

Humpál, Martin

Irony revisited : Arne Garborg's Novel Trætte Mænd

Brünner Beiträge zur Germanistik und Nordistik. 2001, vol. 15, iss. 1, pp. [165]-170

ISBN 80-210-2725-8

ISSN 1211-4979

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/105968>

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

MARTIN HUMPÁL

**IRONY REVISITED:
ARNE GARBORG'S NOVEL *TRÆTTE MÆND***

I

Garborg's novel *Trætte Mænd* is written in a quasi-diary form from the point of view of a decadent protagonist who toward the end seems to find a way out of his spiritual and sexual frustration in the Catholic Church. When the book was first published in 1891, some readers thought that the fictional narrator represented the opinion of the formerly agnostic author who seemed to have converted to Christianity and was now endorsing it as a way out of *fin-de-siècle* decadence. Yet this seemed highly improbable to others; and Garborg himself confirmed that the text was meant to be read ironically, and that he actually wanted to ridicule the religious-romantic tones in contemporary literature.¹

Critics usually agree that the discrepancy between certain readers' reception of the novel and Garborg's alleged intention is due to the fact that irony in *Trætte Mænd* is very subtle. Several generations of scholars have struggled with the question to what extent this irony is recognizable. Some found no irony, while others did. Today the general opinion seems to be that the book is, indeed, ironic due to the ironic signals in the text, and not only because Garborg claimed that it was an ironic text.² I agree and I do not intend to bring further proofs in this regard. I do want to suggest, though, that one reason the discussions of irony in *Trætte Mænd* have been so varied is perhaps that critics have

¹ For the genesis of the novel's reception, see Jan Sjøvik, "Arne Garborg: *Trætte Mænd*. En retorisk og genetisk analyse," *Edda* 82 (1982): 1-22.

² A good example of an analysis of such ironic signals which does not depend on Garborg's own pronouncements is Atle Kittang's analysis of Garborg's ironic use of the Faustian motif in *Trætte Mænd*. See Geir Mork, Atle Kittang, and Edvard Beyer, "Den reflekterte latteren: På spor etter Arne Garborgs ironi," *Edda* 91 (1991): 3-31, pp. 13-14. Per Thomas Andersen sees one of the above-mentioned ironic signals in Garborg's use of the character of Dr. Thisted. See Andersen, *Dekadanse i nordisk litteratur 1880-1900* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1992), pp. 437-439.

employed different conceptions of irony. I also wish to point out that these different conceptions of irony may have played a role in the historical reception of the book.

I will use Jan Sjøvik's work on *Trætte Mænd* as a basis for this discussion.³ Sjøvik's careful textual analysis is, in my view, so far the best explication of how irony works in Garborg's text. I do not intend to dispute his textual argument. What I want to question is the way Sjøvik relates this argument to Garborg—the-author, because Sjøvik may be speaking unwittingly of two types of irony.

II

There is one basic meaning of irony everyone is familiar with: an ironic statement means the opposite of what it literally says. A simple example would be a sentence such as "Oh, he is so smart." Let us assume that this sentence is addressed to a hearer who shares with the speaker the knowledge that the person referred to is actually rather dull. Both the speaker and the hearer share the same knowledge of the context in which such a statement was made and thus the speaker has no doubt that the hearer will understand the message ironically, and the hearer indeed has no difficulty in doing so. In this sense, irony has a clear communicative intention; it is meant to be understood in one specific way, and it usually is. Let us then call it "communicative irony."

The word irony, however, can also denote a certain form of rhetorical negativity or juxtaposition whose meaning is not supposed to be understood unambiguously. An example would be: "I will come tomorrow, God willing." In a certain context, this might be an ironic statement, and the hearer might become quite uncertain about the speaker's intention to come.⁴ The hearer's knowledge of the context in which such a statement is made may be of no help. This type of irony differs from the first in that it does not communicate a single, unambiguous meaning, but rather obscures or complicates meaning. Let us therefore call it "non-communicative irony."⁵

Let us apply the model "speaker – hearer" to the pair "author – reader." In the case of communicative irony, the author creating a text tries to make sure that

³ Sjøvik's analysis of *Trætte Mænd* was first published as the above-mentioned article, and later republished in an almost identical wording as a chapter in his book *Arne Garborgs Kristiania-romaner: En beretterteknisk studie* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1985). In my citations I am referring to the original article version.

⁴ I have taken this example from Louis Mackey's book *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), p. 134.

⁵ These two types of irony have received various names throughout the history of theory of irony. One of the most famous divisions is, for example, "stable" vs. "unstable," established by Wayne C. Booth in his book *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

the text's rhetoric makes the authorial message unambiguous. In the case of non-communicative irony, the author creates a text which is internally contradictory, creates an ironic tension and makes ironic interpretation possible, but this interpretation may not necessarily be identical with the author's "message." The irony is present and works on its own, regardless of the author's message. An example would be Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in which the possibility of authentic living is predicated upon faith, yet at the same time faith is defined as a continual, neverending striving. Some critics have pointed out that this juxtaposition of two seemingly contradictory positions is a non-communicative irony: does the text suggest that one can achieve authenticity through faith or that no authenticity is possible?

