenment and the possibility of progress have already been settled. The “end of poetry” in this usage serves as a rhetorical device to cut off critical thought. In this sense, there is a close connection with the current proclamation of the “end of irony” and the earlier discussions prompted by Adorno.

One can make similar points about other proclamations of some kind of “end”. In the decades since Adorno’s statement was made, we have witnessed “The End of Ideology”,

“The End of Modernism”, “The End of Art”, “The End of Politics”, “The End of the Nation State”, “The End of Liberalism”, and many lesser “ends.” Assertions are made with a dizzying regularity and for the most part are forgotten with the same degree of regularity. Who now remembers the torrent of words spilled over Daniel Bell’s thesis of “The End of Ideology”? Yet among all these “ends”, one discussion stands out both for the intellectual tumult it caused and its staying power. This was the so-called “End of History” discussion engendered by Francis Fukuyama in 1989. Turning to this discussion of a dozen years hence could shed some light on our present intellectual climate.

Enter Fukuyama and the End of History

The “End of History” debate was a direct reaction to great historical events. That discussion came on the heels of the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It was launched in an article by Francis Fukuyama in the Summer 1989 issue of the conservative periodical, *National Interest*. The title of the article was, appropriately enough, “The End of History?”

Although Fukuyama gets the credit for introducing this theme within this milieu, it was not exactly a new topic. For up till then, “the end of history” had been an occasional item of discussion among scholars of the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. This rather exclusive fraternity of academics was more than a little bemused when one of their occasional seminar topics began making the news among beltway pundits. Even more startling, in prefacing Fukuyama’s inaugural article, the editor of *National Interest*, Irving Kristol, went so far as to provide an introduction of the 19th century German philosopher to his audience of Washington insiders:

“I am delighted to welcome G. W. F. Hegel to Washington. He will certainly help raise the intellectual level of the place... Hegel is unquestionably a genius – along with Kant, the greatest philosopher of modernity. In a sense all of us have to decide whether we are pro-Hegel or contra, even if we have never read him, as many of us have.”⁵

The spectacle of introducing Hegel to the political culture of modern Washington is almost as strange as the injunction to make a decision about his works despite having never read them. Adding to the drama is the notion that much depends on the decision, as if Hegel had announced his candidacy for the Presidency.

An examination of what Fukuyama actually wrote will however dampen the enthusiasm for all things Hegelian. For it turns out upon closer examination that the inspirer of Fukuyama is not Hegel at all. This point will become clearer as we delve into the enigma of the “End of History”.

Fukuyama prefaces his essay with some observations about how history can be judged. For him, and in this respect he cannot be faulted, history is not merely a series of random

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, *National Interest* 16, Summer 1989.

events, but is a coherent and comprehensible process. Furthermore, Fukuyama maintains that progress is not just an idea but is a demonstrable fact immanent in history. Following from these preliminary considerations, Fukuyama proclaims his essential insight:

“What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such. The end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”⁶

From this overarching observation Fukuyama follows with several concrete predictions.

1. The story of human history is the story of our ideological evolution. That evolution culminates with liberal democracy, what he calls “the Western idea.”
2. History ceases because “the basic principles of the liberal democratic state (the ideals of the French and American Revolution) cannot be improved upon.”
3. There are no contradictions in human life that cannot be resolved in the context of the liberal democratic state.
4. All important nations will either turn out to be liberal democracies, or, failing that, at least abandon their pretensions to represent any alternative or higher form of human society.

Fukuyama brings his piece to a conclusions with the following account of the significance of the triumph of liberal democracy:

“The remnants of absolutism, then bolshevism and fascism, and finally an updated Marxism that threatened to lead to the ultimate apocalypse of nuclear war have all been defeated. The twentieth century has turned out to lead neither to “the end of ideology” a popular theory of the 1950’s proposed by Daniel Bell, nor did it lead to the convergence between capitalism and socialism – but to an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism”⁷

Fukuyama’s seminal essay became the prototypical exhibit of the spirit of triumphal capitalism that was in the air in 1989 as the Berlin Wall was being dismantled. The prevailing order of world capitalism appeared to have overcome all challenges. The Soviet Union would not be officially dissolved for another two years but was by then already acting as a junior partner of American interests in international affairs and was well along the path of the plunder of state industry by the new class of gangster capitalists.

It is hardly necessary to spend a great deal of time refuting Fukuyama’s arguments. Suffice it say that insofar as there is any logic behind them, they consist of a selective and dishonest account of recent history and its supposed “trends” combined with what is essentially a circular argument. The argument, when distilled to its essentials, goes something like this: We know we have reached the end of history because no form of

⁶ Fukuyama, “The End of History?”

⁷ Fukuyama, “The End of History?”

The End of Irony or the Irony of Ends

social organization is possible that is superior to the type of global capitalism that we have attained. How do we know then that an alternative form of social organization is not possible? Essentially because we have reached the end of the historical process and what we are left with at the end is capitalism.

There is a subsidiary argument that states that capitalism has beaten back all challenges to its rule. The rupture in the capitalist domination of the planet created by the Russian Revolution has finally been undone. Yet this tells us nothing at all about why future challenges to capitalist rule will not be successful. Furthermore, it took just a few years for history itself to expose Fukuyama's Pollyannaish prophecies. What is left of the liberal-democratic state that Fukuyama saw as universally triumphant? Where such states exist, they have become increasingly illiberal and undemocratic. Examples of communalism and fratricide have multiplied exponentially in the past decade. Finally, instead of living in a world characterized by a greater degree of security and peace, it is obvious that particularly since Sept 11, we live in a world far more dangerous and far more prone to elemental discharges of violence than at any time in history.

In 1989 Fukuyama and his colleagues were too busy celebrating to notice the signs of impending chaos. Yet amid all the revelry, Fukuyama introduced a discordant note, for his vision of the triumph of liberal democracy had a distinctly consumerist flavor to it. He invoked "the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands" as the paradigm for the problem solving ability of capitalism. It is ultimately this distinctly unheroic mastery of instrumental rationality that is the driving force behind the penetration and global reach of capitalism. In this sense, Fukuyama's thesis not only gave voice to the triumph of capitalism at the end of the Cold War, but anticipated the celebratory hosannas to a capitalist dominated globalization that have become the common fare of today's journalistic elite. Typical of this genre was Thomas Friedman's recent book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. The ascendancy of Disneyland and McDonalds as symbols of globalization and American domination are in their own way an appropriate coda for the paucity of ideals in Fukuyama's version of "The End of History". We suspect that we are a long way from Hegel when the ideals of the bourgeois revolution, "liberty, equality and fraternity" have given way to a jaded consumer culture.

