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TRANSLATING LITERARY IRONY: ELEMENTS FOR A PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK

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This paper looks at the versatile and elusive concept of irony in literature from a translator's perspective. It offers elements for a basic definition and for a classification of literary irony. It aims to provide the literary translator with a practical framework that would make it an easier task to identify and understand the various types of irony present in literature.

Irony is not a distinct and independent phenomenon. It is a term used by critics and historians to explain or to define a broad range of different phenomena. The vast majority of studies dealing with this concept are concerned with only one particular aspect of 'irony' relevant to their subject. In addition, it is a word in general use, which further complicates specialists' attempts to control it. Such diversity of perspectives prevents one from reaching an ultimate definition of irony, even in the realm of poetics.

Yet irony has been a prominent feature of the literary discourse since the eighteenth century and became a virtually omnipresent element in the twentieth century literature. Versatile and elusive by nature, irony is perhaps the greatest problem facing a literary translator – and this is no rhetoric exaggeration. One of the main vehicles of irony is antiphrasis – the turn of speech which consists in saying one thing to convey the opposite meaning. Even fairly basic rhetorical irony thus requires an outstanding knowledge of the source language and an equally outstanding knowledge of the target language, in order to grasp deliberate linguistic improprieties and suitably render them in translation. But irony is not reduced to antiphrasis. Irony, especially in modern writing, takes numerous forms and often becomes the structural principle in a work of literature. Always suggestive and never directly referential, irony uses subtle hints and allusions, which require a deep and ready knowledge of the book's context. Straightforward difficulties, such as rhyme, for instance, have the merit of being obvious.

Irony, by contrast, is pernicious. It is an ambush prepared by the author for the unwitting reader and translator. It is all too easy to overlook all its subtle manifestations and end up turning a complex and ambiguous book into flat and straightforward narrative. Missing a book's irony can deprive that book of its essential ornament; in the case of some deeply and pervasively ironic books it can betray their very essence.

This article offers a classification of literary ironies, which ought to be useful for the literary translator.[1] It seeks to circumscribe this concept which is all the more vague as it is widely used, to alert the translator to its complexity, and to point at a number of its less obvious aspects which are easily missed. It does not provide methodological guidelines for the translation of irony, but rather a framework for systematically identifying the different types of irony in a given work.

I propose to distinguish between five fundamental types of irony: behavioural, situational, rhetorical, aesthetic, and philosophical. The boundaries between these categories are blurred and one type of irony is seldom entirely independent from another. Furthermore, the situation is equally uncertain in chronological terms, for the codification of a particular type of irony by some theorist, philosopher or critic often comes much later than the emergence of a particular usage or understanding of irony. The present classification remains an artificial analytical grid imposed on a subtle and organic mode of thought and expression, whose defining characteristic is elusiveness. But it is convenient for the sake of analysis. For each category I present below the historical origin of the term, provide a succinct definition of the type of irony in question, and look at the modalities of its manifestation in literature. Philosophical irony is given particular attention.

Initially, the term 'irony' applied to a type of human *behaviour*. It was derived from the Greek word *eironeia*, meaning 'dissimulation'. The *eiron* was a character proper to ancient Greek comedy. The first occurrences of *eiron* are found in Aristophanes,[2] where the term designates characters of little trustworthiness,

1 The definitions proposed in this article are, to a large extent, based on a detailed study of irony as a device and a philosophical attitude in six major Russian novels: Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, Gogol's *Dead Souls*, Goncharov's *Oblomov*, Il'f and Petrov's *The Twelve Chairs* and Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. The few concrete examples provided here are also drawn from these works. Hereafter translations into English are mine unless indicated otherwise. Italics are always mine.

2 Sedgwick G. G. 1935. *Of Irony: Especially in Drama*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 11.

who do not have the author's sympathy. Plato several times applies the terms *eiron* and *eironeia* to Socrates. In the *Symposium* Alcibiades compares Socrates to a Silenus and uses the term *eiron* on that occasion in a positive sense.[3] The *eiron* is like a sculpture of a Silenus – unattractive on the outside, but containing exceptional treasures within. In the *Republic* an opponent of Socrates is irritated by the manner (*eironeia)* in which the latter eludes his questions instead of answering them directly.[4] Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* presents the *eiron* as a person to beware of because of his hypocrisy.[5] In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he opposes the dissimulating *eiron* to the boastful *alazon*: the former diminishes his merits and is less condemnable than the latter, who usurps merits that he has not.[6] Irony, for Aristotle, is preferable to buffoonery, because the buffoon seeks to amuse the audience while the ironic person seeks to amuse himself.[7] The typical shrewd servant of the classical comedies is the heir of the Greek *eiron*. He is believed to be stupid by his master but his behaviour and *a parte* speeches reveal to the spectator the reality of the situation.