There are two major differences between the two ironies. One concerns the importance of "message"; the other is related to the importance of context for the reader's understanding. The idea of the author's message assumes that there is some communication channel, and that on one side of this channel the author sends a message in a package called "text," and the reader receives this message on the other side, whatever coding operation this might involve. The problem is that this kind of model, no matter how indispensable for literary studies, reduces irony to a message. But is irony always a message? Certainly not. Irony, I believe, can be equated with message only in the case of "communicative" irony.

In the case of non-communicative irony, irony is normally not a message, but a textual effect, an effect of textual organization which makes certain themes and motifs contradictory, ambiguous, and allows for an ironic reading. Sure enough, this effect may be intended by the author, but does not necessarily equal the author's message. The ironic effect may sometimes indirectly suggest the author's position, but, in principle, it cannot be reduced to it.

It is my contention that some of the confusions concerning irony in *Trætte Mænd* result from the fact that critics have conflated irony as the author's message with irony as a textual effect. This, I believe, happens even in the case of Sjøvik's penetrating analysis of *Trætte Mænd*, since he analyzes irony as a textual effect but ultimately subsumes it under a message.

III

According to Sjøvik, Gabriel Gram's conversion toward the end of the novel is not an authentic acceptance of God, but is rather a psychological healing of frustrated sexuality, an attempt to reestablish on a higher spiritual plane a relationship with the woman he has lost.⁶ Gram's religious feeling is thus an "[u]tilfredsstillet ... Kjønndrift," in the words of one of the characters in the book, Dr. Kvaale.⁷ Gram pretends that his motivation is truly spiritual, but his

⁶ Sjøvik, "Arne Garborg: Trætte Mænd," p. 18.

⁷ Arne Garborg, *Trætte Mænd (Skriftir i samling)*. Vol. 3. Oslo: Aschehoug, 1944), p. 216.

self-deception is revealed both in the thematic and the narrative organization of the text. Sjøvik points out that *Trøtte Mænd* is not a diary pure and simple, but a narrative that Gram edits out of his earlier diary entries, and his own editorial practice reveals his self-deception. Also, the whole organization of the thematic development and the characters' remarks about similarities between the erotic and the religious, casts an ironic light on Gram's words and actions.

Thus the text reveals that "Grams omvendelse bare er en annen side ved hans erotikk."⁸ Sjøvik clearly sees this as Garborg's message. At the beginning of his study, Sjøvik writes: "Formålet med denne studien er å klarlegge hva det er Garborg forsøker å si til leserne, og hvordan han romanteknisk går fram for å formidle sine meninger og normer.... [T]ekstens mening ... betraktes som identisk med forfatterens budskap...."⁹ Of course, Garborg is the author of the novel, and we know that Garborg did say that he was being ironic, so the textual irony Sjøvik describes must be an instrument of Garborg's ironic message. But how do we actually know this? Does Sjøvik's analysis of irony as a textual effect allow him or us to claim that this is Garborg's message without having recourse to biographical material?

Sjøvik actually performs two operations that may not be compatible. He undertakes a rhetorical analysis of the text, and he uses Garborg's own pronouncements about what he was up to. He analyzes irony as a textual effect, but then he uses it as if this analysis itself could prove the author's ironic message. But if one reads Sjøvik's article carefully, one notices that his analysis of irony as textual effect is used only to supplement what one already knows about what Garborg said.

My suspicion is that, in the case of *Trøtte Mænd*, the analysis of irony as a textual effect alone cannot prove that the author is being ironic. Sjøvik seems to be aware of this, too, when he writes that the reader "kan danne seg et bilde av forfatterintensjonen ved å anlegge et synkront perspektiv på det verdisystem som teksten utgjør," but "[f]or å forstå forfatterintensjonen i dens endelige utforming vil det imidlertid også være av verdi å betrakte den under et genetisk perspektiv," or "[e]n diakron analyse."¹⁰ Yes, indeed, irony as a textual effect can give us only "et bilde," that is, an approximation of the author's intention, but not more, and only sometimes. We cannot understand the author's intention or message fully only by reading the text. But this means that Sjøvik's attempt to prove Garborg's "message" is not really valid. We cannot fully understand the communicative irony without knowing Garborg's opinion from biographical sources.