Perhaps because he recognizes this incongruity, Fukuyama injects an odd note of despair at the end of his piece. He writes that,

"The end of history will be a very sad time."

Instead of Hegel's vision of a triumph of freedom and mutual recognition, life will consist of an endless series of uninspiring economic calculations.

"In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history."⁸

⁸ Fukuyama, "The End of History?"

This air of pessimism alienated some of the conservative readership of *National Interest*. They had after all been under the impression that they were just invited to a party celebrating the new millennium, only to find the host wearing the mask of tragedy. Fukuyama's piece soon inspired a backlash among some conservative critics. More than one person noted that Fukuyama's vision had more in common with the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche than that of Hegel. These observations were correct, for Fukuyama's despairing note at the end of his article evoked a metaphor found in Nietzsche, that of the "last man".

Nietzsche Encounters the Last Man

Who is "the last man" and why do we find him at the end of history? To answer this question it is necessary that we take a brief survey of the ideas of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche was a life-long critic of Western liberal democracy. He thought that the highest forms of human existence were to be found in Ancient Greece prior to the advent of Socrates. Nietzsche held on to an idealized version of Greece in the heroic age, one that was not uncommon among German intellectuals in the 19th century. According to this depiction of Ancient Greece, men believed in themselves unconditionally and lived life as an endless challenge. They instinctively cultivated social virtues, of which those associated with the warrior, bravery and the spirit of self-sacrifice, were deemed the most worthwhile. Greek society revolved around heroes and the poets who celebrated their deeds.

In Nietzsche's vision, this idyllic society was irrevocably disturbed with the coming of Socrates. For Nietzsche, Socrates becomes a symbol for a principle of self-doubt that enters Greek culture and eventually undermines it from within. Nietzsche's Socrates embodied the very opposite of the virtues of the warrior. He did not challenge the warrior ethos on the field of battle. He did not attempt to match his courage with that of his enemies. Rather Socrates adopted the stance of professing weakness and ignorance. In this way, Socrates disarmed his opponents and turned his weakness into a source of strength. Thus, when Socrates professed to be ignorant, he was assured that he was closer to wisdom than the naively non-reflective person who thinks he knows something. Socrates at least knew that he didn't have that sure knowledge of which the non-reflective person was completely ignorant. The strategy adopted by Socrates has been labeled "Socratic Irony". It suggests one seminal meaning of irony – namely that we step back from our spontaneously held beliefs and question their justification. Nietzsche called the Socratic stance "slave morality" because it seemed to him to embody the strategy adopted by a class of slaves, deprived of the normal weapons of war, in their struggle against the class of masters.

Nietzsche's discussion of "slave morality" owed more to the reaction of a frightened German middle class to the emergence of the independent working class movement in the latter half of the 19th century than to any real history of events in Ancient Greece.

The End of Irony or the Irony of Ends

Nietzsche's thought is rife with the fear that the mass movements in his time for democracy and socialism may succeed. To him their triumph would be tantamount to the inauguration of an age characterized by servility and vulgarity.

Though his analysis of Western history is reflected through the prism of his own time, he does nevertheless identify an internal process that eats away at the culture of the Athenian city-state in the classical age. For Socrates did play a subversive role by teaching the youth that opinions ought to be justified in the light of reason. He exposed the inadequacy of relying on custom and traditions. Once this process of self-reflection begins, the standards of the community begin to dissolve. The ethos of the heroic age, which is characterized by naively held beliefs, inevitably give way to a more skeptical culture. Although this process certainly began long before Socrates - we had already noted that the Greek term from which "irony" is derived comes from a tradition of comedy that is even older - he has, in the popular imagination, become identified with it.

Nietzsche's claim was that once the mechanism of "slave morality" is unleashed, there is nothing that can stop it. "Slave morality" has a universally corrosive effect, taking on many forms throughout Western intellectual history but always succeeding in eating through any attempt to contain it. One important way station in the progress of "slave morality" is Christianity. Nietzsche saw Christianity as both a new form of Socratic Irony or "slave morality" and at the same time an attempt to hold back its internally subversive side. The latter project ultimately fails, defeated by the Enlightenment when the pretensions of religion are finally unmasked as nothing other than an expression of the "will to power" of a priestly class. Nor does the process stop with the Enlightenment. For the skepticism of the Enlightenment eventually eats away at the belief in Reason at the heart of the Enlightenment. Nietzsche sees the Enlightenment as the final act of Socratic Irony now triumphant. It culminates in the state he calls the "death of god".

The "death of god" has a wider meaning than the denouement of religious beliefs. The term encompasses the overthrow of the last foundation for ideals and actions. With the announcement of the death of god a new age of nihilism beckons, an age which has ceased believing in itself. Nietzsche thought that the movements for democracy and socialism, movements that had a pedigree in the Enlightenment, represented the end game of the logic leading to nihilism.

Nihilism is both a catastrophe and a blessing. We are left at a historical crossroads from which one of two possible outcomes is possible. In the first instance, a new form of humanity announces its presence, one that justifies its own values unfettered by the slave morality that has infected past ages. This is the source for speculation about an *Übermensch*, a new social type that is able to posit its own laws and values and is thus literally "beyond good and evil".

The other possibility that Nietzsche envisions, and one that he thinks is far more likely, is the triumph of democratic movements, the final form of "slave morality". Men retreat to a life of hedonism little different than that of an animal whereby the service of pleasure becomes the only principle guiding action. Nietzsche identified this condition with the

appearance of the “last man”. Nietzsche, through the voice of Zarathustra announced the coming of the last man:

“Alas, the time of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold I show you the last man.”⁹

The “last man”, one possible outcome of the end of history, is clearly inscribed in Fukuyama’s version. This fact was picked up by some of Fukuyama’s early interlocutors. Responding to these critics, Fukuyama sought to back off some of his more extreme “Nietzschean” pronouncements in later reformulations of his thesis. We shall however take Fukuyama’s original formulation as the most authentic representative of his vision for this is the version that caused all the uproar.

The Spectre of Hegel

Given the Nietzschean palette in Fukuyama’s vision, it seems odd that it bore a Hegelian label at all. Perhaps this is not so strange if we bear in mind that there is up to a point, a kinship between Hegel and Nietzsche. We know that Hegel shared the same idealized views about ancient Greek society that motivated Nietzsche. Hegel too celebrated life in the heroic age of the Greeks, a time when one did not have to agonize over what was just – one’s obligations to the community were at one with one’s inner beliefs. Likewise, Hegel noted the subversive effect of Socratic irony on this pristine culture.

