

Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*
Preface and Chapter 1, “The Ironic Situation”
Wesley Advocates 9 October 2016

See end for preface and definitions.

Chapter 1, “The Ironic Situation”

“Pure tragedy elicits tears of admiration and pity for the hero who is willing to brave death or incur guilt for the sake of some great good. Irony, however, prompts some laughter and a nod of comprehension beyond the laughter; for irony involves comic absurdities which cease to be altogether absurd when fully understood. Our age is involved in irony because so many dreams of our nation have been so cruelly refuted by history. Our dreams of a pure virtue are dissolved. . . . “(2) What dreams of virtue? Who holds them? Do we admit to those dreams? Have we surrendered them?

“Our situation of historic frustration becomes doubly ironic through the fact that the power of recalcitrance against our fondest hopes is furnished by a demonic religio-political creed which had even simpler notions than we of finding an escape from the ambiguity of man’s strength and weakness. For communism believes that it is possible for man, at a particular moment in history, to take ‘the leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom.’” (3) What are the realms of necessity and freedom? How does one make that leap?

Where are our philosopher-kings? Have we become so jaded that we no longer even search for or hope for them? Do we need to reread *The Republic*? Have we entered the cave and turned our backs on the world, now mistaking the reflections on the cave wall for reality? (4)

Have we rejected Providence? Have we rejected the Christian idea of the ambiguity of human virtue? (4) What lies within that ambiguity? Who can live with profound ambiguity? How?

Before the Great War, did Americans continue the innocence of irresponsibility and a religious version of belief in national destiny, meaning our nationhood was God's effort to make a new beginning in the history of mankind? And if so, then what happened? (4) Now what do we live by?

"Our idealists are divided between those who would renounce the responsibilities of power for the sake of preserving the purity of our soul and those who are ready to cover every ambiguity of good and evil in our actions by the frantic insistence that any measure taken in a good cause must be unequivocally virtuous." (5) Where are our idealists? Why are they thus divided, supposing we agree with RN?

Why does RN think we are "schizophrenic" on the subject of power? (5)

Have we dismissed the concept of immortality as wishful thinking? Have we become so preoccupied with our technical and scientific culture in order to gain physical security (from what?) that we have ignored the hazards of materialism? (6)

Note RN's statement that from our Calvinist and

Jeffersonian ancestors we inherited the conviction that there is perfect compatibility between virtue and prosperity. Is that true now? How do we know? (7)

When he talks about the vexations and frustrations of global responsibility, what does he mean? (7)

Have we placed “extravagant emphasis” on the value and dignity of the individual and individual liberty as “the final value of life”? If so, where is the evidence? What are the consequences? (7)

RN points out the irony in our valuing the “freedom and uniqueness of the individual” amid a culture, a civilization which obscures individuality in science and technology and dismisses man’s freedom and capacity for self-determination.” What can we say in response? (8)

Throughout RN’s chapter, is it possible to replace *communism* with *terrorism*?

Do we hold, with RN, that scientific instruments are unable to discover the integral, self-transcending center of personality above the stream of nature—that self-transcending center which religion and poetry take for granted? What is that? How do we know it exists? (9)
How does science fail? How does religion fail nowadays even to engage with these ideas? How has literature failed?

Do we agree with RN that in the scientific account of human affairs, the individual is an embarrassment? (9)
Why or why not?

RN notes that many young men assured by American and other idealists that only the individual counts have nevertheless died upon foreign battlefields. What is he criticizing here? Why? (10)

“Contemporary history not merely offers ironic refutation of some of our early hopes and present illusions about ourselves; but the experience which furnishes the refutation is occasioned by conflict with a foe who has transmuted ideals and hopes, which we most deeply cherish, into cruel realities which we most fervently abhor. “ (11) What ideals and hopes, what cruel realities does RN refer to? What, if anything, has changed since the demise of the USSR and end of the Cold War?

What comments, agreements, refutations can we offer to the following statements from pages 12-16?

“Our modern commercial civilization mixes Christian ideals of personality, history, and community with characteristic bourgeois concepts. Everything in the Christian faith which points to ultimate and transcendent possibilities is changed into simple historical achievements. The religious vision of a final realm of perfect love in which life is related to life without the coercion of power is changed into the pretension that a community, governed by prudence, using covert rather than overt forms of power, and attaining a certain harmony of balanced competitive forces, has achieved an ideal social harmony.” (12)

“The knight of old knew about power. He sat on a horse, the symbol of military power. But the power of the modern commercial community is contained in the ‘counters’ of stocks and bonds which are stored in the vaults of the bank. Such a community creates a culture in which nothing is officially known about power, however desperate may be the power struggles within it.” (13)

“The Christian ideal of the equality of all men before God and of equality as a regulative principle of justice is made into a simple historical possibility. It is used by bourgeois

man as a weapon against feudal inequality; but it is not taken seriously when the classes below him lay claim to it.” (13)

