



Ironic Practices as Pedagogical Tools for Accomplishing Italo Calvino's Lightness

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Abstract

This essay begins with the premise that Italo Calvino's *Memos* serve as a fundamentally educational proposition. Each of his lectures can be regarded as a substantive proposal, encouraging a reevaluation of our contemporary world through unconventional forms of knowledge, especially considering the challenges posed by the new millennium. The essay's central objective is to further the intellectual movement initiated by Calvino, but with a specific focus on theorizing education. It aims not to simply apply Calvino's principles and insights to education or provide a pedagogical analysis but rather to actively engage with them, fostering educational-philosophical reflections centred around the concept of "lightness", as identified by the Italian writer. Key questions emerge from this exploration: How can "lightness" be considered an educational quality? Can it serve as a valuable guide for navigating the complexities of contemporary education? Can the notion of "lightness" inspire the creation of new pedagogical languages that resist the instrumentalizing tendencies in education? The essay proceeds to elucidate Calvino's primary theses on "lightness" while also examining the potential for a productive dialogue between Calvino and Richard Rorty's ideas on irony, both in public and private dimensions. It illustrates how ironic practices, such as sarcasm, satire, and wit, conveyed through artistic expressions, can embody the essence of "lightness" that Calvino encourages. Ultimately, the essay concludes by reflecting on the pedagogical implications of embracing "lightness" in education, particularly in the affirmative/post-critical and Arendtian sense, as a means of bequeathing a world that genuinely belongs to future generations.

Keywords Lightness · Italo Calvino · Richard Rorty · Irony · Education

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Introduction

In this essay, it is taken as a starting point that Calvino's lessons represent a purely educational proposal. Each lecture, chapter, or lesson stands as a substantive proposal to rethink (considering the new millennium and its own urgencies) our common world from non-evident forms of knowledge. The aim of this essay is precisely to resume and continue the movement initiated by Italo Calvino, but in the key to theorizing education. And this, with the purpose not only of simply "applying" his principles and intuitions to the educational field, or commenting on them through a pedagogical lens, but rather of working with them, of developing autonomous educational-philosophical reflections around the quality of lightness, the first one that the Italian writer identifies. Thus, the first questions arise: In what sense can lightness be considered an educational quality? Can lightness become a good guide for navigating the contemporary educational scenarios? Can lightness help us generate new, more interesting, and fruitful pedagogical vocabularies from which to better resist the instrumentalization of education?

I will first explain Calvino's main theses on lightness included in the lesson at hand, I will present to what extent I find a potential dialogue with Richard Rorty's proposals regarding irony to be productive. After clarifying what I believe Rorty understands by irony (both in its public and private dimensions), I will engage in the exercise of complementarity between both authors, consisting of showing how ironic practices (sarcasm, satire, wit), expressed through poetic, musical, and literary examples, are ways of embodying the lightness to which Calvino invites us. I will conclude with some pedagogical considerations on the extent to which all of this may be of interest when thinking about educating the new generations. More specifically, how lightness can be an especially desirable quality if, in an affirmative and Arendtian sense, we wish to pass on the world in such a way that it can truly belong to those who will succeed us.

The Lightnesses of Italo Calvino

Calvino presents lightness as the first of his lectures¹. This fact is not insignificant, as it can be interpreted that the first thing to consider within this set of revisited and redefined intellectual virtues for the conditions of the upcoming millennium (lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity) is to take things a little more lightly, insofar as Calvino opposes it to heaviness (2016, p. 3) and has come to consider it "more as a virtue rather than a fault" (Ibid.). Applying lightness to reality like a tool allows us to distance ourselves from "the heaviness, the inertia, the opacity of the world" (Ibid., p. 4) that tends to adhere to our redescrptions of the world (to "writing") if one does not hurry to rid oneself of them ("find a way to give them the slip"). The lightness that preserves us from the slow and inexorable petrification of reality: like Perseus, freeing himself from Medusa. Calvino highlights from this mythological tale how the classic hero with light feet "supports himself on the lightness

¹ While I cannot provide a comprehensive overview of previous discussions on Italo Calvino's concept of "lightness", I cannot either go on in this article without acknowledging that this is not the first work to draw inspiration from this quality (Modena 2008; Spagnulo 2020). An inspiration that extends beyond the pedagogical realm I will be devoting to, reaching into areas such as ethics (Andreozzi 2012), theatre (Murray 2013), organizational studies (Michel 2007; Grimand 2018), or architecture (Modena 2011; Cabas 2014).