In this respect there is much in common between Hegel’s view of the ancient world and that of Nietzsche. However, Hegel’s further discussion show him to be the more profound thinker. For Hegel recognizes that while Socratic irony results in a loss, something is also gained. What is lost is the naïve harmony between the individual and the world of custom and authority into which he is born. What is gained is the beginning of a process of self-reflection and critical thought – a process that insists that all the imperatives of custom and authority be brought before the tribunal of reason. The historical evolution of self-reflection is at the same time the process of the formation of the self-conscious individual who only comes into his own in the modern era. Hegel interprets the history of culture that gives rise to the individual as a history of progressive alienation one of whose first avatars is the irony of Socrates. For Hegel sees Socratic irony as a prime exemplar of how the dialectic exhibits the arising of something new through negation.

“The exposition of the untrue consciousness in its untruth is not merely negative procedure ... This is just the skepticism which only ever sees pure nothingness in its result and abstracts from the fact that which this nothingness is specifically the nothingness of that from which it results ... But when, on the other hand the result is conceived as it is in truth, namely, as a determinate negation, a new form has thereby immediately arisen...”¹⁰

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Prologue, Sec. 5, p.17

¹⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 50-51, Par 79.

When irony enters the scene, the result is that a fragmented existence replaces the sense of oneness that was the hallmark of the heroic age in ancient Greece. This is a condition whose roots one can trace in philosophy, in art as well as in everyday commercial affairs. The natural economy of the ancient world in which production was largely for the sake of oneself and one's family gives way to the market economy in which production is almost exclusively for the world market. In characterizing Hegel's view of historical development in these few brief remarks, we are undoubtedly oversimplifying Hegel's rich account of the movement of Spirit from Ancient Greece to the modern world. Nonetheless, it is sufficient to grasp that for Hegel the history of human Spirit is the history of its progressive self-alienation in which the work of Socratic self-reflection plays a key role. In this respect Hegel and Nietzsche are not so far apart. Where they differ is that for Hegel alienation is not the final act of the drama, for with alienation comes the possibility and the necessity for the overcoming of alienation. The product of our alienated history is therefore not nihilism, as Nietzsche would have it, but is a determinate negation – the new world that is coming into being.

Hegel thought that his own time had witnessed the final reconciliation of human history with itself. We had entered a time, particularly with the triumph of the French revolution, in which it was possible to consciously grasp what had been the implicit work of human history all along, the triumph of freedom as self-determining activity. This is the sense in which we can speak of an “end of history” in Hegel's thought.

We might add that although there were important differences between Marx and Hegel, on this point there is a common thread. Hegel identifies the “end of history” with his own time of post-Napoleonic Europe and the triumph of the bourgeoisie. Marx, having the advantage of assimilating Hegel and the intellectual movements he spawned, and writing in another generation when the cracks in the bourgeois social order were much more apparent, saw that the triumph of the bourgeois revolution creates a new set of social contradictions. For Marx then the equivalent of Hegel's “end of history” is a project yet to be realized through the agency of the rising working class movement. Marx conceived “the end of man's pre-history” in terms that are remarkably similar to Hegel's “end of history”, in the sense that communist society would usher in a new era in which human social relations would become completely transparent and our “metabolic interaction with nature” would be, for the first time, consciously guided.

Enter Alexandre Kojève

Returning to our question, we still are lacking an explanation of how Fukuyama's Nietzschean vision attained a Hegelian pedigree? The link between Hegel and Nietzsche is to be found in the work of one man who was a major influence on Fukuyama. That man was the enigmatic Alexandre Kojève, whose lectures on Hegel in Paris in the 1930's have become the stuff of legend. Kojève's work had a profound, if little noticed effect on both French and American philosophy. Starting life as Russian émigré in Paris in the years after the Russian Revolution, Kojève had a decisive influence on an entire generation of the French intelligentsia. It has been said that Kojève was responsible for

bringing Hegel to France, and by way of Hegel he was largely responsible for the central place given to the philosophy of Marx for several decades. Among his students were the surrealists Raymond Queneau, Georges Bataille, the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan and the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He was also an important influence on the thought of the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.

According to Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, the year 1806, which featured the triumph of Napoleon ("that World Spirit on horseback" as Hegel called him) at the battle of Jena, witnessed the end of history, at least in theory. Philosophy, which in its original Greek means "love of wisdom" has also come to a point of closure as its project has been realized by the attainment of Wisdom. The last philosophy book ever written was Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit" which was actually completed on the eve of the battle of Jena. As soon as the ink dried, so to speak, the philosophical enterprise, the search for wisdom, was over. As far as Kojève was concerned, all subsequent developments, including the wars and revolutions of the remainder of the 19th and 20th centuries, were just so many unfinished details working out the practical implications of the end of history. But whereas 1806 was the theoretical end of history, it is only in his own time that Kojève thought he saw the practical completion of history. This was coming into being with the triumph of the universal homogenous state, which he identified alternately with either the United States, the Soviet Union or in the post-war period with the European Common Market. By the time he was preparing the second edition of his work (1946), he couched the end of history in distinctly Nietzschean terms, as the arrival of the Last Man.

"Hence it would have to be admitted that after the end of History, men would construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs, would perform musical concerts after the fashion of frogs and cicadas, would play like young animals, and would indulge in love like adult beasts. But one cannot then say that this "makes Man happy." One would have to say that post-historical animals of the species *Homo sapiens* (which will live amidst abundance and complete security) will be content as a result of their artistic, erotic and playful behavior, inasmuch as, by definition, they will be contented with it. But there is more. "The definite annihilation of Man properly so-called" also means the definitive disappearance of human Discourse (*Logos*) in the strict sense. Animals of the species *Homo sapiens* would react by conditioned reflexes to vocal signals or sign "language", and thus their so-called "discourses" would be like what is supposed to be the "language" of bees. What would disappear, then, is not only Philosophy or the search for discursive Wisdom, but also that Wisdom itself. For in these post-historical animals, there would no longer be any "[discursive] understanding of the World and of self." ¹¹

It turns out that Kojève's interpretation of Hegel was more of a vehicle for Kojève's own views than a faithful representation of Hegel's. Kojève himself described it as a "work of propaganda designed to shake up people's minds". ¹²

¹¹ Alexandre Kojève, Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, Basic Books, 1969, p.159-160.

