

A Quarrel with Itself

The Ironic Structure in Poetry

Excerpted from *Structure and Surprise*

CHRISTOPHER BAKKEN

William Butler Yeats famously claimed, “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.” A poem with an ironic structure is, in essence, a poem that has a quarrel with itself. It offers two points of view, or two conflicting attitudes toward a single subject, and allows the playful tension of those contradictory impulses to stand. As such, poems employing an ironic structure often teach us something crucial about the attitudes of the poets who wrote them, since these contradictory impulses—if Yeats is to be believed—go to the heart of literary creativity.

Poems using the ironic structure begin with positive assertions and assumptions of truth, but end by undercutting such assertions and certainties, sometimes rather abruptly and surprisingly. This decidedly simple poetic mechanism—which might be thought of as a process of rising and falling, or inflating and deflating, or dreaming and waking—produces a surprising amount of intellectual and dramatic energy. Though examples of poems employing an ironic structure date back to the beginnings of poetry, the ironic structure has proven especially popular in the poetry of the last two centuries, embodying as it does a particular attitude toward the world that we associate with modernity.

The manipulation of tone is at the heart of any poetic activity, thus irony is a crucial weapon in any poet’s arsenal, but it is important to understand the distinction between the most common type of irony we encounter—verbal irony—and the kind of structural irony under consideration here. Verbal irony is produced by saying one thing while meaning or implying the opposite. A perceptive reader or listener will “hear” irony because she understands that the truth of what’s being said is intentionally undercut by the context in which it is said. For example, if you step outside your house on a February morning into a diagonal sleet, with a ten-below-zero wind chill churning into your face, and you say to your wife, “Nice day!” she’ll know, because she is just as disgusted as you are, that you are not proposing a picnic. X.J. Kennedy explains that this kind of irony is “a manner of speaking that implies a discrepancy. If the mask says one thing and we sense that the writer is in fact saying something else, the writer is using an ironic point of view.”¹ Often this disparity results in good-natured humor, since what is actually said differs from the straightforward truth in such an exaggerated way. But of course this kind of irony can be exaggerated even more, so it moves away from sarcasm into ridicule

and scorn.

Structural irony, in contrast, is a way of organizing a series of utterances so that what is first proclaimed is suddenly or systematically undermined by what follows. Charles Bernstein's tiny poem, "Shaker Show,"² enacts this in two lines:

Now *that* is a chair
I wouldn't want to sit in.

The irony emerges when we perceive the contrast between these two utterances, when we perceive the imbalance between them. In this way, structural irony suspends and stalls a conclusion; if verbal irony is to be immediately perceived, structural irony is usually meant to surprise us more gradually. This is not to say it cannot happen quickly, as in the Bernstein example.

Dorothy Parker's short poem, "Comment,"³ is another example of a poem employing a basic ironic structure. This poem drives toward its final undercutting with a limerick-like quickness:

Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song,
A medley of extemporanea;
And love is a thing that can never go wrong;
And I am Marie of Roumania.

The first three lines constitute rather broad assertions about decidedly broad and abstract concepts, "life" and "love," and Parker understands that we might want to believe such positive truisms. After all, don't we turn to poetry for wisdom and truth? But clearly Parker herself cannot believe in them at all, since she is certainly *not* Marie of Roumania. With the outright lie of the poem's fourth line, the false truths of the first three lines suddenly light up like neon platitudes. This is not merely a statement of two points of view, of thesis/antithesis, because antithesis clearly has the last word here. The actual sentiments of a poem organized with an ironic structure, then, almost always rest upon the poem's conclusion. Here, the poem's final "comment" is to disclaim any final certainties about life or love. According to the logic of the poem, any attempts to comment so broadly about existence will be facile, if not foolish, and about as close to the truth as her last line.

This kind of philosophical skepticism represents a decidedly modern attitude. According to literary critic Anne Mellor, this kind of skepticism became central to artistic production beginning with the Romantic poets—those artists who had to recreate the terms of art after the cataclysmic French Revolution and American War of Independence. These poets no longer took for granted the idea that the world was divinely ordered, that God was ever-present in the natural world, that religion shaped the backbone of society. We still see great spiritual longing and questing in Romantic poetry, but in the context of an increasingly secular world.

