

IRONIES OF A CONVOCATION

By Donald N. Levine

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These soaring arches, the horns heralding our way, the call of pastoral inspiration, the supporting presence of families and friends, the bright sense of personal accomplishment—such are the elements of this occasion that conspire to evoke a mood of buoyant harmony.

And yet, I dare say, there is a discordant element in this scene. Do we really feel comfortable assembling like this? Don't you find it strange to walk such measured steps, to don archaic robes and caps, to await formal words by University officers? We seem to be acting out a set of prefabricated roles—roles that don't allow us to express all that we are really feeling and thinking.

The disjunction I now allude to, a disjunction between socially imposed roles and what we are pleased to call our "authentic selves," has been the theme of much discussion in our time—and in other ages as well. It was a subject that captured the attention, in particular, of those writers of about a century and a half ago we know as the "romantic authors." "For what is our civilized world but a big masquerade," asked Arthur Schopenhauer, "where you meet knights, priests, soldiers, men of learning, barristers, clergymen, philosophers, and I do not know what all! But they are not what they pretend to be; they are only masks." Ralph Waldo Emerson made a similar point in different language: "We come to wear one cut of face and figure,

and acquire by degrees the gentlest asinine expression."

The surest way the romantic authors knew to transmit their dissatisfaction with the customary world of prescribed behaviors was to assume a posture of *ironic detachment*. The romantics used irony to transform everyday life into a stage, in order to illuminate its rigidities, its routine and unthinking quality.

"It is all role," wrote the anonymous author of the romantic novel *The Night Watches of Bonaventura*, "the role itself and the play actor who is behind it, and in him in turn his thoughts and plans and enthusiasms and buffooneries." Romantic irony is interpretable as an attempt to transcend the social straitjacket through an act of self-distancing that is at the same time an act of self-discovery. Kierkegaard went right to the heart of the matter when he wrote: "The ironist raises the individual out of immediate existence, and this is his emancipating function. . . He does not understand irony. . . does not know the invigoration and fortification which, should the atmosphere become too oppressive, comes from lifting oneself up and plunging into the ocean of irony, not in order to remain there, of course, but healthily, gladly, lightly to clad oneself again."

Now that I have dealt with the discomfort I imputed

The University of Chicago Record XVII, No. 1, March 31, 1983 59

to you by associating it with the theme of irony, perhaps you sense less discomfort—or, at least, you find the situation less unfamiliar. For if there is one thing all who spend time at this place are likely to encounter, it is the moment of irony. Sometimes I think that the experience of irony is the distinctive hallmark of life at the University of Chicago. Why this is the case I am not sure, but it may have something to do with the conceit that the University is in some special sense a “community of scholars.” Heirs to John Dewey, we know that the heart of ‘community’ is ‘communication’; and indeed, an enormous amount of communication does take place on these quadrangles. Not that we are more likely than others to exchange views about those four pressing concerns of our daily lives—sex, politics, religion, and the weather—though perhaps that is the case. What I mean is that, no matter how deeply engrossed we become in pursuing our specialized techniques and esoteric lore, we are mindful of a notion widely shared at the University: that it is good and pleasant to communicate with those engaged in other specialized pursuits and that there is some larger common purpose to be served by such communication.

What does the idea of a lively community of scholars have to do with the experience of irony? Just this: the effort to communicate with those wedded to other kinds of expertise produces, time and again, the sense that the special languages we speak and the roles we play are social conventions, not facts of nature. We find ourselves talking to colleagues who appear to deserve our respect about common problems, but they do so in ways that appear strange and hard to understand. How often does one hear around here phrases such as: “What else would you expect from a statistician?” “Watch out, she’s a chemical reductionist.” “Only a historian would look at things that way.” The experience of communicating across intellectual boundary lines necessarily produces these defenses of ironic detachment; but in using them, we cannot but be aware, at some level, that others are likely to be talking that way about *us*. Just as, for the romantic authors, ironic detachment about the roles played by others was used to heighten consciousness about our own roles, and thus to liberate us from rigid and dogmatic constraints, so the experience of being in a genuine community of scholars helps us to be more aware of the hidden constraints involved in our own specialized way of looking at the world. But that experience also confirms our sense, contrary to what some romantic writers have imagined, that there really is no pure, authentic self that exists apart from these constraints. As anthropologists have taught us, the lives of primitive peoples, far from exhibiting a state of natural spontaneity, in fact are ordered by complicated systems

of norms and role structures. Similarly, our experience in the academic community has taught us that to engage a problem seriously means perforce to adopt one or more cultural roles.