of things of stuff –wind and clouds– and turns his gaze toward that which can be revealed to him only indirectly, by an image caught in a mirror” (Ibid., pp. 4–5). Lightness provides that distance of study and indirect storytelling. It reflects reality itself, but by mediating, lightening, the contact with it, different forms of relating to it emerge (knowing them or, like Perseus, battling it). The strength of Perseus, and the virtue of lightness that Calvino finds, resides precisely in this, in “refusing to look directly while not denying the reality of the world of monsters in which he must live, a reality he carries with him and bears as his personal burden” (Ibid., p. 6).

The next literary focus through which Calvino wants to convey his own idea of lightness is Milan Kundera, as the only possible response to existence when conditions become desperate and oppressive. In his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera shows us how “the weight of living is found in all types of restriction, in the dense network of public and private restrictions that ultimately envelops every life in ever-tighter bonds” (Calvino 2016, p. 8). If one is sufficiently in the world, attending to and responding to reality, existence resembles this, embracing and assuming one’s own burdens and those of others. Moreover, choices or desires that may seem light or inconsequential at first can become, within the context of the dynamism of existence (both in the everyday and the extraordinary), heavy burdens. That is why lightness, its practice in the form of “liveliness and nimbleness” (Idem.), is so important. If there is no way to escape heaviness because everything ends up binding and burdening us, then living with the weights of our existences will only be possible if accompanied by the right counterbalances to avoid being engulfed. By changing our approaches, looking at the world from different angles, “with different logic, different methods of knowing and proving” (Idem.).

The next literary stops that Calvino relies on in his inspiring redescription of lightness focus on the literary contributions of Lucretius and Ovid, on one hand, and Boccaccio and Dante, on the other.

Lucretius stands out as one of the first poets “in which knowledge of the world leads to a dissolution of the world’s solidity and to a perception of that which is infinitely small and nimble and light” (Calvino 2016, p. 9), and what concerns him the most is “preventing the weight of matter from crushing us” (Ibid., p. 10). On the other hand, Ovid, according to Calvino, also understands that knowing the world fundamentally involves a form of dissolution, which leads him to affirm that in everything that exists, there is “an essential equality that goes against all hierarchies of power and value” (Ibid., p. 11). The certainty of this equalization dissolves the weight of what may appear to us as structurally imposed. Both inspire in Calvino a form of lightness “that is reflective and distinct from frivolity (...) In fact, reflective lightness can make frivolity seem heavy and opaque” (Ibid., p. 12). Lightness, therefore, is rather the opposite of frivolity: it is because one knows and reflects on the seriousness and weight of things that the necessary lightness is applied to rise above the structures imposed by the world, to avoid being crushed by it. On the other hand, the Cavalcanti of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* is highlighted by Calvino for his condition as “an austere philosopher walking pensively among the marble tombs beside the church” (Idem.). Is it possible to think of a more evocative image of someone who approaches the heaviest aspect of life (perhaps its end, death) with the necessary lightness to make it bearable than strolling, reflectively, through a cemetery? Calvino appreciates in this character his ability to “lifts himself against the weight of the world, proving that its heaviness contains the secret of lightness” (Ibid., p. 14). In contrast to that, Calvino presents Dante, in whose work

“everything takes on substance and stability: the weight of things is established with exactitude. Even when speaking of light things, Dante seems to want to measure the exact weight of their lightness” (Ibid., pp. 17–18). For Calvino, lightness is the opposite of losing interest in the world and letting things pass. In fact, it is an exercise in precision². “Lightness for me is related to precision and definition, not to the hazy and haphazard” (Ibid., p. 19).