¹² Letter to *Les tempes modernes*, Oct. 7, 1948, cited in French Philosophy in the 20th Century, Gary Gutting, Cambridge University Press, n. p. 110.

Kojève was deeply indebted to the work of Heidegger and of Nietzsche. In Kojève's version of the end of history we meet, not Hegel's Absolute, but Nietzsche's Last Man. While sharing Nietzsche's view that the end of history produces the "death of man", Kojève, unlike Nietzsche welcomed this fate. Modernity was irreversible and it was not possible to return to a heroic age, much as we long for it. To say that Kojève stoically welcomed the end of history would be an understatement. He enlisted his service in the cause of hastening its inevitable realization. He ended his career not as an academic, but as a leading bureaucrat in the French government where he was deeply involved in the birth of the European Economic Community, forerunner of today's European Union. He was an early exponent of what today would be called "globalization".

Fukuyama's Circuitous Route

Fukuyama's kinship to Kojève should be obvious. What is not so obvious is the circuitous route Fukuyama traveled to get there.¹³ For Fukuyama was a student of Alan Bloom. The latter, having become a household name during the culture wars of the 1980's with his book, "The Closing of the American Mind", was a student of Kojève's. Yet Bloom, unlike Kojève, was not a supporter of modernity in any sense. Bloom believed in the viability of the "ancient wisdom" of classical Greek society and considered that modern thought, beginning with Machiavelli, was a corruption and debasement from this hallowed starting point. He believed it was necessary to return to the ancients and reject the teachings of modernity. How then does a primitivist such as Bloom become involved with the supreme exponent of bourgeois modernism, Alexandre Kojève? The answer, and this is the final link in the chain that leads from Hegel to Fukuyama, is the figure of Leo Strauss.

Strauss, a scholar of German Jewish background, spent many years at the bastion of conservative thought, the University of Chicago. He was Bloom's mentor and the major influence on his thought. Strauss was the consummate advocate of "ancient wisdom" and enlisted a coterie of devoted students. His students have gone on to play an important role in conservative cultural and political circles. They populate right wing think tanks, conservative academic journals and have penetrated the highest centers of power in Washington. Bloom himself was a case in point. He was a speechwriter for Barry Goldwater in the 1960's and became a kind of intellectual icon of the right during the Reagan Administration. Saul Bellow's recent novel, "Ravelstein", features a thinly veiled biographical sketch of Bloom as its leading protagonist.

Strauss, after being forced into exile with the rise of Nazism in the 1930s, met and befriended Kojève while he was in Paris in the 1930s. The two kept up a lifelong correspondence. Strauss had serious disagreements with Kojève, most notably over Kojève's advocacy of the modern liberal bourgeois state. Yet Strauss also considered Kojève as the most honest representative of the "other side" of the philosophical divide.

¹³ A detailed and instructive account of the road from Kojève to Fukuyama can be found in the article, "The End of History and the Return of History", Philip T. Grief, in the anthology, *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, Jon Stewart, Northwest University Press, 1996, p. 183.

He therefore sent his most promising students to study with Kojève, hoping they would return with a solid grounding in the thinking of modernity. This explains the peculiar apprenticeship of Bloom with Kojève. Bloom in turn, passed on his wisdom to his student Fukuyama.

The End of History Revisited

Fukuyama's 1989 musings and the subsequent debates it engendered lasted well into the 1995-1996 period. In light of this, it seems curious that not many years later a new discussion on the "end of irony" has erupted, in many cases from the same quarters. For what could be more final than the "end of history"? Was there something left undone at the "end of history", something that needed to be addressed with "the end of irony"?

If history really came to an end with the final triumph of liberal capitalism, then the contradictions historically displayed by capitalism must have somehow been overcome. A new era of capitalist globalization beckons that is no longer characterized by economic crises, wars, and open expressions of class conflict. While many people may have actually thought this way in 1989, it is much harder to maintain this illusion today, particularly since Sept 11. At the same time, the ideological requirements for reinforcing the illusion that "the basic principles of the liberal democratic state cannot be improved upon" are stronger than ever. Enter the "end of the age of irony."

When a civilization or a way of life feels imperiled, the subversive side of irony comes under increasing pressure. Let us not forget that Socrates was put on trial and executed essentially for committing the crime of irony. Times of reaction invariably find the ironic voice intolerable. The suppression of irony is the philosophical equivalent of the attempt to reassert blind obedience to authority. Scepticism about the use of power and military force must be swept aside. In this sense, the literary charge against irony is the companion to the political campaign to eradicate the Vietnam War syndrome.

The end of history discussion of the previous decade still left the door open for irony. The ever-present manifestations of irony on the other hand, put the question to the aura of capitalist triumphalism. The end of irony is therefore the logical continuation of the earlier proclamation of the end of history. It closes the door that Fukuyama's plaintive note of protest seemed to leave open.

Part II - The Uses and Abuses of Irony

There is another dimension to a consideration of irony that was completely untouched by the recent discussion of an “end of irony”. We mean the sharp contrast between the use of irony in its classical form and the “ironic” mode of much contemporary culture. The shallow nature of the recent journalistic discussion failed to explore this issue at all, but it nevertheless remains an important subtext in any consideration of the subject. As before, an excursion into some recent and not so recent history may help shed some light on this subject.

Irony and the Dialectic

There is a more or less continuous thread of thought that connects all the seemingly disparate thinkers from Nietzsche to Heidegger to Kojève, Strauss and Fukuyama. We are alluding to the reaction against the Enlightenment and the world of bourgeois modernity. This line of thought culminates in what is conceived as the triumph of the Last Man or the Death of Man. Sometimes, as with Kojève, the language of Hegel is borrowed to express this view. But its spirit is the antithesis of Hegel.

There is a different line of thought that traces its lineage to Hegel. While here we likewise encounter a critique of the Enlightenment, this is where the resemblance ends. For this intellectual heritage sees bourgeois society and the Enlightenment as a necessary moment in the progression of man from mere animality to being truly human.

The line of thought identified with Hegel has a much older lineage itself. It is the descendant of a philosophy with roots in the classical world of ancient Greece. It is what Hegel called the dialectic. Hegel gives credit to Socrates’ form of irony as providing the first paradigm of the historical dialectic.