You who are about to receive degrees this morning in one of five Collegiate Divisions will have no difficulty bringing to mind instances of what I am talking about. Imagine, for example, an interchange among those talking about biological evolution, now from the temporal perspective of the paleontologist, for whom 50,000 years is but an instant; now from the perspective of the geneticist, for whom the crucial unit of time is the ten-day reproductive cycle of the fruit fly; now from the perch of the molecular biologist, who watches the replication of some DNA molecules in thirty minutes. Or think of a group of literary critics discussing the value of a Salinger novel, when some are trained to deal with the “essential” dimensions of plot, diction, and character; while others are trained to deal with the “essential” criterion of historical authenticity; still others with the “really essential” matter—the quality of its moral message. These are plausible University of Chicago scenarios, and chock full of imaginable ironic nuggets.

In talking to you now in this way, I have detached myself from the conventional role of the convocation speaker. By focusing on some familiar features of life at the University, I have ignored the normal task of a June convocation address: to deal with some pressing problem of the world that you, as they say, are about to enter. I have taken the luxury of doing so because, in contrast to earlier generations of graduates, you confront a world that fortunately is free from major problems. Just consider what those who preceded you here during the last five decades had to contend with. The class of 1932, after all, faced an economy marred by high unemployment and business failures in numerous sectors, while you find an economy surging with enterprise and such high levels of employment that only some 10.3 million Americans are currently out of work. In contrast to the class of four decades ago, who faced a terrible conflagration of world war, you enter a world secured against violence by mutually deterrent tools of destruction sufficient to destroy all human life many times over. Unlike the class of 1952, for whom all public discourse seemed reduced to the issue of confrontation against a Soviet drive for world hegemony, you face a world where the simplicities of Cold War reductionism have been overcome by an intelligent and well-educated cadre of public leaders.

Where the class of 1962 encountered the shame that one-third of the population of this country lived below the poverty line, and one-ninth behind racial barriers, you find all members of our society in a position to obtain decent nutrition, housing, medical care, and proper

education. Where the class of 1972 was moving to the awareness that energy and environmental resources on this planet were being dangerously eroded, you find a situation where careful planning has worked to assure future generations abundant supplies of energy and a benign whole earth.

So there are no outstanding crises for me to arouse you about on this occasion—except the crisis fueled by the tendency of this generation to embrace an ethic of radical privatization, a creed that may lead you to deceive yourselves that the preposterous ironic statements I have just uttered are even thinkable. Against that danger—against the possible seduction of all your energies into private concerns—I appeal now to what I hope has been an implicit component of your education at this University. The degrees you are about to receive symbolize your attainment of a certain level of competence in some special domain of intellectual work. But the experience you have had along the way should have made you aware of the innumerable links between that specialty and so many other domains. And if the community of scholars can be construed as a microcosm of the world at large, it will have led you to see that, however grandiose the claims you may make for the special work and lifestyle in which you get embedded, your vocation is necessarily tied to those of others in an overarching division of labor, and the possibility of communicating with those others may lead you both to a more modest appreciation of your special niche, and to a sense that it is lodged in a public world which has some claims on your attention.

The moment at which you separate from the University, or at least this phase of your life at the University, has now arrived. The separation is made easier, for all of us, by knowing that the mode of ironic detachment we all share somehow constitutes a bond that will always link us in a very special way.

Donald N. Levine is Professor in the Department of Sociology and the College and Dean of the College.