The fact that some readers did take Garborg's text seriously – even his contemporaries who ought to have been more aware of the context than later generations – suggests that the novel may indeed be read as devoid of irony, or at

8 Sjøvik, "Arne Garborg: *Trøtte Mænd*," p. 21.

9 Sjøvik, "Arne Garborg: *Trøtte Mænd*," p. 1.

10 Sjøvik, "Arne Garborg: *Trøtte Mænd*," p. 2.

least the type I have called "communicative." The text might indeed be read as a confessional account of an individual who finds a way out of his problems in the Church with no ironic undertones intended by the author. I also think that critics who have claimed that Garborg failed to make the irony clear are right, but only in the sense of communicative irony. We cannot detect any direct authorial message, either ironic or serious.

What we can detect is the ironic juxtaposition of frustrated sexuality and Christianity. By not letting his own opinion be known directly through communicative irony, Garborg achieves the following effect. The relationship between sexuality and Christianity is presented more objectively than if Garborg made it clear that it was his personal, subjective opinion. Garborg made the irony subtle as if he were aware that an ironic effect does not yet mean that the author's message is ironic. If the textual irony is non-communicative, the equation of frustrated sexuality with Christianity gains a greater degree of objectivity than if Garborg made clear to everyone that it was his personal message.

To test this supposition, let us ask whether a reader who knows nothing about Garborg—the-man or the context in which the book was written can tell whether Garborg intended an ironic message. My suspicion is that the reader cannot tell without substantial knowledge of the historical background of the novel.

But I believe that such a reader can still interpret the juxtaposition of religion with frustrated sexuality as ironic, because the reader can detect irony as a textual effect without being aware of the author's worldview, opinion, or intended message. The internal organization of Garborg's text is indeed such that the interest in Christianity appears to be an aspect of frustrated sexuality. In other words, Gram's conversion may appear inauthentic to certain readers even if they do not know anything about Garborg. But it may also appear serious, depending on how much irony the reader is able to see in the text's juxtaposition of sexuality and Christianity. I think that for this reason, *Trætte Mænd* is a case of non-communicative irony. The text creates a certain juxtaposition, and leaves it up to the reader to interpret it.

IV

The distinction I am trying to make might explain the different attitudes to *Trætte Mænd* during the history of its reception. I suggest that perhaps one reason earlier readers did not understand Garborg's irony is that the readers of the classic realist novels were less accustomed to literary irony as a textual effect than twentieth-century readers after the arrival of modernism are. Many studies have argued that the narrators of the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel guarantee objectivity and an appropriately public view of the world. The discourse of the reliable narrator governs the overall narrative, and this concerns first-person narrators, too. Therefore, while irony is a common element in these novels, it seems to belong to the communicative type. The nineteenth-century novel seems to prefer communicative irony, just as it prefers that uncertainty be only

temporary. Obviously, exceptions such as Kierkegaard's texts exist, but, as we know, Kierkegaard's non-communicative irony was overwhelmingly misunderstood in his lifetime.

Thus the irony as a textual effect which Sjøvik analyzes may not have been perceptible for Garborg's audience for whom the narrator still expressed to a great degree the opinions of the author, as Sjøvik himself suggests.¹¹ The early readers read *Trætte Mænd* as a serious story of conversion because the text is devoid of direct communicative irony in the sense I have defined it above: it does not communicate a clearly understandable message.¹² It is therefore not surprising that analyses such as Sjøvik's came much later after the novel was first published.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, with the rise of various movements that are often placed under the rubric of modernism, fictional narrative often becomes ironic because it employs non-communicative irony. This irony typically expresses the loss of traditional values, alienation, uncertainty in the era of rapid secularization, perspectivism and relativism. Non-communicative irony is a reaction against the nineteenth-century fixed point of view, the fixed epistemology of public reason. The ironic effect of a text is often impossible to equate with the author's ironic message. In other words, the author's viewpoint becomes irrelevant, in that what the author says about the world is less important than what the text itself says about the world. If one reads *Trætte Mænd* in this way, one may see its non-communicative irony as anticipating a rather modern way of constructing a literary text.¹³

11 Sjøvik, "Arne Garborg: *Trætte Mænd*," p. 6.

12 Per Thomas Andersen's unwillingness to discuss conceptually the problem of irony in his analysis of *Trætte Mænd* seems to confirm this: "Jeg vil altså mene at det ikke fins noen enkel metode til å komme 'bakenfor' ironien i *Trætte Mænd* og konstruere en 'egentlig' eller éntydig holdning uten ironisk avstand" (*Dekadanse i nordisk litteratur 1880-1900*, p. 374). Also Per Buvik sees the irony in *Trætte Mænd* as very complex, and claims that the novel is "eit så samansett verk at ingen har vore i stand til å gjøre greie for ei éintydig norm eller ein éintydig budskap" (p. 55). See Buvik, "Trætte mænd, Garborg og dekadansen." In: Sveinung Time, ed. *Å lese Garborg i dag: Artiklar* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1980), pp. 54-65.

13 This article was originally read as a paper at the 86th conference of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study, May 2-5, 1996 in Williamsburg, Virginia.