Quoting Paul Valéry, Calvino adds that one should aspire to be light like a bird, not like a feather. Lightness as an existential and lyrical turn “that allows one’s own drama to be contemplated, as if from without, and dissolved in melancholy and irony” (Calvino 2016, p. 23). Pointing to literature represented by Shakespeare, Calvino emphasizes the connection between melancholy and humour. “Just as melancholy is sadness made light, so humour is comedy that has lost its physical weight (...) and casts doubts on the self, the world, and the entire network of relations they form” (Idem.). The union of melancholy and humour is what characterizes characters like Hamlet, as “a veil of minuscule particles of humors and sensations, a dusting of atoms” (Ibid.). Cyrano de Bergerac, according to Calvino, is another example of a character who embraces lightness in recognizing the precariousness of life: “how close man can be to not being a man, life to not being life, and the world to not being a world” (Ibid., p. 24). Happiness is also, by definition, a precarious state, as Calvino acknowledges in the work of Leopardi, who, through his meditations on the unbearable weight of life, links the never fully attainable nature of happiness with images that evoke lightness: “birds, a female voice singing from a window, the transparency of air, and above all the moon” (Ibid., p. 29).

All the forms of lightness that Calvino discusses and that I have tried to review here refer to the existential function of literature, “the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living” (Calvino 2016, p. 31). The lightness that literature recreates and that we need in the coming millennium consists of not expecting to find in it “more than what we’re able to bring with us” (Ibid., p. 34). In other words, it is about traveling with light luggage. One specific approach to leading a life with minimal baggage, which I aim to delve into as a pedagogical realization of Italo Calvino’s concept of lightness, involves embracing and educating oneself in the realm of ironic practices that, akin to Calvino’s writing style, can be discovered in literature.

Travelling Light and with an Ironic Spirit

Richard Rorty’s description of liberal irony is one of the most resonant forms in contemporary philosophy. In this section, I will try to explain and clarify Rorty’s position regarding irony and its function in liberal democracies³. Already in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, written in the late 1970s, Rorty had suggested that systematic philosophers want

² There is a full article within this special section devoted to discussing the educational potentialities of Italo Calvino’s ideas on the quality of precision. As Joris Vlieghe claims there, “exactitude is at the heart of what education is itself: teaching and learning are all about fostering an ethos of exactitude towards the world”.

³ Although I will refer to this and other works in which Rorty addresses the issue of liberal irony, my understanding of Richard Rorty’s ironist proposal and my moderate and modest clarification about it are marked by the works of Bernstein (2016), del Castillo (2015) y Frazier (2006). Here I make an expository presentation of what the ironic spirit is, without going into the literature that has discussed it or is discussing it, because the objective of the essay is to address the pedagogical derivations of practicing irony as a way of realizing the value of lightness to which Calvin invites us.

to provide grand arguments and build “for eternity,” while edifying ones “are reactive and offer satires, parodies, and aphorisms” (2001, p. 334). But it is in his work *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, written ten years later, that Rorty (1991) insists once again on that reactive character, now associating it much more with irony than with the specific form of satire.

The ironic intellectual is someone who feigns being less than they truly are and responds to others without taking them too seriously⁴. For instance, the philosopher in the Socratic style seeks definitions of terms to break free from the circularity imposed by common sense (or the common way of thinking about our problems), while the edifying philosopher attempts to determine if it is time to change our vocabulary to one that proves more useful. Irony, for Rorty, is not a rhetorical stance from which to elevate oneself above all and everyone else, but rather “a way of perceiving oneself, a state of mind” (2005, p. 61). The specific form this state of mind takes depends, according to Rorty’s thinking, on whether we are talking about the public or private sphere.

An ironist intellectual is someone who pretends being less of whom they really are, responding to someone who does not take themselves too seriously. For example, the philosopher in the Socratic style seeks definitions of terms to escape the circularity in which common sense (or the common way of thinking about our problems) traps them, while the edifying philosopher attempts to determine if it is time to change our vocabulary for one that is more useful. Irony, for Rorty, is not a rhetorical stance from which to elevate oneself above everything and everyone, but rather “a way of perceiving oneself, a state of mind” (2005, p. 61). The specific form that this state of mind takes depends, in Rorty’s thinking, on whether we are talking about the public or private sphere⁵.