“Besides the dialectic is not a new thing in philosophy. Among the Ancients Plato is called the inventor of the dialectic, and that is quite correct in that it is in the Platonic philosophy that dialectic first occurs in a form which is freely scientific and hence also objective. With Socrates, dialectical thinking still has a predominantly subjective shape, namely that of *irony*. Socrates directed his dialectic first against ordinary consciousness in general, and then, more particularly, against the Sophists. He was accustomed to pretend in his conversations that he wanted to be instructed more precisely about the matter under discussion; and in this connection he raised all manner of questions, so that the people with whom he conversed were led on to say the opposite of what had appeared to them at the beginning to be correct.”¹⁴

The power of the dialectic, in both its subjective and objective forms, is that through it motion and life become intelligible. The negative moment is seen to contain its other in itself. The result of negation is therefore not nothing, but a determinate something. This is why the employment of Socratic irony leads not to endless skepticism

¹⁴ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hackett Publishing, 1991, paragraph 81, Zusatz, p. 129.d

or cynicism, but to an ever more profound progression of concepts. Hegel explained it this way,

“...philosophy ... contains the sceptical as a moment within itself – specifically the dialectical moment. But then philosophy does not stop at the merely negative result of the dialectic, as is the case with scepticism. The latter mistakes its result, insofar as it holds fast to it as mere, i.e. abstract negation. When the dialectic has the negative as its result, then, precisely as a result, this negative is at the same time the positive, for it contains what it resulted from sublated within itself, and it cannot be without it.”¹⁵

Philosophy from the end of the 18th century right down to our own time is in one way or another a reaction to the Enlightenment. This is obviously a huge subject that we can only mention in passing here. It is no exaggeration to say that Hegel’s entire oeuvre is dominated by a critique of the Enlightenment. It should be borne in mind that *critique* does not mean *rejection*, but rather is the process that through determinate negation, returns with a higher truth. For Hegel, the Enlightenment, while historically progressive in its struggle against superstition, suffered from a one-sided and narrow approach to the issues. Typically, it saw a wrong, and attacked that wrong by proclaiming its opposite. The Enlightenment thinkers were trapped in a method of thought that was non-dialectical, that saw only rigid opposition. They did not recognize the self-contradictory nature of movement and life.

A good example of the latter is Hegel’s critique of Voltaire’s attack on religion. Voltaire thought that religion existed because a conspiracy of priests organized to deceive the common people. If you expose the lies and fantastic tales told by the priests, Voltaire reasoned, you would end religion. Hegel showed that even if it were true that the priests conspired to deceive the people, their exposure would not end religion because religion was deeply rooted in the structure of society. Thus, Voltaire’s truth was taken up and superceded by a higher truth.

While correctly pointing to the social role of religion, Hegel did not draw out all the implications of this position. This was left to the next generation. In the decade after Hegel’s death (1831) the critique of religion had become a central preoccupation of Left Hegelianism. It comes to a conclusion with Ludwig Feuerbach on a much more profound level than Voltaire. Feuerbach showed that religion is but an alienated expression of man himself. The source of religious beliefs are not the lies of the priests primarily, but a profound ideological mystification that is a consequence of man’s projection of his own qualities onto an imagined entity having power over him. By the time Marx comes on the scene, he is able to write that “...the criticism of religion is essentially complete, and the criticism of religion is the presupposition of all criticism.”¹⁶ Thereafter Marx absorbs the critique of religion as a subordinate element of a wider critique of an alienated bourgeois

¹⁵ Encyclopedia Logic, paragraph 81, Zusatz, p. 131.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction*, Karl Marx Selected Writings, edited by David McLellan, Oxford University Press, p. 62.

The End of Irony or the Irony of Ends

society. At the same time Marx notes that the very notion of critique is transformed from a critique of concepts to a critique of life. This is how he expressed himself in 1844:

“Religious alienation as such occurs only in man’s interior consciousness. But economic alienation is that of real life, and its abolition therefore covers both aspects.”¹⁷

Marx’s critique of the methods of the Enlightenment is a theme of his famous Third Thesis on Feuerbach, where Marx writes, “The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.” Marx is here taking a shot against the “Enlighteners” of the last century, for it is they who divided themselves from their society and thought they were “superior to society”.

By way of contrast to the critique of the Enlightenment, the last two centuries have witnessed both those who continued to defend the rigid antinomies of the Enlightenment, the various schools of empiricism and positivism, as well those who simply rejected the Enlightenment and turned back to ancient traditions and religion, reactionaries old and new. Finally there is yet another reaction to the Enlightenment that emerged from the 19th century. We speak of those whom, acknowledging the truth of the Enlightenment and even of Hegel’s critique, reject the consequences of modernity that is implied by it. We do not mean to suggest that most of these thinkers would literally say that the Enlightenment was correct, but simply that they acknowledge that the corrosive forces set into motion by the Enlightenment cannot simply be undone. In that sense, their position is very different from those of classic reactionaries. It is in this latter tradition that we locate Nietzsche, Heidegger and their followers.

Nietzsche and those who followed him put the question to modern society and the result they obtained was literally nothing – i.e. nihilism. The despair at the End of History is thus directly related to the reaction against Socratic irony. Nietzsche’s aversion toward Socratic irony is the form in which he rejects the dialectic. We can now see another side of the relationship between the discussion on the end of irony and that of the end of history. If Fukuyama’s thesis is to be taken seriously then the End of Irony is in fact a necessary coda to his earlier discussion of the End of History. You cannot have one without the other. For if history has indeed come to closure, then so must irony and the dialectic collapse into nothingness.

By way of contrast with Nietzsche, let us briefly examine how another 19th century thinker, Karl Marx, reacted to the triumph of bourgeois society. Instead of despairing longingly for a past heroic age, he reveled in the demystification of the middle ages ushered in by the bourgeoisie. In the Communist Manifesto he wrote that,

¹⁷ Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, McLellan, p. 89.

“The bourgeoisie has disclosed how it came to pass that the brutal display of vigour in the Middle Ages, which the Reactionists so much admire, found in fitting complement in the most slothful indolence.”¹⁸

In one of the most oft-quoted passages in the Manifesto, Marx dramatizes the nature of the psychological and philosophical impact of the new social relations:

“All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”¹⁹

Marx is equally attuned, both to the revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie in relation to the feudal society it replaces, and to the new impasse that it creates. For alongside its role in revolutionizing the means of production, the triumph of the bourgeoisie means all human life becomes subordinated to the law of value.

“Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like a sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world which he has called up by his spells.”²⁰

This domination of man by his own creations, creations that assume a life of their own and come to dominate man, is the heart of the bourgeois mode of production. It is the negative moment of the historical dialectic. Marx follows the dialectic to its conclusion. The negative is not a mere nothing. It contains the other of itself, for within the womb of bourgeois society rises ever more powerfully the productive forces themselves and the working class which has the potential to liberate mankind from the straitjacket of domination by the profit system.

“The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.”

“But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons – the modern working class – the proletarians.”²¹

Schlegel Discovers a New Form of Irony

If Hegel and Marx stand on one side of the dialectic then Nietzsche and his followers stand on the other. We have discussed the intimate connection between Socratic irony and dialectic. It is therefore no surprise to learn that Nietzsche’s attempt to

¹⁸ Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, McLellan, p. 224.

¹⁹ *Communist Manifesto*, McLellan, p. 224.

²⁰ *Communist Manifesto*, McLellan p. 226.

²¹ *Communist Manifesto*, McLellan p. 226.

overturn the dialectic is part and parcel of a reevaluation of irony. To be sure, irony is not rejected flat out. It is however employed in an entirely new way and to a different purpose.

It turns out that Nietzsche is deeply indebted to a contemporary of Hegel's, Friedrich von Schlegel. Schlegel, one of the founders of German Romanticism, pioneered a new form of irony, one that marks a turning point both in art and philosophy. Schlegel discovered what is today called Romantic Irony. To get a handle on Romantic Irony, let us turn to one of Schlegel's attempts to define the Romantic stance:

“ But to transport oneself arbitrarily now into this, now into that sphere, as if into another world, not merely with one's reason and imagination, but with one's whole soul; to freely relinquish first one and then another part of one's being, and confine oneself entirely to a third; to seek and find now in this, now in that individual the be-all and the end-all of existence, and intentionally forget everyone else: of this only a mind is capable that contains within itself simultaneously a plurality of minds and a whole system of persons and in whose inner being the universe which, as they say, should germinate in every monad, has grown to fullness and maturity.”²²

Schlegel redefines irony as the standpoint of absolute egotism. The ego is unconstrained by any law. It is completely free to adopt first this point of view and then another point of view. By positing a “plurality of minds” that coexist simultaneously, Schlegel effectively discards any notion of truth or objectivity.

Readers can judge for themselves the debt that Nietzsche owes to Schlegel. How far removed is the following description of the coming *Übermensch* from Schlegel's paean to the infinite possibilities of absolute egotism?

“We, however, want to become those we are – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.”²³

Very early on, Hegel recognized the dangerous implications behind this new form of irony.²⁴ He pointed out that absolute egotism leads to an orgy of the self-indulgent imagination that just as easily becomes self-destructive. The upshot is that,

“...nothing is treated in and for itself and as valuable in itself, but only as produced by the subjectivity of the ego. But in that case the ego can remain lord and master of everything, and in no sphere of morals, law, things human and divine, profane and sacred, is there anything that would not first have to be laid down by the ego, and that therefore could not equally well be destroyed by it. Consequently everything genuinely and independently real becomes only a show, not true and genuine on its own account or

²² Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde and the Fragments*, Athenaeum Fragment 121, trans. Peter Firchow, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kauffman, 1974, p.266, section 335.

²⁴ For an excellent discussion of Hegel's critique of Romantic Irony particularly in its impact upon history and literature, see: Carl Rapp, *Fleeing the Universal: The Critique of Post-Rational Criticism*, State University of New York Press, 1998.

through itself, but a mere appearance due to the ego in whose power and caprice and at whose free disposal it remains. To admit or cancel it depends wholly on the pleasure of the ego, already absolute in itself simply as ego.”²⁵

Thus one possible outcome of this ironic stance is a kind of endless playfulness with infinite possibilities. The other side of this position is however a sense of despair at the recognition that our creations have no objective life of their own. The inability to live with this contradiction lead some of the Romantics to escape into religion where they hoped to find a firm basis for their beliefs. This is how Hegel characterized this flight away from infinite possibilities:

“The utter despair in respect of thought, of truth, and absolute objectivity, as also the incapacity to give oneself any settled basis or spontaneity of action, induced the noble soul to abandon itself to feeling and to seek in Religion something fixed and steadfast... This instinct impelling us towards something fixed has forced many into positive forms of religion, into Catholicism, superstition and miracle working, in order that they may find something on which they can rest, because to inward subjectivity everything fluctuates and wavers.”²⁶

Hegel had in mind the specific case of Novalis who converted to Catholicism before eventually succumbing to a storybook romantic death by consumption. We can point to the more recent example of T.S. Elliot whose poetry started in the mode of Romantic Irony but eventually lead to Catholicism. Beyond the specific history of artists and poets, Hegel’s diagnosis is an apt description of the movement of right Nietzscheans such as Frances Fukuyama in our time. They have embraced religion and reactionary ideologies that appear to provide a foundation for the aristocratic values that they prize.

Left and Right Nietzscheans

We have previously discussed the work of Alexandre Kojève and Leo Strauss. If we recall, it was Kojève, who while heavily influenced by Nietzsche, first introduced the idea of “the end of man” into the discussion of the of the “end of history.” Strauss, a philosophical opponent of modernity, seemed to have little in common with the arch-modernist Kojève. Yet we know that these two figures kept up a lifelong correspondence and had a great deal of mutual respect. The bond that held these two men together was not simply personal however, but was rooted in their shared assumptions about the nature of the philosophical enterprise, one that they inherited from a tradition going back to the earliest philosophers. The assumption is that the life of contemplation is the highest form of life that man can attain and is therefore what makes us truly human. There is a further assumption that such a life is reserved for “the few” and always out of reach by “the many”. Kojève thought that the ultimate triumph of modernity, which he saw as the end of history, brings “the many” onto the scene and destroys the conditions for the old ideal

²⁵ Hegel, *Lectures on Aesthetics I*, Oxford University Press, 1975, trans. T. M. Knox, p. 64-65, Introduction 7- iii.

²⁶ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, Humanities Press, 1983, III, p. 510

of the contemplative life. To Kojève, this was a tragic but necessary consequence of modernity, one from which we cannot escape. Instead of escaping from this dark fate, Kojève contemplated a new mode of life that would allow us to live playfully in a world in which man has returned to an animal existence. Strauss agreed with Kojève that such an end is a tragedy, but he felt that its consequences could be undone and mankind could return to the aristocratic ideals of ancient Greece. In true Nietzschean fashion, this requires that political activity, if it is to be authentic, becomes synonymous with the making of myths. Thereby Strauss upheld a tradition whose roots are to be found in Plato's advocacy of the "noble lie" in his Republic. In Strauss version of the noble lie, "the many" must be pacified with religion and myths in order to restrain their base instincts through fear. Only "the few", whose basic instincts are noble, are capable of knowing the truth, namely that there are no gods or transcendent values.