Ironic behaviour thus consists in one person dissimulating something from another, while enjoying the ignorance of the other person. In so doing the ironist is not merely pursuing a practical goal through dissimulation of truth; on the contrary, he is looking forward to the key moment of revelation, when the dissimulation is made obvious and the victim's naivety is more or less gently ridiculed.

In literature, ironic behaviour materialises in the relationship between the ironist and his victim: the play between author and reader. The ironic author often turns into an *eiron* to manipulate and disconcert the reader. Practically, this may mean introducing numerous and elusive narrators whose authority is unreliable; leading the reader up false paths and suggesting deliberately fallacious interpretations of a given event; making playful intertextual references whose status remains uncertain, etc. Broadly speaking, any kind of irony in a text – be it purely rhetorical, situational, aesthetic, philosophical – is a kind of ironic behaviour whereby the author engages in a play with the reader. The degree of irony in the author's behaviour may range from fairly straightforward allusions, meant to be immediately understood by nearly any reader, to an elaborate and malign manipulation of the reader's perception of reality by means of recurrent

[3] Plato. 1980. *Symposium.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 216d–217a.
[4] Plato. 1994. *Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 337b.
[5] Aristotle. 1926. *Rhetoric*. London: Heinemann, 1382b; 18–20.
[6] Aristotle. 2002. *Nicomachean ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1152b; 26–30.
[7] Aristotle. 1926. *Rhetoric*, 1419b; 8, 9.

polysemy, discrediting of interpretations, contradictory and self-contradicting narrative voices, etc.

An example of behavioural irony that can be easily lost in translation is offered by Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*. The anonymous traveller from the second part of the novel has come into possession of the hero's diaries and published them. These diaries constitute the novel's second part. The style of the preface written by the anonymous narrator to these diaries strangely resembles the style of Pechorin himself (the hero). Furthermore, the style of Lermontov's *own* preface to the novel's second edition occasionally reads like a parody of Pechorin's style. This resemblance is not fortuitous and it has been convincingly argued that Pechorin and the anonymous narrator are indeed one and the same.[8] Regardless of the conclusion one wishes to draw from this stylistic feature, the latter undeniably plays a crucial role in the novel's web of unreliable narrative voices. It is part of the author's ironic game with the reader and must be carefully conveyed in translation.

Subsequently, the term irony came to characterise a *rhetoric* in which the speaker consciously aims to convey the *opposite* of what he is actually saying to an understanding audience. The definition of irony as a rhetoric appears in a treatise attributed to Anaximenes,[9] a contemporary of Aristotle, in which irony is defined as saying something while pretending not to be saying it (preterition), or saying something while naming things by their opposites (antiphrasis). Ironic preterition consists of saying 'I *shall not mention* the way in which those citizens have betrayed their allies…'; ironic antiphrasis is 'Look at those *noble* citizens who have betrayed their allies!'. Later, for the Roman rhetoricians, notably Cicero and Quintilian, irony had a double definition, being on the one hand a rhetorical device based on saying the opposite of what is meant and on the other hand a strategy of dissimulation as the one used by Socrates. The latter, however, progressively loses the ambivalence that the figure of the *eiron* had for the Greeks, and its negative aspects are not addressed.[10] The wily attitude of the *eiron* and the method of Socrates are superseded by antiphrastic irony.[11]

Since the medium of literature is the word, the most prominent type of literary irony is the rhetorical one. Indeed, other types of irony in literature are largely dependant on rhetorical irony; most often the latter serves to alert the

[8] Barratt A. and Briggs A. P. D. 1989. *A Wicked Irony: the Rhetoric of Lermontov's 'A Hero of Our Time'*. Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 46.