When the public sphere is concerned, it is important not to confuse the ironic spirit with cynicism. The cynic is not someone who doesn’t take themselves seriously; they simply do not require seriousness. They recognize the falsehood and know that everything is a lie. They wear a mask, know it, and make a display of it. In the postmodern era in which Rorty writes, power no longer needs to be serious; it can be effective by openly laughing at itself. This is not the irony that Rorty speaks of, and his efforts focused on presenting the advantages of irony over seriousness: “Take yourself a little less seriously. Be aware of yourself as someone who is at the mercy of the contingencies of your education, culture, and environment” (2005, p. 159). The resonances with Calvino’s notions of lightness become apparent here: the precariousness of our existence and identity⁶, as an invitation to connect with what is light, what does not weigh us down, what allows us to bear the burdens of life. According to Rorty, irony is related to the stories we tell about ourselves. In the public sphere of liberal democracies, it is important to have discourses in which we “narrate, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives” (2001, p. 91). Those who participate in an ironist spirit will grasp more clearly the contingent nature of those

⁴ Within this context, there exist potential connections to Rancière’s critical analysis of Socratic irony in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière 1987), as well as to the recent works of Säfström (2021, 2022, 2023) that explore the potential of the Socratic tradition in reimagining education and democracy.

⁵ In an earlier paper I dealt with this problematic distinction. (Thoilliez 2019b).

⁶ I cannot go into it here now, but perhaps the quintessential literary example of this contingency of human existence and identity to which Rorty appeals can be found in Paul Auster’s novel, *4 3 2 1* (2017). Where before the same immutable fact, the birth of Ferguson on March 3, 1947 in Newark (New Jersey), several paths open as a result of random situations that the novelist presents to us resulting in four potential lives completely different from each other.

narratives and, therefore, will always be more predisposed to keep the conversation alive, open, and unfinished, with their main public virtue being tolerance. Indeed, taking things more lightly, as Calvino's notions of lightness also suggest, would help us become more liberal and tolerant individuals, traveling through the world with lighter luggage. Rorty expresses it as follows:

Liberals are people who believe that acts of cruelty are the worst things one can do. And I use the term 'ironist' to designate those individuals who recognize the contingency of their beliefs and their most fundamental desires (...) Liberal ironists are people who, among those desires that cannot be grounded, include their own hopes that suffering will decrease, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings must cease (2001, p. 17).

The liberal ironist that Rorty speaks of wants their society to be committed to the eradication of cruelty but also wants to combine this commitment “with a sense of contingency and transitoriness of their own commitment” (2001, p. 61). In other words, even though the ironist knows that this achievement is a result of contingent historical circumstances, they will not be any less convinced that avoiding cruelty is a fundamental obligation. It is interesting, especially in terms of discussing the pedagogical consequences of all this, that Rorty rejects the desirability of a human group that socializes solely in the practices specific to or characteristic of the ironist spirit: “I cannot imagine a culture that socializes its young in such a way that it constantly makes them doubt the very process of socialization they are undergoing. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated” (Ibid., p. 106). Just as with other qualities of an educated person, perhaps irony can be a desirable destination to be visited in adulthood, but not an educational starting point for newcomers (Arendt 1961). It is for this reason, due to the problems that would arise from a public socialization designed from radical irony, that Rorty suggests reserving the most extreme degree of irony⁷, in which the subject continuously rejects any normalized language, for the intimate and private sphere. The creation and preservation of that private space presuppose certain political and economic conditions, but when it exists, what happens there should not be considered relevant to the public sphere. Languages of self-creation must stay within their own limits. This is something that, generally, novelists (like Proust) handle much better than philosophers (like Nietzsche). In fact, for Rorty (2001, pp. 159–162), good literature is the one that best understands the conflict between the public sphere of solidarity (with books that help us be less cruel by warning us about the negative effects of institutions on people or the negative effects of our individual fantasies on others) and the private sphere of fantasy (with books that help us feel freer by constructing individual fantasies).

⁷ Coherently with his philosophical project, Rorty does not prescribe a specific “degree” of irony that is acceptable or desirable for education. However, I would argue that determining the appropriate level of irony is a contextual decision. The best ironists are often individuals who have traversed a considerable journey in life, accumulating a diverse range of experiences along the way. It is uncommon to encounter a masterful ironist among the inexperienced. For oneself to be a productive ironist, one that genuinely lightens perspectives, it is crucial to know how to switch on and off from that way of reasoning.