The political theorist Shadia Drury has, with some justification, labeled the French followers of Kojève as "left Nietzscheans." The American followers of Strauss who were influenced by Kojève, on the other hand, could be seen as "right Nietzscheans".²⁷ The right Nietzscheans stand for order and authority. Although they themselves do not believe in the myths associated with ancient societies, they find the resurrection of such myths a useful and necessary mechanism of social control. Irving Kristol, the founder of Neoconservatism, said that Leo Strauss was one of the most influential sources of his ideas. Kristol has given us the clearest expression of the idea that animates right Nietzscheans, the need to create myths to insure social stability. He wrote that religion, "is far more important politically" than the founding fathers of the American republic realized.²⁸ The founding fathers were blinded by the liberal and humanist prejudices that, according to Kristol, prevented them from understanding the importance of "breathing new life into the older, now largely comatose, religious orthodoxies."²⁹ It is no accident that many of Strauss's followers have pioneered a revisionist interpretation of the founding of the American republic by minimizing the role played by Deists and atheists in establishing the separation of Church from state. They have also become prominent among the ranks of constitutional scholars where they invariably champion the importance of the aristocratic values enshrined in the Constitution and denigrate the egalitarian values that are proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence.

The left Nietzscheans on the other hand are interested in transgressing current boundaries. The goal of transgression is not liberation. Rather, transgression becomes an end in itself, irrespective of the content of what is transgressed. This attitude was exemplified in Georges Bataille's study of Gilles de Rais. Gilles de Rais was a notorious sadistic nobleman of the late middle ages. He lured young children to his castle where he would offer them up as sacrifices to the devil. He sexually violated them, tortured them, burned them and decapitated them. When done, he would fall asleep drenched in blood while his servants cleaned up the castle and disposed of the corpses. De Rais was eventually caught, tried and executed. Bataille treats this psychopathic criminal as some

²⁷ Shadia Drury, *Alexandre Kojève: The Roots of Postmodern Politics*, St Martin's Press, 1994, p.205

²⁸ Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, Free Press, 1995, p. 101.

²⁹ *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, Free Press, p. 146.

kind of “noble warrior” who had the misfortune of being born at the wrong time in history. His warrior virtues had no outlet in a time that turned its back on the heroic age of the early middle ages. Instead of outrage toward his crimes, de Rais is portrayed as a victim of an increasingly rationalized society that no longer has any room for the “heroic” men in its midst.

There is a similar celebration of the perverse in the writing of Foucault. Foucault’s deconstructive history of madness attempts to show that madness was redefined as a clinical ailment in the modern world. The treatment of madness mirrored the increasing subjugation of all disciplines with the methods of “rationality”. Rationality is for Foucault unrelated to truth. It is merely a more or less arbitrary interpretation foisted on the world by centers of power. Foucault contends that eventually the Enlightenment view, that every delusion must have a rational cause, triumphs in the treatment of madness and thereby asserts its “power” over the reality of madness. In contrast, the madman was an object of awe and reverence as well as fright during the middle ages. Foucault longs for those pre-rational times when the madman was able to transgress the boundaries of repression. Paradoxically, Foucault’s need for transgression entails a need for a society that sets limits. Such a society is to be found in the middle ages. It no longer exists in our own society where transgressive behavior has been medicalized. The upshot is that transgression for Bataille and Foucault has a profoundly reactionary side. They need the pillars of authority as much as the transgressors against that authority.

It should be borne in mind that the designation of right-Nietzscheans and left-Nietzscheans have only the most tenuous relationship to any conventional view of a political right and left. The right-Nietzscheans are in favor of authority and tradition, but in a very untraditional way. They see themselves as the creators of new values and new authorities. The left-Nietzscheans on the other hand need authority as much as they need rebellion against authority. It is no accident that Bataille was at times attracted to fascism. Nor is it a coincidence that Foucault expresses a longing for the repressive middle ages. Yet for all their differences, the Right and Left Nietzscheans have much in common. Both share an aristocratic ethos that elevates the deeds of heroic individuals and contrasts them to the mediocrity of the masses. They are both deeply critical and pessimistic of the post-Enlightenment world. They both share the thesis of Kojève that our times are witnessing the end of history, or in Nietzschean terms, the death of god, a fate that is anticipated in various modes of dread.

Left Nietzscheans in the mould of Foucault have taken Romantic Irony one step further. Foucault denies the objective nature of truth. Truth is merely a reflex of the relations of power prevailing in society at any time. Truth therefore can only be a subjective creation. Yet even the creative subject is a creation of power relations in society. All this makes it very difficult to see why Foucault’s historical deconstruction should be taken any more seriously than the myths he is purporting to unmask. Foucault in his capacity as a historian is “ironically” aware of this cul-de-sac, and at the same time is unable to escape from it. These labors of Sisyphus, the endless back and forth between the unmasking of an apparent truth and its immediate cancellation, is characteristic of the

self-refuting nature of the standpoint of Romantic Irony. It is a stance that hopes to avoid the despair of nihilism by a mode of playfulness, in the spirit of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. It is here that we find some of the roots of what has been called the postmodern condition.

Irony and the Postmodern Condition

When we speak of the "postmodern condition" we are not simply referencing the works of Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard or anyone else. We are rather pointing to a fundamental mode of contemporary culture. Were one to try to characterize this condition in a succinct phrase, it would have to be that our times have witnessed the capture of large portions of contemporary culture by the stance of Romantic irony. Romantic irony is a mode of reflection characteristic of a culture that has ceased to believe in itself and its self-professed values and at the same time has yet to find an alternative. In this sense, "the death of god" is here and has been with us for some time. Foucault's Nietzschean meditations seem so compelling to so many readers precisely because Foucault captured some powerful feelings engendered by contemporary life. Further discussion of the sociological basis for this cultural watershed and its implications must however be reserved for another occasion. That Foucault did hone in on a condition of contemporary culture was brought home by a recent episode in the world of letters.