[9] Schoentjes P. 2001. *Poétique de l'ironie*. Paris: Seuil, 75–76.

[10] Cicero. 1942. *De Oratore*. London: Heinemann, II, LXVII, 259; 270.

[11] Quintilian. 1920. *De Institutione Oratoria*. London: Heinemann, IX, 1; 2.

reader to the presence of other types of irony. Rhetorical irony can be conveyed by a number of stylistic devices, such as hyperbole, litotes, euphemism, preterition, allusion, oxymoron and other forms of stylistic discrepancy, through borrowed speech and parodic speech. Essentially, any strictly verbal irony can be reduced to antiphrasis: the figure of speech that consists in saying one thing while conveying the opposite meaning.

Rhetorical irony is the most common type and needs little illustration. Below is an example from Il'f and Petrov's *The Twelve Chairs*: [12]

(1)

Как и полагается рядовому студенческому общежитию в Москве, дом студентов–химиков давно уже был заселен людьми, имеющими к химии *довольно отдаленное* отношение.

As befits a regular student residence in Moscow, the residence of chemistry students was inhabited by people with *a rather remote connection* to chemistry.

It seems needless to say that a failure to convey, even imperfectly, the antiphrasis *Как и полагается* ('as befits') and the litotes *довольно отдаленное* ('rather remote') would deprive this passage of its intended ironic meaning.

The translator's task becomes more difficult when rhetoric irony relies on parody. In the passage below, taken again from *The Twelve Chairs,* the description of Madame Gritsatsueva, a common provincial widow getting married to the novel's hero, opens with an ironic quotation from Pushkin's poem *Egyptian nights*:[13]

(2)

Чертог вдовы Грицацуевой сиял…

The palace of the widow Gritsatsueva gleamed…

(2a)

(Compare with: *Чертог сиял. Гремели хором / Певцы при звуке флейт и лир*. :: The palace gleamed, the choir was singing, / Mingling with sound of flute and lyre…)[14].

Failure to mark this connection in translation deprives the foreign reader of the delightful implicit comparison between the elephantine Gritsatsueva and Queen Cleopatra described in Pushkin's poem.

[12] Il'f I. and Petrov E. 1990. *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev. Zolotoi telenok*. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 117.

[13] *Ibid.* 100.

[14] Pushkin A. S. 1937–49. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 16 vols. Moscow: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, vol. 3 (1), 130; English translation by Ronald Wilks, 1998, Penguin.

Most complicated perhaps are the subtle, almost imperceptible ironic allusions, which hardly stand out from the text. Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* contains, for example, a satirical passage describing talentless scribblers at the service of the state, who are acclaimed as great writers and enjoy numerous privileges. That passage contains the description of a poster advertising 'creative vacations' provided for these writers by the State:[15]

(3)

…роскошный плакат, на котором изображена была скала, а по гребню ее ехал всадник в бурке и с винтовкой за плечами. Пониже – пальмы и балкон, на балконе – сидящий молодой человек с хохолком, глядящий куда-то ввысь очень-очень бойкими глазами и держащий в руке *самопишущее* перо. Подпись: 'Полнообъемные творческие отпуска от двух недель (рассказ, новелла) до одного года (роман, трилогия). Ялта, Суук-Су, Боровое, Цихидзири, Махинджаури, Ленинград (Зимний дворец)'.

A lavish poster on which was painted a cliff, and on the edge of the cliff there was a rider in a fur burkha and with a rifle on his shoulder. Slightly lower were painted some palm trees and a balcony, and on the balcony was sitting a young man with a cute mop of hair. He held an *automatic* pen in his hand and looked at the distant heights with a boisterous and enthusiastic gaze. Below figured an inscription: 'Full creative vacations, from two weeks (short story, novella) up to one year (novel, trilogy). Yalta, Suuk-Su, Borovoe, Tsikhidziri, Makhindzhauri, Leningrad (Winter Palace)'.

Here the adjective *самопишущее* contains pitiless double-entendre: the idiom *самопишущее перо* commonly refers to a fountain pen, but taken literally it means 'self-writing' pen, i.e. automatic, and hints at the mechanistic and artistically worthless nature of such writing. For this reason I would prefer, in translating this passage into English, to use 'automatic pen' rather than 'fountain pen', and keep the potential irony at the expense of strictly literal exactitude.

