3 'About 136'

Bob Dylan's democratic irony

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In December 1965, Bob Dylan held a press conference in Los Angeles. Its tone was set by the first exchange:

REPORTER: How many people who labour in the same musical vineyard in which you toil…how many are protest singers…?
DYLAN: How many?
REPORTER: Yes, are there many who –
DYLAN: Yeah, I think there's about 136.
REPORTER: You say, 'about 136'?
DYLAN: Yeah.
REPORTER: Or do you mean exactly 136?
DYLAN: It's either 136 or 142.

(quoted in Burger 2018, 116)

Definitional issues aside, Dylan's responses were clearly ironic. The most obvious indicators were how quickly, when pressed, Dylan changed his initial answer to the equally arbitrary 142, and how he took literally a question meant impressionistically. Both suggest the disconnect between what he said (the number) and what he meant (his disdain for the question). The laughter from *some* of those present likewise suggests irony's power to create and reveal an in-group and an out-group; just as the reporter's embarrassing struggle to pin down a number he does not realise is irrelevant suggests a cruelty with which irony is sometimes associated. For those opposed to what they see as the pernicious ubiquity of irony in (post)modernity, Dylan's mid-sixties insouciance captures much they find objectionable, especially concerning its negative impact upon democratic life and politics. In addition to its supposed divisiveness and elitism, critics might see in the exchange the corrosion of a trust and reciprocity central to democratic politics. Irony is likewise seen as promoting a dissimulation antithetical to public deliberation, and a lack of seriousness that makes hard decisions and resolute action impossible. Here, however, I will argue that Dylan's embrace of irony offers a counterargument to such claims. The argument is not that irony's critics are entirely mistaken, simply that they underestimate its value as a political aesthetic and

democratic pedagogy. Dylan's work shows how irony can cultivate a recognition of duality and contingency conducive to the development of a political ethos: a 'bicameral orientation' that, William Connolly (2005) argues, is essential to democratic politics (4).

Only a pawn in their game?

Although the struggle to define irony has prompted a veritable 'cottage industry in taxonomy' (Monson 1988, 541), the most persistent understanding of the term is saying the opposite of what is meant. It is the first definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*,[1] and one which Will Kaufmann (1997) traces to Cicero and Samuel Johnson (36). Many who denigrate irony in public life predicate their arguments on this understanding. Robert McCrum employs it to critique what he considers to be the debasement of modern life by irony's widespread embrace. For him, irony 'clogs up the arteries of grown-up discussion', producing an 'infantilization of public discourse', and corrupts the citizenry's democratic ethos. 'Irony […] comes with personal flippancy and emotional evasiveness, a refusal to face things squarely'; it belittles, he argues, the freedom that makes it possible, asking was it 'irreverence or the stiff upper lip that got us through two world wars and a depression?' (McCrum 2000, n.p.). David Foster Wallace (1993) expressed similar concerns, suggesting that irony is 'not liberating but enfeebling', further arguing that 'irony tyrannizes us' because the 'ironist is *impossible to pin down*'. Irony, he complains, 'is meant to make us uneasy' (Wallace 1993, 183). His critique is, however, more nuanced than McCrum's. Capturing irony's Janus-faced nature, he notes that while it promotes 'great despair and stasis', it can also be 'entertaining and effective' (Wallace 1993, 171). Furthermore, his suggestion that 'ironists work best in soundbites' indicates a belief that irony itself is not necessarily the problem, but rather its saturation of the culture; certainly, he admires how Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo use it (Wallace 1993, 167). It is not coincidental that Wallace's definition of irony is less Manichean than McCrum's: he identifies it as a '*tension* between what's said' and what is meant, with irony serving to '*undercut* what's said' (Wallace 1993, 161; my emphasis). Wallace's account is, however, still somewhat limited in its appreciation of irony's political and aesthetic possibilities: as evidenced by the overly reductive critiques offered by some of his acolytes (Ashby and Carroll 2014).

Melvin Rogers's critique of irony focuses on Richard Rorty's attempts to employ it to liberal-democratic ends. Although Rorty's understanding of irony is often considered idiosyncratic (Saatkamp 1995; Stow 2007), Rogers offers insights of value to critiques of irony more broadly understood. Like Wallace, Rogers expands his definition of irony beyond the simple opposition of meaning and expression. He also introduces the idea of the ironist as an identity, someone for whom irony is less a matter of individual utterances than about how their utterances are rendered together, warning that there 'is always a provisional tint to such a person's character' (Rogers 2004, 107). He

further shows how irony can humiliate fellow citizens – such as Dylan's press conference interlocutor – arguing that irony's dissembling is not only damaging to the democratic ethos of individual citizens, it also undermines the trust and reciprocity democratic politics requires (Rogers 2004, 95, 97). Critics of irony in democratic life and politics see it, then, as a corrosive force, not only damaging to the polity, but also to the ironist him or herself (Hutcheon 1994, 52). Irony, Rogers (2004) argues, undoes democracy and is thus to be eschewed (96). This is not a new concern: as John Lombardini (2018) notes, in Ancient Athens irony was a 'contested practice precisely because it raised certain democratic anxieties about its antidemocratic implications' (26). The existence of such anxieties should not, however, serve to disqualify irony as a democratic resource. As Dylan's work demonstrates, it is far too useful and sophisticated an instrument to be abandoned simply because it can be employed in troublesome ways.