In 1999, a then 24 year old man named Jedediah Purdy wrote a book called **For Common Things: Irony, Trust and Commitment in America Today**. Purdy's book was a very thoughtful meditation on some of the expressions of what we have identified as Romantic irony in contemporary culture. Purdy identified many manifestations of this condition from the popularity of the television series *Seinfeld*, which features a character who is disloyal and unable to take any relationship seriously, to the columns of Maureen Dowd in which political commentary is presented in the mode of society gossip where nothing of any consequences really happens. An examination of the contemporary art scene provides easy confirmation of Purdy's insight. Contemporary art has become self-referential in an entirely new dimension. It is not simply that a work of art now reflects on another work of art or on the state of art as such. This has to some extent been with us since the birth of Romanticism. Yet ultimately, art must point beyond itself if it is to have any resonance. At any art gallery today one can find art works that reflect on other works that in turn reflect on other art works. There is no light at the end of tunnel. There is only the tunnel and its "plurality of minds" changing their roles in a tarantella at the service of absolute mind.

Purdy was careful to differentiate the anomie that is characteristic of contemporary irony from the classic forms of irony. He specifically praises irony when it is employed as a genuine critique, as found in the works of Montaigne, Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain. What Purdy put his finger on was the difference between an irony that challenges prevailing modes of dogmatism, hypocrisy and mendacity, the classic form of irony – and of the dialectic – and another noxious form of irony whose hallmark is the false "plurality of minds" first elaborated by Schlegel more than two centuries ago. Purdy

showed how so much of what appears as the prevailing feelings of cynicism and apathy that mark his generation can be better understood as forms of the standpoint of a Romantic irony. (He does not use this term, but simply calls it a form of excessive irony.)

The reaction to Purdy's book was very instructive, and in its own way reinforced his thesis. Purdy was universally pilloried in the most intemperate language by the denizens of the literary establishment. Roger Hodge, the editor of Harper's for instance, called him a "cornpone prophet", apparently a reference to his humble West Virginia origins, and referred to the book as "second and third-hand musings". Other critics derided Purdy for conflating irony with sarcasm, cynicism and other such sins. Others pounded on his naïve political prescriptions and calls for sincerity. Still others caricatured Purdy, in the most dishonest manner, as a primitivist opponent of irony in all its forms.

To be sure, there was something to be said for some of the criticisms made of Purdy's book. His politics is indeed naïve. He believes that a form of voluntarism in which everyone gets involved in the affairs of their local community is a viable prescription for addressing the social and political problems of our time. And he does in his examples sometimes conflate irony with sarcasm and cynicism. But the more fundamental point, that virtually all the critics have missed, is that Purdy does present a more or less compelling picture of our debased contemporary cultural scene. And unlike most members of his generation, he has not adapted himself to it. He has sought to make a reasoned diagnosis of this culture. The most important thing perhaps is that contemporary culture – dominated by a false irony – bothers him and he wishes to do something about it. It does not bother the arrogant and condescending critics. Perhaps the most ironic phenomenon of all is that in many cases, the same voices who made such a pretense of defending the integrity of irony against Purdy in 1999 were nowhere to be heard when a genuine retrograde attack against irony emerged after the tragedy of Sept 11.

The abuse of irony, the posturing of an infinite plurality of minds, leads inevitably down the road of either madness or repression, or even both at the same time. Shadia Drury captured this very well in discussing the constant movement between transgression and repression in the works of Georges Bataille.

"Bataille's transgressions are not simply intended to overturn the puritanical order and reveal the dark passions; they are also intended to reawaken the "archaic horror" of nature. This latter is bound to send us scurrying back to civilization to repeat the process all over again, in an eternal recurrence of the same. In other words, Bataille's transgressions simultaneously subvert and reinforce the order of civilization. This accounts for the self-refuting character of postmodern critique."³⁰

On the other hand, the proper use of irony in the hands of a master can forge a powerful weapon for human emancipation. If we restrict ourselves just to the use of irony as a rhetorical device we can see the profound impact made when an apparent truth is questioned. In order for the ironist to be successful, the challenge to dogma must be made

³⁰ Drury, Alexandre Kojève: The Roots of Postmodern Politics, p. 115-116.

in such a way as to seem at first to reinforce the prejudices of the reader, only to draw out conclusions that challenge the foundations of the reader's beliefs. A wonderful example is the following passage from Montesquieu, in which he tears apart the rationale made by Europeans for the then robust slave trade, all the while seemingly providing a justification for it:

“The peoples of Europe, having exterminated those in America, had to enslave those of Africa so as to have someone to clear all that land. Sugar would be too dear if one didn't have slaves to cultivate the sugar-cane. The peoples in question are black from head to foot; and their noses are squashed so flat that it is next to impossible to feel any pity for them. One cannot bring oneself to think that God, who is so wise and judicious, would put a soul, and above all a virtuous soul, into a body that is black all over.”³¹

Or take the following piece, from the pen of Mark Twain. The scene is a church in small town America and the parishioners have convened on the eve of an impending war. The atmosphere is one of unmitigated joy and celebration of patriotism. A discordant note is struck however when a stranger, clothed in rags, walks into the church. As the crowd stares suspiciously at the stranger, he proclaims,

“I come from the Throne – bearing a message from Almighty God!...He has heard the prayer of His servant your shepherd, and will grant it if such be your desire after I, his messenger, shall have explained to you its import – that is to say, its full import. For it is like unto many of the prayers of men, in that it asks for more than he who utters it is aware of – except he pause and think.”

As the parishioners sit in shocked silence, the stranger mouths the following prayer:

“O Lord, our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle – be Thou near them! With them – in spirit – we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord, our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of the wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sport of the sun-flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it – for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet. We ask it in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.”³²

³¹ Charles-Louis Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, New York, 1949, p. 238.

³² Mark Twain, “The War Prayer”, *A Pen Warmed –Up in Hell*, edited by Frederick Anderson, Harper, 1979, p. 110.

The End of Irony or the Irony of Ends

Twain's piece is particularly appropriate given today's orchestration of patriotism backed by religious cant on behalf of new wars. It has the same power to shock and provoke as it did when it was written a hundred years ago. It is the most eloquent statement that can be made against the stupidity of those who proclaim an end of irony.

Neither the flight from despair into reaction, nor the embrace of nihilism offers a viable vision for the future. Ultimately these poses are just another way of adjusting to the status quo. The same can be said for the air of complacency and cynicism of those who don't see any problem with contemporary culture. To find our way, we must turn to the solutions that emerge out of the historical process itself. And far from turning our back on irony, we must retrieve the genuine irony at the heart of the dialectic.

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