Approximately at the beginning of the 18th century, the term 'irony' began to be applied to a *situation*. Situational irony is dependent on a subjective perception of events, in which an independent consciousness perceives a contradiction with the logically expected situation. Situational irony, or 'irony of fate' as it also came to be called in some cases, was not unknown in the Antiquity, but was termed differently: it corresponded to the *peripeteia*, or reversal, which Aristotle defined in his *Poetics* as one of the key elements in a tragedy.[16] Situational irony can be divided into two types: 'pictorial' and 'narrative'[17] or, in other

[15] Bulgakov M. A. 1990. Master i Margarita, ed. by Gots G. S. et al. *Sobranie sochinenii*, 5 vols. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, vol. 5, 56.

[16] Aristotle. 1998. *Poetics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 11, 52a, 22–28.

[17] Schoentjes. *Poétique de l'ironie*, 52.

terms, synchronic and diachronic. It is of the pictorial or synchronic type when a *situation* juxtaposes that which should have never been put together. It is narrative or diachronic when a radical reversal occurs in the course of an *action*, against one's expectations.

Situational irony present in a work of literature reflects the author's perception of the world. In observing the world, men and their lives, the ironic author perceives the contradictions inherent to them and displays these contradictions in his art. Situational irony may range from vaudevillian reversals to tragic irony of fate. The difference between mere dialectic and situational irony passes through the presence of the author's rhetorical irony (i.e. a distinctly ironic *tone*), which makes the latter an unavoidable device in an ironic work. Narrative situational irony in literature, although often called 'tragic irony' or 'Sophoclean irony', does not necessarily imply a tragic or negative turn of events. It occurs when a given character acts on the basis of assumptions which other characters or the audience know to be false and is a frequent device in comedies.

A famous example of continuous situational irony is Gogol's novel *Dead Souls*. The main character, the ingenious crook Chichikov, travels from landowner to landowner, buying dead serfs with the aim of mortgaging them. Chichikov's encounters with the unsuspecting landowners are each full of irony.[18]

Situational irony seldom represents a difficulty for the translator, for it is embedded in the plot rather than in the language. Nevertheless, the contrast between the awareness of one character and the ignorance of another is often stressed by subtle stylistic turns, which must not be overlooked.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century the German theorists of Romanticism began to use the term irony specifically in relation to *art*. I am using the term 'aesthetic irony' in this section to designate the more formal aspects of the broader philosophical concept of 'romantic irony' developed by Friedrich Schlegel. A work of art that makes use of 'aesthetic irony' is primarily characterised by a distanced and amused attitude of the artist towards his own work. A work of art that is mimetic, i.e. putting in place an alternative reality, and which at the same time is baring its own internal mechanisms is, in this context, called ironic. Aesthetic irony broadly corresponds to a marked presence of self-reflexivity in a work of art.

As in the case of other works of art, aesthetic irony in a work of literature consists in the foregrounding of the work's artificial nature. The ironic author will

[18] Gogol N. 1984. Mertvye dushi*,* ed. by Shcherbina V. R. *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8 vols. Moscow: Pravda, vol. 5–6.

deliberately interrupt the flow of the narration and break the illusion of reality to turn the reader's attention to the fact that he is *reading a book*. One of the most prominent devices of aesthetic irony is parabasis. The latter concept comes from Greek tragedy and designates a device which allows the author to directly address the audience through the choir, the coryphaeus or a messenger during the performance. Parabasis can take different forms, ranging from *a parte* speech in classical theatre to the off-screen voice in contemporary cinema, and including the intrusion of the novelist's voice, who may directly address the reader in the middle of a novel. The author may interrupt the narration to give his opinion on a character, suggest that he will finish the narration later and switch to some topic that is irrelevant to the main plot, or abruptly change the subject of his discourse. Aesthetic irony can also pass through a specific structure: for example an intricate inner chronology which makes the reader suddenly discover that episodes placed at the end of the novel narrate events which correspond to the beginning of the story. This device shifts the reader's attention to the structure of the novel and to his own initial delusion. As defined here, the notion of 'aesthetic irony' is very close to the notion of metafiction, which has been defined as 'a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'.[19]

An exceptional example of aesthetic irony is Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*. The narrator incessantly interrupts the flow of the story by various digressions. Here is one such passage in which the poet-narrator comments on the progress of his work:[20]

(4)
Я думал уж о форме плана,
И как героя назову;
Покамест моего романа
Я кончил первую главу,
Пересмотрел все очень строго;
Противоречий очень много,
Но их исправить не хочу. (1, LX)

[19] Waugh P. 1984. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Methuen, 2.