Jokerman

One of two original songs on Dylan's first album, 'Talkin' New York' (1962) is a humorous, first-person account of musician's struggle to make it in the big city. It is also the first time that Dylan's commitment to irony is captured on record. Declaring New York winters so cold that people could freeze to the bone, the narrator asserts that he does not feel so cold once the *New York Times* declared it the coldest winter in seventeen years. Here, Dylan's irony almost corresponds with the most common definition of the term: he says he feels less cold but means something like its opposite. The effect is humorous and seemingly without greater rhetorical or political import. A later use is somewhat richer. Having secured a harmonica job, the singer devotes two lines to his patron's enthusiasm for his sound, concluding with the observation that, for this much-vaunted performance, he is paid a dollar a day. There is obvious irony here: the juxtaposition of the twice repeated expression of enthusiasm, the effort expended by the performer, and the pittance paid. This is a form of situational irony: what is expected contrasts with what occurs. The statement that his performance is worth a dollar a day seems similarly ironic, the implication being that the performance is worth more. Significantly, this is not quite the *opposite* of what is said, it merely *differs* from what is said, a seemingly small but important difference that expands the definition of irony in productive ways. Indeed, restricting the definition of irony to diametric opposition obscures a further dimension of the narrator's assertion about the value of his performance: because the narrator is paid the market rate, there is a sense in which his work is worth precisely that. Here, then, what the narrator says and what he means are both congruent and not congruent, with Dylan's timing and tone calling into question the narrator's renumeration and/or the market as a mechanism for evaluating his art. Even in this small instance, Dylan's work reveals irony to be considerably richer than the most common definition would suggest: it is multifaceted and

multilayered in ways that create far more possibilities for meaning and effect than its critics suggest. This is further evidenced by the song's conclusion. Lamenting the cutthroat world of the New York folk scene, the narrator declares that he is heading out West. Boldly bidding farewell to the city, his epic quest ends some twenty miles later in East Orange, New Jersey. Employing situational irony to comedic effect, the singer travels to a location that is, indeed, west of Manhattan – what is said here is what is meant – but not what might be expected or implied given the conventions of the westward journey in American culture. As with the market value of his harmonica playing, the narrator offers a statement in which what is said is what is meant – it really is the case that the singer is heading out West – but it is not necessarily *everything* that is meant, nor, indeed, what is strongly implied. Similarly, the song's final line further exposes the overly narrow definition of irony embraced by many of its critics. Songs in the rambling blues genre feature itinerant singers whose journeys provides fodder for their art. In 'Talkin' New York', not only does the singer's journey end in New Jersey, but the choice of 'Orange' – for which there is famously no rhyme – as the song's final word suggests that the singer's songwriting will also end. This tension, then, between the song's generic expectations and what it delivers, further suggests the irony is far richer and potentially more productive than its critics suggest.

At this point, it would, nevertheless, be too much to argue that Dylan's work offers a positive case for irony in public life: the irony in 'Talkin' New York' is largely comedic and aesthetic, where the latter is meant to suggest the pleasure – arising from what Wayne Booth (1961) calls the 'secret communion' between the author and reader (300–303) – that comes from peeling back layers of possible significance in sentences that appear to mean something more than, or different from, what they ostensibly express. 'Talkin' New York' suggests, however, that any engagement with irony demands a far richer definition than those generally employed by its critics. Those more sympathetic to irony's role in (post)modern life tend to relax the suggestion that the relationship between meaning and intent is necessarily oppositional, pointing instead to a tension between the two. Paul de Man (1983), for example, asserts that in irony 'the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the thematization of this difference' (209; see also Oergel 2000, 515 and Hutcheon 1994, 11). 'Talkin' New York' offers another possible permutation: the expression of a sincere and/or truthful statement – being worth a dollar a day, or heading out West – in a way that suggests the speaker might also mean something else, especially when the speaker also does mean something else. Dylan's irony reveals its duality to be more than the simple juxtaposition of opposites: Dylan employs this 'most ill-behaved of all literary tropes' (States 1971, 3) in multiple ways to multiple ends, further suggesting the democratic possibilities of irony, even when his work is not explicitly political in intent or effect.

Although Dylan is – because of his early zeitgeist-capturing songs such as 'Blowin' in the Wind' (1963a) – frequently hailed as 'the voice of a generation', a label he disdains (Burger 2018, 78, 82), he is also a writer of great songs about romantic relationships. These should be distinguished, perhaps, from 'love songs', which are often – though not necessarily – one dimensional. Relationship songs are multilayered, addressing not just the first flush of romance but all aspects of human intimacy. While love songs are seldom marked by irony, Dylan's turn to irony in some of his relationship songs suggests that irony can be an enriching rather than a corrosive force in human interaction. In 'Don't Think Twice It's All Right' (1963b), for example, the narrator, addressing a former love, laments the failure of their relationship and repeatedly asserts his ex-lover's blamelessness and the absence of a need for regret. The repeated assertion that the ex should not think twice about the reasons for their split suggests a certain magnanimity, an uncommon refusal of one person to blame the other for the failure of a relationship. This apparent generosity is, however, also repeatedly undercut by snide assertions: most obviously, that the ex is a child who, while not necessarily treating the narrator poorly, nevertheless wasted his or her time.