Ironic Practices to Realize Lightness

In what follows, I intend to present several ironic practices⁸ (poetic sarcasm, political satire, intellectual wit) as invitations to embrace the lightness advocated by Calvino for this coming millennium, also inspired by Rorty, by traveling light and with an ironic spirit. I will not offer a detailed aprioristic definition of these three practices, since I would rather let the examples teach the reader by themselves, but only a very basic note on each one of them (it is worth noting that these three definitions provide a general understanding of these terms, and they can overlap or intersect in certain contexts, as I hope becomes also apparent in the examples). The nuances and usage of these terms can vary, but these definitions should function as a helpful starting point: (i) *Sarcasm* is a form of verbal irony that involves saying something contrary to what is intended, often with a mocking or derisive tone. It is a way of expressing humour, criticism, or disdain by using words that are intended to be understood as the opposite of their literal meaning. (ii) *Satire* is a genre of literature, art, or performance that uses humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to criticize and expose vices, follies, or shortcomings of individuals, institutions, or society. It aims to provoke thought, challenge norms, and bring about social or political change through clever and often humorous means. (iii) *Wit* refers to the ability to think quickly, express ideas cleverly, and make connections that are amusing or insightful. It involves using language in a clever, humorous, or ingenious way to create intellectual amusement or perception. Wit often involves wordplay, puns, clever observations, or humorous associations.

I plan for the examples to speak for themselves, in line with Calvino's own suggestion regarding myths, to avoid suffocating them with my interpretations. Therefore, I will present them as they are, only preceded by a brief contextualization. In my selection, I intentionally sought to include different forms of expression (poetry, musical libretto, novel). I will revisit their pedagogical derivations in the final section.

Poetic Sarcasm

One of the most sarcastic poets writing about contemporary life is the current Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, Simon Armitage. In this poem, Armitage sarcastically criticizes consumer society through a call to passengers of any flight at any airport. As the voice of an airline ground staff member announces successive groups of people over the public address system in the waiting area, they express their "thanks for waiting" while informing the different classes and strata of travellers (who have paid or not for various upgrades in flight access) that they can now board the plane: "Thank You for Waiting" (Armitage 2017), a sarcastic poem about the ills of consumer society and the degrading experiences it produces in even the most mundane aspects of our daily lives.

*At this moment in time we'd like to invite.
First Class passengers only to board the aircraft.*

⁸ I refer to these as "ironic practices", and while there are certainly "ironic situations" that can be found in the realm of education, I am particularly interested in exploring irony as something that one actively engages in within the world. In a similar vein to Calvino's proposition of lightness to counter the overweight of life and escape the perils of petrification, I view ironic practices as creative means to navigate, respond, and live with difficulties, challenges, and problems.

Thank you for waiting. We now extend our invitation.
 to Exclusive, Superior, Privilege and Excelsior members,
 followed by triple, double and single Platinum members,
 followed by Gold and Silver Card members,
 followed by Pearl and Coral Club members.
 Military personnel in uniform may also board at this time.
 Thank you for waiting. We now invite.
 Bronze Alliance Members and passengers enrolled.
 in our Rare Earth Metals Points and Reward Scheme.
 to come forward, and thank you for waiting.
 Thank you for waiting. Accredited Beautiful People.
 may now board, plus any gentleman carrying a copy.
 of this month's Cigar Aficionado magazine, plus subscribers.
 to our Red Diamond, Black Opal or Blue Garnet promotion.
 We also welcome Sapphire, Ruby and Emerald members.
 at this time, followed by Amethyst, Onyx, Obsidian, Jet,
 Topaz and Quartz members. Priority Lane customers,
 Fast Track customers, Chosen Elite customers,
 Preferred Access customers and First Among Equals customers.
 may also now board.
 On production of a valid receipt travellers of elegance and style.
 wearing designer and/or hand-tailored clothing.
 to a minimum value of ten thousand US dollars may now board;
 passengers in possession of items of jewellery.
 (including wristwatches) with a retail purchase price.
 greater than the average annual salary.
 of a mid-career high school teacher are also welcome to board.
 Also welcome at this time are passengers talking loudly.
 into cellphone headsets about recently completed share deals.
 property acquisitions and aggressive takeovers,
 plus hedge fund managers with proven track records.
 in the undermining of small-to-medium-sized ambitions.
 Passengers in classes Loam, Chalk, Marl and Clay.
 may also board. Customers who have purchased.
 our Dignity or Morning Orchid packages.
 may now collect their sanitised shell suits prior to boarding.
 Thank you for waiting.
 Mediocre passengers are now invited to board,
 followed by passengers lacking business acumen.
 or genuine leadership potential, followed by people.
 of little or no consequence, followed by people.
 operating at a net fiscal loss as people.
 Those holding tickets for zones Rust, Mulch, Cardboard,
 Puddle and Sand might now want to begin gathering.
 their tissues and crumbs prior to embarkation.
 Passengers either partially or wholly dependent on welfare.