[20] Pushkin A. S. 1937. Evgenii Onegin, ed. by Tomashevskii B. V. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 16 vols. Moscow: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, vol. 6. References are given in brackets as chapter number followed by stanza number.

I've drawn a plan and a projection,
the hero's name's decided too.
Meanwhile my novel's opening section
is finished, and I've looked it through
meticulously; in my fiction
there's far too much of contradiction,
but I refuse to chop or change.[21]

This kind of aesthetic irony is translated together with the text itself. There are however more subtle forms of it, which are more easily missed. Thus, for example, the poem uses exactly the same words at several chapters' distance, to highlight the poem's symmetry. Tatiana's letter to Onegin and Onegin's letter to Tatiana thus contain the same phrase *судьба моя* ('my fate')in the same place at the end of the letter:

(5)
Но так и быть! *Судьбу мою*
Отныне я тебе вручаю. (3, Tat'iana's letter)

So let it be! for you to keep
I trust *my fate* to your direction.

(6)
Все решено: я в вашей воле
И предаюсь *моей судьбе.* (8, Onegin's letter)

I'm yours, in a predestined fashion,
and I surrender to *my fate*.

Less obviously, the same method of echoing phrases is used below, in the description of Olga's rapid change of heart after the death of her betrothed (Lenskii), which echoes Lenkii's own lyric musings. This parallelism ironically highlights Lenskii's delusion:

(7)
Он верил, что душа родная
Соединиться с ним должна,
Что безотрадно *изнывая*,
Его вседневно ждет она. (2, VIII)

He was convinced, a kindred creature
would be allied to him by fate;
that, meanwhile, pinched and glum of feature,
from day to day she could but wait…

[21] Here and below the English translation of *Eugene Onegin* is by Charles Johnson, 1977, Penguin.

(8)
Мой бедный Ленский! *Изнывая,*
Не долго плакала она. (7, VIII.IX.X)

Poor Lensky! Set aside for weeping,
or *pining*, Olga's hours were brief.

A translation ideally ought to pick up the meaning of this ironic parallelism and the importance of using exactly the same words in the parallel passages, which the translation by Charles Johnson given here fails to do. By contrast, and quite expectably, the acclaimed literal translation by Vladimir Nabokov preserves this parallel:[22]

(9)
He believed that a kindred soul
to him must be united;
that, joylessly *pining away*,
it daily kept awaiting him. (2, VIII)

(10)
My poor Lensky! *Pining away*,
she did not weep for long. (7, VIII.IX.X)

Finally, irony came to characterise a *philosophical outlook*. One of the first mentions of irony as a philosophical attitude belongs to the third Earl of Shaftesbury who, in the early 18th century, described a 'soft irony […] spread alike through a whole character and life'.[23] Here irony is seen in a modern way, from the subjective angle of the individual soul, rather than from Aristotle's objective social angle. Shaftesbury's emphasis falls on the mental attitude, of which the ironic manner is only the external expression. The manner Shaftesbury describes is a fusion of modest self-abnegation, gentle gravity, and an apparent tolerance of all things behind which hide reservations about all things.

The fundamental shift from instrumental irony (i.e. a behavioural, situational, rhetorical or aesthetic device) to irony as a philosophical attitude occurs when the formal incompatibilities of an ironic behaviour, discourse or situation set up and provoke a deeper interrogation of self-consciousness. It should be noted that the distinction between irony as a device and irony as a philosophical attitude is a distinction between form and content, and the two cannot be separated. The

[22] Nabokov V. 1976. *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse. By Aleksandr Pushkin; translated from the Russian, with a commentary, by Vladimir Nabokov*, 4 vols. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

[23] Knox N. 1973. Irony. *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas,* ed. by Wiener Philip P. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, II, 626–34.

use of irony as a device nearly always presupposes a certain degree of ironic attitude to life on the artist's part; conversely, an ironic attitude to life must express itself through an ironic form, lest it should loose its essence and become a merely dialectical approach.