T. McCracken argues that irony offers what musicians call triple-voicing, where 'two notes played together produce a third note which is at once both notes and neither' (quoted in Hutcheon 1994, 58). 'Don't Think Twice' appears to be a perfect example, illustrating the ways in which irony can imbue human expression with a richness and depth. The first note is the depiction a post-relationship marked by an apparent magnanimity unusual in the aftermath of intimacy. The second is the undercutting of this purported generosity by the barbs aimed at the former lover. The third is the possible effect that the juxtaposition of the first two notes has on the listener. Initially, perhaps, the listener is taken in by the narrator's faux magnanimity. Over the course of the song, the listener might, nevertheless, come to realise that he or she has been misled by the duality of the narrator's ironic – given that it actually demands its opposite – injunction not to think twice, an injunction aimed at both the lover and the listener. Were he or she to think twice, the listener might come to see his or her own capacity for a certain kind of blindness to human behaviours, one that might benefit their own intimate relationships. Thus, the possible humiliation arising from irony, which so troubles its critics, might be thought of as a source of insight into the self, an opportunity for the listener to experience a meaningful form of self-transformation or personal growth.[2] A second, and closely related, aspect of irony's third note is the possibility that the listener might come to understand the difference between the song's narrator and its author. Just as the narrator admonishes the song's object against second thoughts – as a means of prompting him or her to do precisely that – he or she also prompts the listener to do the same while ostensibly demanding the opposite. With the ironic invocation coming at the end of each of the four verses, moreover, object and audience are ultimately prodded to think four times about what is being said (or eight times if the 'don't' is understood to mean its opposite). This ironic tension between what

the narrator is saying and how often the artist makes him or her say it should, perhaps, suggest to the listener that he or she must do more than simply let the song wash over him or her: that listening is an activity (Bickford 1996, Dobson 2014). A final aspect of irony's third note might be the depiction of the complexities of romantic relationships: capturing the juxtaposition of good intentions and small feelings that structure human behaviours. In 'Don't Think Twice', then, Dylan employs irony to add depth, nuance, and self-awareness to what might otherwise be a one-sided tirade of little aesthetic value.

The presence or absence of irony from a song is not, of course, evidence of a song's quality or lack thereof. Dylan has written many wonderful songs in many genres that are devoid of irony; likewise, he has written songs whose embrace of the ironic fails to save them from their awfulness. 'Rainy Day Women #12 & 35' (1966) is a case in point. Structured around a pun on the dual meaning of what it means to get stoned – the Biblical punishment and smoking marijuana – the song accomplishes little beyond the expression of its lame joke, failing to achieve what McCracken calls irony's triple note. Here, the pleasure of the 'secret communion' between artist and audience is mitigated by the openness of the secret. 'Emotionally Yours' (1985) not only demonstrates that pleasure, it suggests much about irony's power to disorientate the listener in productive ways. Presented as a romantic ballad crooned by Dylan in a delightful vocal, 'Emotionally Yours' and *Empire Burlesque*, the album from which it was drawn, were seen by many as Dylan eschewing the ironic. *The New York Times* suggested that the record 'may just be the test of a new stratagem – Mr. Dylan in his sincere mask' (Pareles 1985, H21); while, under the headline 'Dylan returns without the mask', *The Boston Globe* declared that in 'Emotionally Yours' he 'again treads the path of the resolute lover' (Morse 1985, 57). Befitting a song on an album with the word 'burlesque' in its title, 'Emotionally Yours' is, nevertheless, a song whose apparently sincere form would appear to belie its content. In only the first verse, the narrator acknowledges that his or her lover is suspicious of him or her, before making a promise to remain emotionally committed. The charming vocal masks the possible hollowness of the promise: emotional commitment does not appear to entail physical fidelity. Indeed, the singer seems to be promising an emotional connection as a rationalisation for sexual infidelity, especially given the assertion, in the final verse, that the singer will remain emotionally faithful whenever they are apart. This implication is, perhaps, strengthened by the details of Dylan's biography – much has been written about his alleged philandering.[3] As such, 'Emotionally Yours' offers something far less straightforward than many critics of the song have discerned.[4] Although Travis Andrews (2018) might have been overstating the case when he declared that '[i]t's never a good idea to take a Dylan lyric literally', the literal and the ironic exist in a symbiotic relationship – if there are no lyrics that one could take literally, there would be no lyrics that one could take ironically – it is, nevertheless, true that songs such as 'Emotionally Yours' serve, or should serve, to generate precisely the sense of unease in the listener

that David Foster Wallace and others consider to be so corrosive of our democratic life and politics. Such unease might, nevertheless, be their positive contribution to democracy.