*or kindness, please have your travel coupons validated.
at the Quarantine Desk.
Sweat, Dust, Shoddy, Scurf, Faeces, Chaff, Remnant,
Ash, Pus, Sludge, Clinker, Splinter and Soot;
all you people are now free to board.*

Political Satire

The example of political satire I propose takes place in the USSR in 1948 when the most important Soviet composers of the time (Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Khachaturian) were condemned in a notorious and sinister decree for being formalists, meaning they were accused of writing music contrary to the interests of the people (whatever that meant). “Anti-formalist Rayok,” is a satirical operetta in four voices for choir and piano. The exact date of Dmitri Shostakovich’s composition is unknown (Grabowski 2014), but it appears to be a work he revisited over several years, and its premiere had to wait until January 12, 1989, in Washington. Due to space limitations, I won’t be able to reproduce the complete libretto here (Shostakovich n.d.)⁹, but I will present the central speeches of the three invited speakers¹⁰:

Chairman: So, comrades, let’s begin. True, there are few people today. True, among us, the underestimation of the cultural maximum of the lecture propaganda still prevails. Yet, since according to the schedule of our palace of culture we have today some discourses concerning the theme “Realism and formalism in music,”. We’ll carry this theme, that is, these discourses, though. That’s right, isn’t it? The proposal is accepted. The introductory speech on this subject will be pronounced by the musicologist number one, our principal advisor and music critic, Comrade Numberone. Now, comrades, let’s greet our dear and beloved great comrade Numberone!

Chairman & Musical Activists: Glory! Glory to great Numberone! Glory!

Numberone: Comrades! The realistic music is composed by people’s composers, and the formalistic music is composed by anti-people composers. Now, I put the following question: Why is the realistic music composed by people’s composers, and the formalistic music composed by anti-people composers? People’s composers compose realistic music, comrades, because, being realists by their nature, they can compose only realistic music. And anti-people composers, being by their nature formalists, can compose only formalistic music. So, our task consists in the following: People’s composers must develop the realistic music, while the anti-people composers must stop their more than doubtful experimentations in the field of formalistic music. (...)

Chairman: According to the schedule, let’s give the floor to the musicologist Numbertwo, who, moreover, has a voice, and hence can vocalize. So, I give the floor to comrade Numbertwo.

⁹ A complete bilingual edition of the Russian-English libretto can be consulted at the following link: <https://russian.spysideshow.org/music/Rayok.pdf>. A full version of the complete operetta can be heard here: <https://open.spotify.com/track/5LiviBdRwRe3PGnShgfkJk>.

¹⁰ According to Grabowski’s (2014) study, each speaker would represent a prominent Soviet political figure: Joseph Stalin (Numberone), Andrei Zhdanov (Numbertwo) and Dmitri Shepilov (Numberthree).

Numbertwo: Comrades! I don't intend to introduce with my speech any dissonance

Chairman & Musical Activists: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

Numbertwo: ... Or atonality

Chairman & Musical Activists: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

Numbertwo: Now, let's love the beautiful, the nice, the graceful. Let's love the aesthetic, the harmonic, the melodic, the poetic, the legal, the polyphonic, the popular, the noble, the classical! And, moreover, comrades, I have to inform you that in Caucasian operas, there must be an authentic 'lezghinka'. In Caucasian operas, the 'lezghinka' must be simple and well-known, dashing, familiar, popular, and, certainly caucasian. It must be authentic, it always must be authentic, it must be only, only authentic. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, authentic. (...)