This paradox informs the very structures of Romantic poetry, resulting in what Mellor calls "Romantic irony."⁴ According to Mellor, the Romantic ironist:

must acknowledge the inevitable limitations of his own finite consciousness. . . . But even as he denies the absolute validity of his own perceptions and structuring concepts of the universe . . . he must affirm and celebrate the process of life by creating new images and ideas.⁵

Such poetry reflects the ongoing tension between disbelief and belief, between rejection and celebration, and often the very structure of a poem helps the poet reflect this tension creatively. “The artistic process,” Mellor continues, “must be one of simultaneous creation and de-creation.”⁶ The ironic structure—with its building up and knocking down, its dreaming and waking—becomes the perfect instrument for a great Romantic ironist like Lord Byron, whose long poem *Don Juan* exemplifies this pattern.

Byron’s poem is composed in a seemingly unstoppable series of ottava rima, an elegant eight-line stanza rhymed in an ABABABCC pattern. The energy of the first six lines—which are propelled forward by the alternating ABABAB rhymes—comes crashing up against the final rhyming couplet, which is designed to bring the stanza to a conclusion, to close with certainty. Byron adapts ottava rima to his own purposes, however, often turning the stanza into an ironic structure by forcing the first six lines to build toward a concluding statement, then dismantling the possibility of conclusion in the final couplet, often to great comic effect. As Hoxney Fairchild once said, Byron had a mind “too idealistic to refrain from blowing bubbles, and too realistic to refrain from pricking them.”

Byron’s protagonist, Don Juan, is at the outset too earnest, naive, and ordinary to be taken very seriously by the poem’s wildly rhyming narrator. While the poem’s themes are often quite profound, we are not to take the character Don Juan himself too seriously. The ironic structure of the stanzas alone makes this abundantly clear, as in this stanza from Canto I, describing Don Juan’s meditations upon love⁷:

He pored upon the leaves and on the flowers,
 And heard a voice in all the winds; and then
 He thought of wood-nymphs and immortal bowers,
 And how the goddesses came down to men.
 He missed the pathway, he forgot the hours,
 And when he looked upon his watch again,
 He found how much old Time had been a winner.
 He also found that he had lost his dinner.

The first six lines of the stanza place Juan in the realm of an idealized pastoral landscape—an Arcadia this young lover wanders while contemplating his Julia. What he projects upon that landscape is the dreamy stuff of pagan Greece and Rome, the kind of things any reader of Homer or Virgil might imagine. But Juan’s longings are hopelessly over-wrought and silly, purely conventional. The bubble of that kitschy pastoral daydream is burst by the entirely mundane final two lines—bringing our hero, hungry, back to earth.

Structural irony actually helps Byron produce the stanzas that make up his lengthy poem; every burst bubble is followed by another breath of affirming inflation. Byron addresses this idea in this stanza from Canto IV of *Don Juan*:

Nothing so difficult as a beginning
 In poesy, unless perhaps the end;
 For oftentimes when Pegasus seems winning
 The race, he sprains a wing and down we tend,
 Like Lucifer when hurled from heaven for sinning,
 Our sin the same, and hard as his to mend,
 Being pride, which leads the mind to soar too far,
 Till our own weakness shows us what we are.

For Byron, the problem of beginning—and ending—in “poesy” has ultimately to do with knowing how far the poet should reach. This stanza sums up Byron’s philosophy and his aesthetic. Although he maintains an ironic understanding of the universe, Byron knows we are not ever satisfied with earth, and so for him poetry will be made out of endless attempts to rise, but it will also reflect the ever-leveling force of gravity, which pulls even the greatest poets back to earth.

At every step in the long progress of Byron’s poem, *Don Juan*, closure is avoided—this applies to individual stanzas, but also to the narrative itself. Our hero cannot rest for long before circumstance, fate, or just the author’s own restlessness puts Don Juan back on the path of another adventure. Byron is like a shark: if he stops moving—or if his poem stops moving—he’ll suffocate. As Byron himself once put it, “I can’t stagnate.”⁸ And as the example of Byron proves, this process of creation and de-creation can be very productive for the poet: rather than being a dead end, the rise and fall of the ironic structure can lead to a kind of improvisational poetic momentum.

As we have seen, the ironic structure imitates or enacts a sense of uncertainty about the world. The following poem, Constantine Cavafy’s “Waiting for the Barbarians,”⁹ records a series of questions and answers between two speakers who are poised on the very edge of such uncertainty:

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

 The barbarians are due here today.

 Why isn’t anything going on in the senate?
 Why are the senators sitting there without legislating?