Political world

Whomever could tell when Socrates was being serious and when he was joking, Goethe famously observed, would be doing humanity a great service (Nehamas 1998, 7). It may be, however, that it is precisely the inability to decode the ambiguity in Socrates's 'habitual irony' that makes him – contrary to many readings of Plato (Popper 1945) – such an important figure in the history and practice of democratic politics. This is not to say that clarity is not useful to, and important in, facilitating the rule of the many. Indeed, Dylan's work shows how, contrary to those who would decry irony's supposed lack of seriousness – and thus its unsuitability for democratic politics – irony can serve to convey injustice and hypocrisy in ways that might be unavailable to, or less effective than, the literal. Although Dylan would frequently eschew the 'protest singer' label foisted on him by journalists, fans, and critics, he has, nevertheless, identified himself as a writer and singer of 'finger-pointing' songs (Hentoff 1964, n.p.). While finger-pointing would seem to be the antithesis of irony – and many such songs are entirely devoid of it, including 'Masters of War' and the 'Ballad of Hollis Brown' – Dylan's work frequently employs irony to finger-pointing ends.

In 'Only a Pawn in Their Game' (1964a), Dylan traces the causes of the murder of the African American civil rights activist Medgar Evers back from the trigger man to politicians, policemen, white citizens, soldiers, and sheriffs, declaring that each was not to blame because of their connection to a broader set of social causes. This ironic device – also employed in the 1963 song, 'Who Killed Davey Moore?' (1991) – serves not only to point the finger at the named parties, but also at those who would casually dismiss the culpability of these figures by gesturing towards vague structural explanations. As in 'Talkin' New York', irony here serves to expose and cut through cant, but with added political significance. Given irony's inherent ambiguity, it is, of course, always possible that a listener might hear the singer advocating for the vacuous causality that he seems to critique. Nevertheless, Dylan demonstrates the way in which irony can be employed to achieve an aesthetic effect that points to a sincerely and seriously held political position, an irony that is – contrary to McCrum – integral to resolute political action. 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll' (1964b) similarly employs irony to serious political effect: exposing the hypocrisy of America's alleged commitment to racial justice. Having recounted the true story of the murder of a black housekeeper, Hattie Carroll, by her rich white employer, William Zantzinger, the singer concludes by recounting the final injustice of the trial. In ten lines he lays out the supposed values of justice and equality and the judge's purported commitment to upholding them, concluding with the judge giving a six-month sentence for an unprovoked murder. Thus, what might have

appeared to have been a sincere account of the workings of the law is revealed to be an ironic expression of contempt for the same. Unlike in 'Only a Pawn in Their Game', moreover, the possibility for misunderstanding seems so small as to be invisible. Here, once again, Dylan's work suggests the limitations of those critiques of irony which would dismiss its political efficacy and possibilities. While obviously not on a par with Frederick Douglass's Fourth of July address, Dylan's work nevertheless captures something of the abolitionist's famous declaration that '[a]t a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed' (1999, 196).[5] As Douglass suggests, and Dylan's work confirms, sometimes irony facilitates the expression of that which cannot be said within the terms of existing democratic discourse, permitting those on the margins, or outside the parameters of the acceptable, to express their position with a strength and conviction that might otherwise remain unheard were it to be offered – if such a thing were possible – within the language games of the powerful. There is, perhaps, a distinction to be drawn between the political efficacy of showing and telling. Thus, in 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll', Dylan employs irony to demonstrate the injustice and hypocrisy of a politics whose expressed ideals are undercut by its practice in a way that simply declaring it corrupt could not possibly convey. While its critics are not wrong to express concern about irony's potentially pernicious impact on political discourse, Dylan's finger-pointing irony suggests they are mistaken in their dismissal of its democratic possibilities. This is most evident in their assertion that irony's cultivation of uncertainty is anti-democratic. In order to capture the full significance of Dylan's most profound and democratically-productive engagement with irony – that which draws on its capacity to cultivate, cope with, and embrace ambiguity – it is, however, first necessary to say something about irony's pedagogical function in ancient political thought and drama. For it is only against this background that Dylan's contribution to the rule of the many can be properly understood.

What was it you wanted?

Plato's *Republic* opens with Socrates and Glaucon being accosted by Polemarchus's slave, who demands they wait for his master. Polemarchus arrives soon thereafter:

> Polemarchus said, 'Socrates, I guess you two are hurrying to get away to town'. 'That's not a bad guess', I said.
>
> (Plato 1991, 3–4)

As Goethe suggests, in reading Plato, considerable attention is, and should be, paid to Socratic irony. As John Seery (1990) points out, however, less attention has been paid to Platonic irony, which suggests that, far from being a proto-fascist enemy of democracy, Plato was an immanent critic of popular rule. Socrates's answer to Polemarchus's question embodies both the Socratic and Platonic modes of irony in a way that further problematises