Different conceptions of philosophical irony have been formulated. Some of the most prominent are listed below in chronological order.

Philosophical irony of the *Socratic* type was defined as the use of ironic dissimulation with pedagogic intention, whereby a dissimulating behaviour inconspicuously leads to an intellectual contradiction, which is eventually uncovered by the ironist. 'Socratic irony' subtly brings one's interlocutor to reconsider his initial point of view and thus leads him to deeper knowledge. The terms of *eiron* and *eironeia* were used in relation to Socrates' behaviour in ancient literature, but the formal definition of 'Socratic irony' occurred much later. One of the first notable theorisers of Socratic irony was Søren Kierkegaard, who in 1841 defended his Thesis entitled *The Concept of Irony with Continuous Reference to Socrates*.[24] But although defined *a posteriori*, the irony of Socrates may be considered as the first occurrence of irony as a philosophical attitude.

The next major type of philosophical irony was *Romantic* irony. If it can be said that the classical worldview was based on absolute values, on the belief that ideals exist, then Romanticism came to reflect a new awareness that values may be relative. Aesthetic irony, as defined above, was part of a much broader philosophical theory of irony that developed in Germany in the 18th and 19th century and whose most prominent theorist was the Romantic philosopher and writer Friedrich Schlegel.[25] Schlegel considered the universe as chaos animated by permanent motion and made of innumerable contradictions. Although the human mind has an intuition of the Absolute, it is unable to comprehend it. Yet man does not give up his attempts to organise the world and strives to attain that which his intuition has shown him. This acute consciousness of the contradictions inherent and necessary to the world constitutes Romantic irony, which does not lead to an ultimate synthesis, but constitutes a constant movement from one extreme to another, from one paradox to another. To the ironist's eye 'surface incompatibilities reveal the eternal inadequacy of phenomena to the ideas'.[26]

[24] Kierkegaard S. 1989. *The Concept of Irony, with Continuous Reference to Socrates*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[25] Schlegel F. 1963. Philosophische Fragmente. *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe,* ed. by Behler E. Paderborn: Schöningh 18, 3–117.

[26] Handwerk G. 1985. *Irony and Ethics in Narrative*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 8.

The beginning of the 19th century witnessed a re-actualisation of situational irony, with a number of theoretical approaches and works of art characterised by a predominance of an historical rather than aesthetic or rhetorical perspective on irony and the definition of '*tragic* irony'. Situational irony conceived as immanent to human condition acquired a universal, tragic dimension. The fact that there is only one step from happiness to complete misery, from triumph to fall, that the former is indeed often pregnant with the latter, led a number of theorists to perceive tragic irony as a ruling principle of existence.[27]

The concept of irony then gradually became more and more charged with *ethical* overtones. Anatole France, for example, insists on benevolence being a key feature of irony as an attitude to life.[28] He stresses that irony is not cruel but gentle, that it teaches one to laugh at the mean and the stupid, whom without irony one might be tempted to hate. Tolerance and pity became correlative to the critical attitude of irony, which does not allow for any definitive and categorical statement. Approaches to irony from the point of view of ethics stressed an aspect that was missing from the theories of the Romantics – who took themselves and their irony extremely seriously – namely that irony itself should be subjected to irony; if the critical attitude of irony and its detachment are genuine, they must extend to the ironist himself, thereby calling into question the absolute validity of his own opinions.[29]

The First World War made the ironic attitude more widespread and gave it a new angle. The senselessness of the unprecedented slaughter forced one to adopt a detached attitude towards life. Irony became the only reasonably possible way to evade an entirely negative judgement on the world and human condition. A big step was made from Schlegel's romantic irony and Thirlwall's situational irony to *modernist* irony. Whereas tragic irony and Romantic irony both implicitly referred to a concealed world order, which the limited human mind was unable to grasp completely, modernist irony was inclined to state the complete meaninglessness of life and the universe.[30] Yet modernist irony essentially differed from nihilism. It implied that the belief in the meaninglessness of life was itself an emanation of consciousness, and could, therefore, turn out to be an il-

[27] For example: Thirlwall C. 1833. On the Irony of Sophocles. *The Philological Museum* 2, 483–537.