 Because the barbarians are coming today.
 What’s the point of senators making laws now?
 Once the barbarians are here, they’ll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,
and why is he sitting enthroned at the city's main gate
in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and the emperor's waiting to receive their leader.
He's even got a scroll to give him,
loaded with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,
rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?
Why are they carrying elegant canes
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators turn up as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.
And some of our men just in from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

The stage setting here—forum, praetors, emperor, barbarians—helps us place this poem in the ancient world, or at least in a society simplistically divided between a distinguished “us” and a barbaric “them.” In this poem, the ironic structure serves to build suspense and then deflate all that suspense in the final lines. The simple question and answer format emphasizes the fact that civilization as the speakers know it is about to be destroyed. Each of the questions points to the strangeness of the situation, since every common activity of life in this place is being disrupted: the senators aren't legislating, the orators aren't orating, and everyone, even the bureaucratic consuls are dressed

to the nines. And all of this is happening, the answers tell us each time, because “the barbarians” are coming closer and closer with each passing minute.

The poem is structured to build toward the arrival of these barbarians, to make us yearn to see what their arrival will bring—after all, they are barbarians!

But all the energy of that building suspense dissipates suddenly in the poem’s final lines when Cavafy reveals his surprise: “night has fallen and the barbarians haven’t come.” This is the first of three deflations really, since we fall even farther upon reading the next lines, which reveal that perhaps “there are no barbarians any longer.” And the first speaker—always full of questions—finds he must answer his own question in the poem’s final gesture: indeed, what will happen to these people without barbarians? “They were,” he concludes, “a kind of solution.”

After so much building up, that feels like a rather flat, enigmatic conclusion. Clearly, the meaning of the final line emerges from the ironic structure itself. Almost every gesture of the poem illustrates the way this culture defines its idea of itself—in this case by relying upon a group of other beings, “the barbarians,” to serve as examples for what they are not. Each question—with its underlying assumptions about the lowly barbarians (those easily bored beings simple enough to be “dazzled” by jewels)—betrays the speaker’s desperate need to reaffirm his culture’s superiority, its assumed difference from the barbaric barbarians. But all that comes crashing down in the poem’s ironic final gesture: the barbarians don’t come at all, and what’s left in their absence? What “solution” did the barbarians offer? The meaning of that final line arises out of this irony—the speakers are so dependent on the fact that they are *not* barbarians, they haven’t taken the time to define themselves in any other meaningful way. When the barbarians don’t arrive, these citizens prove hollow, and their idea of what defines them collapses inward. The ironic structure allows Cavafy to illustrate poignantly this shallow, racist mentality, and at the same to satirize it and to reveal its emptiness in these citizens’ own words.

Uncertainty—or more specifically a desperate longing for certainty—is also the central theme of this last example of the ironic structure in a poem called “The Most of It”¹⁰ by Robert Frost. If Cavafy’s poem was primarily social, Frost’s poem is primarily philosophical and spiritual. Like all of us, the character depicted in this poem begs to know what’s “out there,” wants desperately to see into invisible places, wants an answer from the universe:

He thought he kept the universe alone;
 For all the voice in answer he could wake
 Was but the mocking echo of his own
 From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.
 Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
 He would cry out on life, that what it wants
 Is not its own love back in copy speech,
 But counter-love, original response.
 And nothing ever came of what he cried
 Unless it was the embodiment that crashed

In the cliff's talus on the other side,
 And then in the far-distant water splashed,
 But after a time allowed for it to swim,
 Instead of proving human when it neared
 And someone else additional to him,
 As a great buck it powerfully appeared,
 Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
 And landed pouring like a waterfall,
 And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
 And forced the underbrush—and that was all.

The irony in this poem is suspended until the very last moment. In order to understand how this poem comes to its conclusion, it is helpful to think of the poem as having an introduction and conclusion (or lack of conclusion), even if they are not divided for you by a stanza break.

The first nine lines act as a kind of preface here, providing us with the background information we need to register the importance of what happens in the rest of the poem. Already with the opening line, we know we are dealing with a character who stands at a rather odd angle to the universe. "He thought he kept the universe alone," we are told; shall we take this as a statement of ultimate solitude? Or shall we emphasize that word "thought," and realize that such a "thought" is rather preposterous—after all, none of us keeps the universe to himself. In either case, the next lines offer us a reason for why he might think this. When he stands at the edge of a lake, upon a "boulder-broken beach," the only voice he hears when he "cries out on life" is his own echo, come back to him from the "tree-hidden cliff across the lake." The only "voice in answer he could wake/Was but the mocking echo of his own," and he is never satisfied with that answer. Clearly he wants more than that—he is tired of "copy speech," of echo, and wants instead "counter-love, original response." "And nothing ever came of what he cried," we are told, "unless . . .".