straightforward understandings of irony as antiphrasis. When Socrates declares '[t]hat's not a bad guess', Polemarchus assumes that Socrates has confirmed his suggestion. Socrates's answer is, however, entirely non-committal. Saying 'not a bad guess' is quite different from saying that Polemarchus is correct: a guess can be not bad, in the sense of being plausible, without necessarily being right. Read straight, Socrates simply confirms the veracity of Polemarchus's assertion; read otherwise, Socrates might be toying with his interlocutor. In the latter sense, his words are a manifestation of the 'habitual irony of Socrates' (Seery 1990, 14) that so infuriates Thrasymachus, the sophist stand-in for the reader frustrated by Socrates's unwillingness to give a direct answer even to the most prosaic questions. Platonic irony is also present in this exchange where Plato alerts the reader – or at least the *attentive* reader – that his character, Socrates, will not answer even basic questions directly, and that reading otherwise will be required in order to make sense of, and to derive benefit from, what follows. Thus, the multiple registers of Socrates's response might serve as a 'secret communion' between author and reader, one in which the author's words mean one thing for his characters and another for his readers. When Polemarchus fails to recognise the full implications of Socrates's response, Plato appeals over the heads of his characters to alert his readers to his presence in the narrative, and thus to the text's hermeneutic demands. Plato's authorial irony reveals, then, much about Polemarchus and about the pedagogical mechanisms by which the text seeks to shape its readers: as Victor Goldschmidt observes, the Platonic dialogues were not written to 'inform' readers, but rather to 'form' them (Hadot 2002, 73). In this, irony addresses the 'insoluble paradox of [democratic] politics', that 'good citizens presuppose good law (to shape them) but good law presupposes good citizens (to make good law)' (Honig 2009, 3).

Platonic irony is, Seery argues, ubiquitous in *The Republic*. Identifying the three arguments Socrates offers in Book X for banning the poets from the ideal city, Seery notes that all three are applicable to Socrates himself. They are, moreover, notoriously weak (Annas 1981, 336–344). This, Seery suggests, is deliberate. Such mechanisms are, he argues, Plato's way of drawing attention to his authorial presence, indicating that there is a distinction to be drawn between Socrates and Plato, and between what the text *says* and what it is trying to *convey*, thereby setting up 'a dialogue between Plato and us (as Plato's audience) in order to prompt us toward further reflection regarding the nature of political justice' (Seery 1990, 100). Such blatant inconsistencies, including his rejection of mimetic speech – *The Republic*'s primary narrative form – casts ironic doubt upon the claims that are made in the text, generating an ongoing sense of uncertainty in the reader. 'The textual incongruities and logical uncertainties', Seery (1990) concludes, 'constitute an invitation to the reader to pose questions of the text, as if one were involved in a dialogue with the author' (102). In this, Plato appears to be employing many of the devices and tropes of Attic comedy, itself widely understood to be a tool of democratic pedagogy, from which citizens learned the skills required for collective self-rule (Henderson 1990, 272). Attic comedy is acutely aware of its audience, with the 'fourth

wall' of the theatre constantly being broken by its actors and playwrights (Taplin 1986, 164, 170). The *parabasis* – a speech midway through the play in which the author addresses the audience through the chorus – is one such device. Likewise, the plays constantly draw attention to their fictive status by engaging in what critics have called 'metatheater': when the hero of Aristophanes's *Knights*, for instance, is informed that he is about to meet Cleon, he is told not to be afraid because the actor's mask is not a likeness of the tyrant (Redfield 1990, 316). Such comedy repeatedly plays with the notions of mask and disguise, 'especially with the *failure* of disguise, since this comically shakes the whole undertaking, and threatens to return the actors to the world of the audience' (Taplin 1986, 170; emphasis in original). Although Attic comedy has always been understood as political, recent scholarship has focused less on the supposed views of individual playwrights and rather more upon how the concern with masks and metatheater offered its audiences a particular perspective for viewing politics, which we might label the 'politics of uncertainty'.

Democracy, like irony, is Janus-faced, relying upon both certainty and uncertainty: the constitutional framework and the possibility of multiple outcomes within it. Democracy, like comedy, relies, furthermore, upon certain conventions that it is constantly testing. At their most healthy, they are both dynamic and ever changing: the tension between conventions and the testing of boundaries keeping both vital. When they become stolid and entirely predictable, both can suffer. At their best, however, both democracy and comedy are consistent and surprising, predictable and flexible. Attic comedy is political in that it offers a worldview that not only allows its audience to live with the uncertainty of democracy, but that also invigorates and enhances popular rule by cultivating a democratic ethos. As a political pedagogy, it rests upon 'an unsettling possibility of *reading otherwise*' (Goldhill 1991, 210; emphasis in original). The capacity to 'read otherwise' underpins democratic citizenship. Democracy rests upon the recognition that there are no fixed and final answers in the political and that most things – beyond the democratic structure – are up for debate. Democracy further demands that citizens learn to live with the outcomes of such debates, even if they do not share the sense that such outcomes are correct. Attic comedy offers tools for both generating, and for living with, the uncertainty of such outcomes. Although irony's critics associate it with corrosive negativity, irony can also be, and historically has been, democratically empowering. 'Irony's guns', observes D.J. Enright (1986), 'face in every direction' (110). The failure of irony's critics to appreciate its multiple registers arises, perhaps, from their failure to learn the lessons it offers about the problems of overly definitive statements. 'When men and women identify what are in fact their partial and particular causes too easily and too completely with the cause of some universal principle', writes Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), 'they usually behave worse than they would otherwise do' (288). Although MacIntyre is concerned with the moral registers of conflating the subjective/intersubjective with the objective – a concern that also drives Dylan's irony-laden, finger-pointing