[28] France A. 1903. *Le Jardin d'Epicure*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.

[29] See for example: Paulhan F. 1914. *La Morale de l'ironie*. Paris: F. Alcan.

[30] See for example: Glicksberg Ch. 1969. *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 11–17.

lusion too. The negation of absurdity remained possible within the framework of modernist irony: the latter, being devoid of the blind naivety of optimism and of the narrow-sightedness of a dogma, became the only possible expression of hope. Modernist irony also asserted the freedom and the dignity of man, his spiritual independence from the absurdity of the world, since an ironic work of art which maintains that life is a nightmare of absurdity is, paradoxically, a way of triumphing over it.[31]

In the middle of the 20th century, the ethical aspects of irony were further studied by numerous critics and philosophers. Summarising many previous theories, Vladimir Jankélévitch in his book *L'Ironie* highlighted the median, neutral nature of the ironic perspective, which offers the advantage of being reversible: where nothing at all is irreplaceable and everything without exception is vanity, everything becomes irreplaceable and nothing is vanity. [32] The ironist, like the man whose glass is filled to the middle, is free to decide whether his glass is half full or half empty. Thus ironic relativism guards against naivety, but leaves the ironist free to opt for the intuition of an absolute or the senseless play of absurdity. Jankélévitch proposed a definition of '*humoresque* irony', in which the element of humour shifts the poised scales of irony towards existential optimism. He stresses that the relativisation performed by irony is not sterile and that humoresque irony does not affect human spirituality itself. It merely frees it from the illusory, the superficial and the emphatic.

Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of *dialogism* and *polyphony,* established in his early work on Dostoevsky's poetics and further refined in his later works – approximately at the same time as Jankélévitch's definitions – come in several respects close to the notion of philosophical irony. Similarly to irony, a dialogical world perception is based on the assumption that no event in the world is definitive: everything is suspended and potentially reversible.[33] Like humoresque irony, 'dialogical' perception allows both an optimistic and a pessimistic perspective on reality (reality as such is neutral until an observer's judgement comes to define it). As Jankélévitch stresses the relation between irony and humour, so Bakhtin highlights the necessary relation between dialogism and laughter and cites 'joyful relativity of any system or order' as a basic element of a dialogical world perception.[34] Bakhtin linked the dialogic worldview to the power of language

[31] *Ibid.*, 13.
[32] Jankélévitch V. 1964. *L'Ironie*. Paris: Flammarion.
[33] Bakhtin M. 1963. *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*. Moskva: Sovetskii Pisatel', 222–23.
[34] *Ibid.*, 166.

and investigated in detail the ways in which creative language (which Bakhtin calls *iazyk-mirovozzrenie*) is able to shape reality.[35] *Dvugolos'e,* double-voiced discourse, the characteristic of which is to be perceived as borrowed, is close to rhetorical irony: it is a discourse within which two different directions, two different meanings are combined in one single sentence. The 'metalinguistic' level, which concerns the 'attitude of the speaker towards his own words',[36] is the level on which irony operates.

Lastly, the concept of irony was reappropriated by the *post-modernist* school of thought. For such theorists as Jacques Derrida or Paul de Man irony remains in many respects a key notion, although the word 'irony' is not always used. However, the idea of irony in post-modernist thinking shifts from ambiguity to complete relativism. That kind of relativism is akin to nihilism, because meaning becomes an ultimately irrelevant notion. For Paul de Man, the elusiveness of the author is 'a metaphor for readability in general'.[37]. For Derrida 'to risk meaning nothing is to start to play'.[38] For Barthes 'writing ceaselessly posits meaning, ceaselessly to evaporate it'.[39] Such understanding of irony is effectively in stark contrast with irony as a philosophical principle. The latter may be playful and ambiguous, it may cease to be referential, but it does not completely abandon a *meaningful* philosophical perspective; it remains a path to a meaning beyond itself.