“The Christian idea of the significance of each individual in God’s sight becomes, in bourgeois civilization, the concept of a discrete individual who makes himself the final end of his own existence. The Christian idea of providence is rejected for the heady notion that man is the master of his fate and the captain of his soul.” (13) *Please note the importance of this return to Protagoras’s Sophism and relativism: he said, “Man is the measure of all things.” Aechylus, Sophokles, Euripides. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle disagreed. So did Jesus; so did Wesley. Have we returned completely to Protagoras and relativism? What and where are absolutes? Have we sacrificed all absolute values to science and individualism? Examples?*

“For the liberal idea of the natural goodness of all men, [communism] substitutes the idea of the exclusive virtue of the proletariat, who, according to Lenin, are alone capable of courage and disinterestedness.” (14)

“Our own nation is both the participant and the victim of this double irony in a special way. Of all the ‘knights’ of bourgeois culture, our castle is the most imposing and our horse the sleekest and most impressive. Our armor is the shiniest (if it is legitimate to compare atom bombs with a knight’s armor); and the lady of our dreams is most opulent and desirable. The lady has been turned into ‘prosperity.’” (15-16)

Preface

RN appropriates several terms arising from and belonging to literature and art as if they are simply mainstream nouns. In addition to his appropriations, I provide some

definitions here.

pathos (Gr. *suffering, deep feeling*): the quality which stimulates pity, tenderness, or sorrow; acquiescent or relatively helpless suffering or sorrow occasioned by unmerited grief—as opposed to stoic grandeur and awful justice of tragic hero (e.g., Hamlet is tragic and Ophelia, pathetic; Lear is tragic, Cordelia, pathetic).

We pity those we perceive as beneath us, persons failing to act as agents of their own wills, persons morally and physically inferior to us—they are pathetic (as in melodrama or farce); we feel kinship to and understand those we perceive as like or equal to us in virtue and physical ability—we sympathize with them (as in comedy); we esteem those we perceive as superior to us morally or physically—we admire them and wish we could emulate them (as in epic and tragedy).

tragedy (Gr. *goat song*): drama which recounts an important and causally related series of events in life of person of significance, such events culminating in catastrophe, with the protagonist isolated from the community or slain, the whole treated with dignity and seriousness (e.g., *Agamemnon*, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*).

comedy (Gr. *revel singer*): drama which aims primarily to amuse and which ends happily, with the protagonist reintegrated into the community; includes sustained plot, weighty and subtle dialogue, natural characters; strives to evoke smiles and laughter with wit and humor, incongruities of speech and physical situation (e.g., *Birds*, *Lysistrata*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado about Nothing*).

Irony (Gr. *eiron* = *dissembler; simulated ignorance*): involving some discrepancy or incongruity; conveying a truth about human experience by exposing some incongruity in a character's behavior or a society's traditions, recognition of a reality different from the masking appearance.

Verbal irony is a figure of speech in which the speaker says the opposite of what he intends. Concluding a meal at which he has eaten two servings of every dish, a man says to his wife, "I sure wish you'd learn to cook something fit to eat."

Situational irony reveals a discrepancy between appearance and reality, between expectation and fulfillment, between what is and what would seem appropriate. For example, a great hunter becomes the hunted; a great beauty grows into a hag.

Dramatic irony involves a discrepancy between what the audience knows and what the characters know. We feel simultaneously removed or detached from an action or situation because we know more than those participating in the action itself and feel, usually, more sympathetic to those who lack the fullness of our knowledge. For instance, long before Shylock discovers the betrayal, we learn about Jessica's love for the Christian Lorenzo and her plan to rob and abandon Shylock, thereby creating dramatic irony.

Before Lady Macbeth loses her mind and dies, we witness her struggle to remain her husband's confidante while he, filled with fear and visions, has chosen to abandon all confidences and trust only murderers, thereby further isolating himself and Lady Macbeth from each other.

arête (Gr. *excellence*): moral virtue, excellence, often the cause of an epic or tragic hero's anagnorisis (recognition of his true nature, true situation) and subsequent catastrophe (e.g., Hektor becomes prey to Achilles and all other Achaians specifically because he is the great defender; Oedipus fulfills the Delphic oracle specifically because he

is intelligent, inquisitive, and proactive; Hamlet falls prey to Claudius and Laertes specifically because he seeks to avenge his father, as asked, and acts).

hubris (Gr. *overweening pride*): excessive pride, often in one's *arête*, which results in a tragic protagonist's catastrophe, usually the direct result of *hamartia* or missing the mark—from archery, “to miss the bull’s eye (e.g., Oedipus’s overconfidence in his reasoning ability leads him to one misinterpretation after another—and to catastrophe; Agamemnon’s excessive pride leads him into Klytaimnestra’s trap so that he offends the gods and meets catastrophe).