'With God on Our Side' – his claim also has political and analytical resonance. Such intellectual inflexibility is evident in the blanket dismissals of the ironic by those who see it as a turn away from seriousness towards a world where anything goes: where if a single infelicity or ambiguity is embraced, all will be permitted. Irony can, however, teach its audiences to embrace the ambiguities at the heart of democracy and, thereby, engage critically with the problematic worldview identified by MacIntyre. If tragedy taught the Greeks about powerful forces that shaped their destinies, comedy's irony taught them their power to create anew: '[t]o look at the spectacle of social life and say: "it ain't necessarily so"' (Redfield 1990, 331). Irony reveals the contingency of political life by showing that things could be otherwise. It can likewise reveal hypocrisy, lies, double-standards, and faulty reasoning (Euben 1997, 133). There is much to suggest that the comic poets conceived of themselves – with much the same ambivalence expressed by Dylan about his finger-pointing – as watchdogs of the *dēmos*.

This turn to the ancient origins and function of irony reveals, then, its role in vivifying democratic practice. This might suggest that much of the criticism of irony in contemporary political life arises from the problematic conceptions of liberal individualism by which it is underpinned. Much liberal democratic theory assumes that democracy is a search for consensus predicated upon the frank exchange of reasoned opinions (Habermas 1991). Speech in which meaning differs from expression is obviously antithetical to deliberative understandings of democracy whose ideal speech situation demands sincerity. Critics of deliberative democracy also point to its problematic commitment to consensus, arguing that not only is such a commitment exclusionary and anti-democratic – every consensus has a remainder – but that it is also predicated upon a mistaken conception of the political. Theorists of agonistic democracy reject the telos of agreement underpinning consensus-based understandings, arguing that human interactions are conflictual not conciliatory. For them, the key political problem is how to structure disagreement in democratically productive ways: most obviously by turning antagonism into the respectful competition of agonism. Given Nietzsche's importance to agonistic democrats, it is not surprising that irony – a literary-rhetorical mode central to his thought – should be valorised in non-consensus-based theories of politics. For Connolly (2005), among others, agonistic politics demands a particular ethos: a 'critical responsiveness' that offers a '*form of careful listening and presumptive generosity*' (126; emphasis in original) to opponents, generating a 'bicameral orientation to political life […] straddling two or more perspectives to maintain tension between them' (4). By mimicking the pedagogical function of Attic comedy, irony can generate just such an ethos, cultivating bicamerality and teaching citizens to read otherwise. This ethic can serve to remind them of the contingency of their positions and, thus, avoid the moral and political pitfalls of an always anti-democratic commitment to certainty.

A face like a mask

In October 1975, Bob Dylan began a tour of North America with an eclectic group of musicians and guest stars, including Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, and Allen Ginsberg. 'The Rolling Thunder Revue' was the antithesis of his 1974 tour with The Band, which had played to sold out audiences in large arenas and performed their most famous songs in energetic but uninspired arrangements. Rolling Thunder, on the other hand, played a variety of venues: theatres, college gymnasiums, prisons, and convention centers. Dylan performed solo, with a band, and with his guests, offering inspired – and often radically reworked – versions of his hits, new and unreleased tracks, as well as folk and country classics. In addition, Dylan also cowrote – with Sam Shepherd – directed, and acted in *Renaldo and Clara* (1978), a nearly four-hour-long movie made up of concert footage, interviews, and dramatic scenes in which Dylan played Renaldo, his wife Sara played Clara, and Ronnie Hawkins played 'Bob Dylan'. Creating a version of himself as a separate character, Dylan embraced the ironic distancing of the mask central to the democratic pedagogy of Attic comedy. 'Bob Dylan', *Renaldo and Clara* suggested, was a *persona*: the Latin word for an actor's mask. In concert, Dylan also wore white greasepaint, signaling the artifice of his performance, a signal amplified by an imperfect application of the makeup that connected him to Attic comedy's 'failure of disguise' and Brechtian defamiliarisation. On Halloween 1975, moreover, Dylan opened the show wearing a Richard Nixon mask that he removed only to play harmonica. Indeed, throughout his career, Dylan has repeatedly implied that 'Bob Dylan' was a creation whose artifice offered a space for artistic creation: an ironic distance whose impact was evident in the difference between his serviceable 1974 performances and the innovative, passionate, and often sublime music on Rolling Thunder.

The fecundity of Dylan's embrace of irony, and its ongoing value as democratic pedagogy, is suggested by *Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story by Martin Scorsese* (2019). Ostensibly a documentary about the 1975–1976 tour, the film contains the musical performances, backstage footage, on-the-road vignettes, period interviews, and post-hoc talking heads common to the genre. In a genre ostensibly committed to presenting the truth of a subject,[6] however, the film's subtitle '*A* Bob Dylan Story' (my emphasis), suggests a certain subjectivity, as does 'by Martin Scorsese'.[7] The film opens, moreover, with a clip from the 1896 film *The Vanishing Lady*, in which a man makes a woman disappear then reappear. The illusion is clumsily executed: one cannot but be aware of how it is done. The gesture is, perhaps, not unlike Socrates's response to Polemarchus, with the director possibly seeking to signal to his audience that what follows cannot necessarily to be trusted, inculcating a democratically productive hermeneutics of suspicion. This baring of the device seems deliberate: it 'feels like a movie that wants to get caught', a 'feature-length magic trick of a movie – a séance disguised as a straightforward PBS-style program' (Ehrlich et al. 2019, n. p.). Undercutting generic expectations is, however, but one of the film's many ironies. The first talking head is offered by the modern-day Dylan. He begins to

describe the idea for the tour, then, seemingly struggling to say something of value, he repeatedly rubs his chin before declaring, '[a]hh, that's all clumsy bullshit'. An abrupt cut finds Dylan seeming to address the director:

> I'm trying to get to the core of what this Rolling Thunder thing is all about, and I don't have a clue because it's about nothing, it's just something that happened 40 years ago. And that's the truth of it … I don't remember a thing about Rolling Thunder. I mean it happened so long ago; I wasn't even born.

It is an apparent baring of the device, but possibly staged; a layering of irony upon irony like the Greek parabasis. Dylan's previous attempts at dramatic acting – performances that can only be described as inept – make the scene particularly disorienting. Here, however, he demonstrates that his best role is, indeed, 'Bob Dylan'.

'[T]o call someone an Ironist', writes Melvin Rogers (2004), 'is to offer a description of their orientation toward the world – to underscore the irrepressibility of their character that is made all the more possible by the masks they wear as part of a life-style that is performative' (107). A figure who cites Rimbaud's '*Je est un autre*', Dylan's masking makes him enigmatic and elusive: in *I'm Not There* (2007), Todd Haynes's quasi-biopic of the singer, the Dylan-like character is played by six actors, including a woman and a young black boy. The ironist's character, writes Linda Hutcheon (1994), contains 'a kind of built-in conditional stipulation that undermines any firm and fixed stand' (48). If Dylan's history of perpetual self-creation is not enough to suggest the conscious artifice in his work, then his opening statement in *Rolling Thunder Revue* should still alert viewers that its historical veracity cannot necessarily be trusted, and that, moreover, to hold it up to such a standard would be to lack critical tact. It is disappointing that many critics, upon realising that Scorsese's film was not what it initially seemed, expressed consternation similar to that which greeted the same belated realisation about *Chronicles: Volume One* (2004), Dylan's purported, but often unreliable, memoir (Warmuth 2008). Much criticism focused on what critics called 'the four big lies at the heart' of the Scorsese film (Ehrlich et al. 2019, n.p.). The first: that while on tour, Dylan had an affair with 19-year-old Sharon Stone. The second: the presence of Jack Tanner, a fictional character from Robert Altman's faux HBO documentary series, *Tanner '88* about the race for the Democratic presidential nomination. The third: the conceit that the historical footage of Dylan and the Revue was shot by a dyspeptic European documentary maker named Stefan van Dorp, when van Dorp was played by an actor. The fourth: that the tour was promoted by Jim Gianopulos, a real person who had no connection to the shows. There were, likewise, many other smaller misrepresentations. Stone, for example, recounts how Dylan told her that he had written 1966s 'Just Like a Woman' for her. The obvious untruth should, perhaps, have alerted audiences that the film might be lying to seduce them, much like the fictional Dylan and Stone: offering a mobius strip of ironic deception that might lead them to read

otherwise. The title of Rob Salkowitz's (2019) review for *Forbes.com* captured a common critical response: 'Scorsese's New Bob Dylan Film Is Proudly A Pack of Lies'. Salkowitz seemed annoyed with film's commitment to misdirection, echoing irony's critics. 'Why traffic in – for want of a better term – "fake news"', he asked, expressing concern about the impact of irony – a term he never uses – on democratic politics, 'at this fraught moment in our history when the difficulty of telling fact from fiction is no laughing matter?' (Salkowitz 2019, n.p.) Paradoxically, in a review that identifies many of film's fictional conceits, Salkowitz (2019) further complains: 'Scorsese and Dylan play their con so straight that there's no reason for anyone to call shenanigans' (n.p.). Owen Gleiberman (2019) expressed similar concerns much more acerbically, noting that he almost had been taken in by the film, and that only a friend's intervention saved him from publishing a more credulous review: '[T]he fact that I was nearly seduced into palming off a blatant fabrication as fact kind of bugged me [...] I didn't feel delighted – I felt played' (n.p.). He did, however, note that in his musical performances 'Dylan appeared on stage wearing heavy mascara and the white-face makeup of a mime, as well as (on occasion) a clear plastic mask, and while that sounds pretentious, the element of concealment seems to have liberated him' (Gleiberman 2019, n.p.). The paradox here is Gleiberman's failure to recognise that the masking and pretense that liberated Dylan on stage might well serve the same function for the Dylan who collaborated with Scorsese, enabling him – or them – to present material which might otherwise have remained in the vault. Sharing Salkowitz's political concerns, Gleiberman (2019) quotes a friend who declared the documentary 'more Trumpian than Dylanesque', further arguing that: '[f]ake news [...] is more than just a lie. It's a virus that infects the truth around it' (n.p.). Noting the role of Dylan's 1965 press conferences in helping to shape the culture of that period in positive ways, he suggests that in the current context such put-ons – he, too, eschews the word 'irony' – are fundamentally damaging.