The ambiguity of philosophical irony makes its richness but also leads to the problem of interpretation and, consequently, translation. Ironic ambivalence opposes one overt statement to another one that is implicit, and the ultimate aim of accomplished irony is precisely to suggest that both messages are – almost – equally trustworthy. There always exists the situation when irony is missed altogether. Any reader can be reasonably hoped to perceive *some* of the irony contained in a book. But no reader can be expected to understand *all* of an author's subtle and pervasive irony. Some of the author's irony is irretrievably lost because we are unaware of some subtle usages, personal allusions or specific circumstances that formed the context of a book; some of it has probably only ever been intelligible to a few close friends and is entirely lost upon the average reader of any time.

[35] Bakhtin M. 1986. Iz predistorii romannogo slova. *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i,* ed. by Bocharov S. G. Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 353–91 (357).

[36] Bakhtin M. *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*, 253.

[37] de Man P. 1979. *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 202.

[38] Derrida J. 1981. *Positions*. London: Athlone, 14.

[39] Barthes R. 1977. *Image. Music. Text*. London: Fontana, 147.

No specific quotation can be given to illustrate philosophical irony in a work of literature, for it is a general attitude systematically conveyed by numerous and varied devices. Some of the most famous cases of philosophical irony are Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste*, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* – to cite but a few. It should be pointed out, however, that it is the translator's task to identify the presence of irony as a philosophical outlook in a book and to take it into account in his translation. Given that irony is based on ambiguity and evades any definitive position, a consistent ironic stance constitutes by itself a powerful and predominant authorial statement. If an entire book is pervaded by irony, then irony itself is the book's most important message. As a consequence, it is irony that must be above all conveyed in the translation of such a book – at the expense, sometimes, of literal accuracy.

As I have stressed earlier, these elements do not lead to an ultimate definition of irony and may be challenged from the position of a specific theory. It is the very ambivalence of irony that precludes definitive categorisation. It is hoped, however, that these notes will have shed some light on a difficult concept and made it an easier task to identify and understand irony in a work of literature. Translating that irony into a different language remains the painful – and wonderfully delightful – job of the individual translator.

A short and by no means exhaustive list of excellent books dealing with literary irony is given below.

Literature

Behler E. 1997. *Ironie und literarische Moderne*. Paderborn: Schoeningh.

Dane J. 1991. *The Critical Mythology of Irony*. London: University of Georgia Press.

Empson W. 1957. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. New York: Meridian Books.

Glicksberg Ch. 1969. *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Handwerk G. 1985. *Irony and Ethics in Narrative*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Jankélévitch V. 1964. *L'Ironie*. Paris: Flammarion.

Japp U. 1999. *Theorie der Ironie*. Frankfurt-am-Main: V. Klostermann.

Knox N. 1961. *The Word Irony and its Context: 1500–1755*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

DHI. 1973. Irony. *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. by Wiener Philip P. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 626–34.

Muecke D. C. 1969. *The Compass of Irony*. London: Methuen.

Schoentjes P. 2001. *Poétique de l'ironie*. Paris: Le Seuil.

IRONIJOS GROŽINĖJE LITERATŪROJE VERTIMAS: PRAKTINIO MODELIO KONTŪRAI

Pierre Skorov

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje iš vertėjo perspektyvos apžvelgiama įvairiapusė, bet sunkiai apčiuopiama ironijos sąvoka. Jame išskiriami penki ironijos tipai: elgsenos, situacinė, retorinė, estetinė ir filosofinė. Pastarajai kategorijai skiriamas ypatingas dėmesys. Filosofinė ironija literatūroje apibrėžiama kaip visa apimantis, subjektyvus, kritinis autoriaus pasaulio matymas, akcentuojantis pasaulio ir gyvenimo daugiaplaniškumą ir atsiribojantis nuo dogmatiškų, tradicinių pažiūrų bei vengiantis bet kokios kategoriškos pozicijos. Tokia ironija reiškiama kaip daugiareikšmis žaismingas dialogas su skaitytoju, įtraukiantis jį į intelektualinį žaidimą, kuris, savo ruožtu, klaidina ir atveria netikėtus minties vingius, skatina savikritiką ir poreikį ieškoti užslėptų prasmių. Jeigu sutiksime, jog tam, kad deramai išverstume knygą, visų pirma turime suvokti ir suprasti jos ironiją, skaitysime šį straipsnį kaip tam tikrą praktinio pobūdžio rekomendaciją, padedančią atpažinti įvairius ironijos tipus grožinės literatūros kūrinyje.