Chairman: Here's a really scientific discourse! What an analysis! What a deepness! Comrade Numberthree takes the floor:

Numberthree: Comrades! We must be like the classics. We must not differ from the classics. Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, you're musical, graceful, harmonious. Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, you're melodious, nice, sonorous. Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, you do touch several strings. This is so right, so exact! Our man is a very complex organism. Therefore, comrades, we need symphonies, poems, quartets, sonatas, suites, quintets... O suites, o my little suites and sonatas, o my merry little quartets and cantatas. Hey, my Glinka, Dzerzhinka, Tishinka. Hey my Khrenish little poem, my little suit... But we must keep it in our memory: Vigilance, vigilance always and everywhere. Be vigilant everywhere, and say nothing! (...) Our great leader taught us all and said incessantly: Look here, look there, let all the enemies feel fear. Look here, look there and do away with the enemy. (...) Vigilance, vigilance always and everywhere. Vigilance, vigilance always and in every circumstance. Don't let the bourgeois ideology infect our youth. Thus, you'll protect our ideas. And if there is someone who appreciates the bourgeois ideas, we'll put him into jail for a long time. We'll put him into a camp under a doubled watch. Jail! Jail!

Intellectual wit

To illustrate intellectual wit, I will now share an excerpt from the novel *My Family and Other Animals* by writer Gerard Durrell (2004). This third excerpt narrates a situation that, in my opinion, can be classified as educational (in a broadly informal sense of the word) to illustrate how intellectual wit, as a manifestation of embracing lightness through the practice of irony, can let thinking go into new, more interesting, directions.

Upstairs Margo was in a state of semi-nudity, splashing disinfectant over herself in quantities, and Mother spent an exhausting afternoon being forced to examine her at intervals for the symptoms of the diseases which Margo felt sure she was hatching. It was unfortunate for Mother's peace of mind that the Pension Suisse happened to be situated in the road leading to the local cemetery. As we sat on our small balcony overhanging the street an apparently endless succession of funerals passed beneath us. The inhabitants of Corfu obviously believed that the best part of a bereavement was the funeral, for each seemed more ornate than the last. Cabs decorated with

yards of purple and black crêpe were drawn by horses so enveloped in plumes and canopies that it was a wonder they could move. Six or seven of these cabs, containing the mourners in full and uninhibited grief, preceded the corpse itself. This came on another cart-like vehicle, and was ensconced in a coffin so large and lush that it looked more like an enormous birthday cake. Some were white, with purple, black-and-scarlet, and deep blue decorations; others were gleaming black with complicated filigrees of gold and silver twining abundantly over them, and glittering brass handles. I had never seen anything so colourful and attractive. This, I decided, was really the way to die, with shrouded horses, acres of flowers, and a horde of most satisfactorily grief-stricken relatives. I hung over the balcony rail watching the coffins pass beneath, absorbed and fascinated.

As each funeral passed, and the sounds of mourning and the clapping of hooves died away in the distance, Mother became more and more agitated.

'I'm sure it's an epidemic,' she exclaimed at last, peering down nervously into the street.

'Nonsense, Mother; don't fuss,' said Larry airily.

But, dear, so many of them ... it's unnatural.

There's nothing unnatural about dying ... people do it all the time.

Yes, but they don't die like flies unless there's something wrong.

'Perhaps they save 'em up and bury 'em in a bunch,' suggested Leslie callously.

Don't be silly,' said Mother. 'I'm sure it's something to do with the drains. It can't be healthy for people to have those sort of arrangements.

My God!' said Margo sepulchrally, 'then I suppose I'll get it.

No, no, dear; it doesn't follow,' said Mother vaguely; 'it might be something that's not catching.

'I don't see how you can have an epidemic unless it's something catching,' Leslie remarked logically.

Anyway,' said Mother, refusing to be drawn into any medical arguments, 'I think we ought to find out. Can't you ring up the health authorities, Larry?

There probably aren't any health authorities here,' Larry pointed out, 'and even if there were, I doubt if they'd tell me.

Well,' Mother said with determination, 'there's nothing for it. We'll have to move. We must get out of the town. We must find a house in the country at once.

The next morning we started on our house-hunt.

Pedagogical Derivations

If philosophy is a general theory of education, and if the fundamental question of philosophy is "how should we live?", participating in educational processes must have something to do with exploring the possibilities of existence. Under certain regimes, where life is painful, suffocating, impossible, existence requires learning to live lightly. There are places and

moments where the most appropriate thing to do (in the sense that it allows for more possibilities of the possible) is to joke, laugh, and use irony. Occasionally, being able to not take life too seriously is a privileged gesture. When life becomes burdensome, practicing irony in the form of sarcasm, satire, or witty remarks is the only way to make it creatively bearable.