'Reading the Socratic dialogues', observed Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980), 'one has the feeling: what a frightful waste of time! What's the point of these arguments that prove nothing and clarify nothing?' (14). Rife with contradictions, abstruse speculations, and irritatingly bad but often difficult to refute arguments, the Platonic dialogues can be deeply frustrating. This suggests their author's brilliance: Plato manages to recreate for his readers the singularly frustrating experience of engaging with Socrates. Asked in the *Republic* how many times happier the just man is than the unjust man, Socrates offers '729'. Despite significant literature on what Socrates meant – with considerable effort expended on mathematical proofs – it is possible that Socrates simply foreshadows Dylan's answer about protest singers and vineyards. Such irony, Hadot (2002) suggests, forms readers by forcing them into a rigorous scrutiny of themselves and their beliefs, and forcing them to recognise the contingency of their commitments (73). It is seldom a pleasant experience: Gleiberman's palpable anger at having been exposed as an insufficiently attentive critic is evidence of a humiliation that irony's critics deplore. It is, nevertheless, likely that a critic, once burned, might

pay closer attention to future objects of criticism. Such is the power of irony in democratic politics: opening up its citizens to the power of reading and thinking otherwise, cultivating the bicamerality and presumptive generosity key to democratic practice. Thus, to answer Salkowitiz's question about how the bending of the truth could possibly be of value in the present historical moment, it might be argued that in an era of 'fake news' teaching the citizenry to read otherwise – and thus to recognise duplicity and dishonesty whatever its source – could not be more vital. The impact is, moreover, also aesthetic: in just the same way that Plato recreates the experience of what it was like to talk to Socrates, Dylan and/or Scorsese seek to achieve something of what it must have been like to experience the theatrical ironies of the *Rolling Thunder Revue*.

Gonna change my way of thinking

In the 1965 press conference, shortly after he was asked about the musical vineyards, Dylan was quizzed about his identity:

[FIRST] REPORTER: Is it true that you have changed your name? And if so, what was your real name?

DYLAN: My real name was Kunezevitch. I changed it to avoid all these relatives that come up to you in different parts of the country and want tickets for concerts and stuff like that.

REPORTER: Kunezevitch?

DYLAN: Kunezevitch, yes.

[SECOND] REPORTER: Was that your first or the last name?

DYLAN: That was the first name. I don't really want to tell you what the last name was.

(quoted in Burger 2018, 117)

As with their colleague, these reporters seemed keen to establish Dylan's alleged name with proper precision while they missed the bigger picture. Unable to conceive of a world in which an interviewee might not share their values, they appeared foolish to some in the room and many in retrospect: the reason why, perhaps, irony in is often seen as cruel and distorting. Dylan's work suggests that all of these things are true. It is, nevertheless, difficult to imagine that the reporters did not ultimately learn something from their encounter, not only about the need to read otherwise, but also that there is a world in which fellow citizens not only have different values, but also different frames of reference; a world where not everything can be quantified, nailed down, or found wanting if it does not conform to majority expectations. Bob Dylan's engagement with irony is obviously less self-consciously political than Plato's. As befits his frequently referenced Gemini status, he has long been interested in duality, complexity, and the cultivation of ambiguity. For this, irony is, perhaps, his most powerful tool. Here, then, it has been argued, in teaching his audience to read, listen, and to think otherwise,

Dylan's work not only generates aesthetic pleasure, it also potentially cultivates an ethos in his listeners that, contrary to the claims of irony's critics, serves to make him a valuable pedagogue of the *dēmos*.

Notes

1 'The expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite' ('irony').
2 This is a variation on Richard Rorty's claims about literature's power to shape the self (Rorty 1989; See also, Stow 1999).
3 According to a divorce filing made by lawyers for Sara Dylan, Dylan's first known wife, on February 13, 1977, their client came downstairs to find her husband having breakfast with their children and a woman named Malka with whom he had been intimate (Heylin 1991, 295). Likewise, the narrator of Dylan's song 'Something There is About You' (1974) tells the object of his or her apparent affection that he or she could promise to be faithful, but to do so would be cruelty to the object of the song and death to its singer.
4 Or, indeed, lay listeners. I know of at least one couple who chose the song as the first dance at their wedding.
5 For an account of Douglass's use of irony to democratic ends, see Stow 2010.
6 The expectations of veracity are obviously considerably different for narrative and documentary features.
7 One of the cruces of Platonic scholarship is the 'Socratic problem'; to what extent can it be claimed that Plato is recounting the words and actions of the historical Socrates versus the extent to which the character Socrates serves as Plato's mouthpiece. The problem cannot be resolved, only employed, creating a further tension between what the texts say and what they might mean. *Rolling Thunder Revue* suffers from the same problem. It is not clear whether its irony comes from its ostensible subject or its ostensible director. That Dylan has long been committed to irony, while Scorsese has not, suggests the film's ironies might be ascribed to Dylan. That this cannot be done with any degree of confidence adds further playfulness to the film and heightens its possible impact on the viewer.

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