This depressing pattern of behavior—his forlorn shouting and echoing—is finally broken in the remaining lines of the poem, which consist of one long, suspended sentence. With this prefatory information behind us, we are now prepared for the surprise arrival—but of what? We cannot be sure that what follows actually "came from what he cried," since that word "unless" keeps us from being very certain, but what comes is at least an "embodiment that crashed/in the cliff's talus on the other side." We are meant to imagine the man's astonishment here; after all, he's been repeatedly asking the emptiness for an answer for his cries "out on life" and at last he might be receiving one. Frost maintains suspense by postponing the arrival of this "embodiment" for as long as he can, letting it swim slowly toward us, employing comma after comma to slow this revelation.

The buck that emerges from the water, though beautifully "pouring like a waterfall," is not immediately satisfying. There is a note or two of disappointment: what arrives is not even human, is not "someone else additional to him." And how is "a great buck" an answer to the man's appeal? Here, the power of the ironic structure comes into

play. Frost knows we will be tempted to ponder the meaning of such an epiphanic occurrence. We long for certainty; we want the universe to have order and meaning, and we want those meanings to be spelled out in terms we can understand. Perhaps we wish to see the buck (a creature of enormous grace and strength) as confirmation that a being—a god?—with such attributes controls the universe? Perhaps we are tempted to see the buck as an image of wildness, or nature's unflinching power over man. Frost carefully orchestrates the poem's final lines to allow us such inflated interpretations, but he will not be content to let them stand. The buck does not stop and utter any satisfying moral—even Keats' Grecian Urn at least gets to speak! And wouldn't it seem rather silly if the buck did speak? In any case, the buck has already moved on, having "stumbled through the rocks with horny tread." Frost's frank four-syllable conclusion, "and that was all," brings us crashing back to reality. All we get in answer from the universe—if

Using the Ironic Structure Writing Exercises

For a poet like Byron, the quarrels with himself tend to work their way out humorously. The narrator of *Don Juan* has the courage to admit his own limitations, and to laugh at his own foolishness and that of others. A high proportion of the stanzas that make up *Don Juan* remind us of the importance of humor in a world where most hard conclusions come at the expense of living without the blindfolds of overwrought idealism and existential clichés. The kind of ironic reversal that works to fuel the punchlines of jokes, or gives limericks their signature finish, operates so insistently in Byron that we cannot help but understand it as the author's unique and hilarious perspective on the world. A key component of the ironic structure involves this kind of surprise, one that helps us register the distance between where we start and where we end. Consider writing a poem in which you locate an argument with yourself, one that demonstrates the distance between what you believe when you dream and what you know when you are awake. Finding humorous examples will be essential when you first try your hand at the ironic structure.

Remember that we often have debates with ourselves over things that are decidedly silly and mundane: "I will floss today. No, I will not floss today."

The poems by Frost and Cavafy remind us that such debates can be profoundly deep and difficult as well. Try writing a poem that declares openly a set of beliefs about a subject of some importance to you, remembering to illustrate those declarations in a way that will allow the reader to "see" them in action, just as Cavafy uses his question and answer format and Frost uses his elaborate philosophical preface to draw us into the matter at hand. Then find a way to undermine your declarations suddenly and surprisingly. As Robert Frost himself reminds us, "No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader." It's crucial that the ironic reversal does not merely come off as a cop out, or intellectual surrender. This will be a rather strenuous intellectual activity, one you shouldn't take too lightly—or chances are the poem will fail. The ironic structure reminds us how difficult it is to keep optimism and skepticism in proper balance—if we can maintain any balance at all.

we get anything—is this: either it was just a buck, or it meant something more, or it was nothing at all. There is simply no way to tell. Like Byron, Frost has an ironic understanding of the universe, one that allows for the possibility of mystery and wonder, but cannot help but check such possibilities with recurring notes of skepticism. His poem enacts this philosophical attitude right before our eyes, playfully baiting us into believing more—or perhaps less—than we should.

Notes

¹ X.J. Kennedy, from *An Introduction To Poetry*. 2nd Edition. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1971.

² Charles Bernstein, “Shaker Show,” from *My Way: Speeches and Poems*. University of Chicago Press, 1999; Used by permission of the author.

³ “Comment,” copyright ©1926, © renewed 1954 by Dorothy Parker, from *The Portable Dorothy Parker* by Dorothy Parker, edited by Brendan Gill. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

⁴ Anne Mellor, *English Romantic Irony*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lord Byron, *Don Juan*.

⁸ Mellor, *English Romantic Irony*, p. 4.

⁹ Keeley, Edmund; *C. P. Cavafy*. ©1975 by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

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