In a recent work (Thoilliez 2022), I addressed two attitudes through which the pragmatist tradition could help us confront one of the main phenomena that erode our possibilities of coexistence: post-truth. These two attitudes are fallibilism (truths are not definitive, but they are possible) and pluralism (caring for truths requires an inquisitive openness to multiplicity¹¹). In this essay, inspired by Italo Calvino, I wanted to address a third attitude that resonates particularly with Calvino's "Six Memos for the Next Millennium": lightness, in the form of ironic practices capable of accomplishing such lightness. Although I have for the most part so far insist on what I find Calvino and Rorty may have to offer when we bring them together to comment on what lightness (and the practice of irony) can make in our lives, there are also differences. For instance, Calvino approaches lightness from a more materialistic perspective, where it extends beyond language or discourse. Lightness becomes something tangible, perceptible, and physical—a solid manifestation that emerges as a counterforce to weight. However, like Rorty, Calvino recognizes that the existential battle against the burdens of our existence can be fought through the exploration and mastery of language¹². In the realm of pedagogy, the performative nature of words becomes evident: they can either petrify or set free, burden, or illuminate.

But what does it mean to educate in the practice of lightness as a virtue/intellectual value/quality? What can the examples of poetic sarcasm, political satire, and intellectual wit proposed for study here clarify for us? Returning to what the examples of ironic practices can evoke, it may be helpful to now advance some lines of interpretation considering the problem at hand.

Regarding *poetic sarcasm*, an example has been provided of how, through the sarcastic humor contained in this poem, a conversation can be initiated about the ways in which social inequalities manifest, about how deeply rooted our socialization is in marking and displaying differences in status and social prestige, and how contemporary wealth is related to the ability to control and have more time than others. Having money, in a way of life where time is valued above all else, means not having to submit to waiting. It means requesting and paying for passage, not waiting for one's turn. What is interesting about the poem is that it accomplishes all this by lightening our own conditions of existence, applying a spirit of unseriousness to a situation that speaks so much about the worst in ourselves, and from which it is possible to explore the expressive potential of economic and social discomfort. The poem sarcastically reflects an experience that all of us who have travelled on a budget have experienced at an airport at some point. As certain cultural experiences have become more popular and accessible to more people (air travel being one of them), mechanisms of distinction have been created in waiting queues (not only at airports, but also in experiences like "FastPass" at ski resorts or amusement parks). The contemporary average citizen, when

¹¹ There is a full article within this special section by Anna Blumsztajn devoted to discussing the educational potentialities of Italo Calvino's ideas on the quality of multiplicity. As it is claimed there, embracing the idea of knowledge multiplicity and the arbitrariness that comes with it "can help us with the endless curricula conflict or frustrations (...) in favour of educational practice based on the understanding that it can lead anywhere and everywhere".

¹² Here again, a strong connection between lightness and precision becomes evident (see Vlieghe's paper within this suit of articles).

he believes he is attaining the luxuries of the aspirational class whose tastes and habits he seeks to emulate, sees that class always one step ahead. Always unattainable, even when he thinks he has achieved it. The sarcastic nature of Armitage's poem accentuates all of this to the point of making us laugh.

By infusing sarcasm into the narrative, the poem transforms laughter into a powerful tool for distancing oneself from the stark realities of inequality. But it is this distance created by laughter, from the inequality that always finds a way to assert itself, that allows for writing about it in a manner that I would dare to describe as post-critical, a burst of laughter from which it is possible to apply an affirmative tone to our own social miseries¹³. It invites readers to share a collective, knowing chuckle at the absurdity of the human condition, creating a space for a post-critical perspective. This sarcastic laughter, rather than trivializing the gravity of social miseries, becomes a vessel for navigating through the complexities with an affirmative tone. The poem, through its unique blend of light sarcasm, invites readers to confront societal inequities with a renewed perspective —one that transcends criticism to embrace a form of enlightened and hopeful acceptance, fostering a collective understanding of our shared social predicaments and educational potentialities.

Moving on to the example of *political satire*, it is an operetta that highlights how the practice of satire has a very close relationship with the margins of existing freedom or, as many contemporary analysts would call it, the health or maturity of democracy where it is practiced or attempted. In totalitarian regimes, satire is an affirmative and post-critical way to escape, with a potentially unsettling twist, from the forces that seek to petrify reality and its inhabitants, like the Medusa of Perseus mentioned by Calvino. Totalitarianism also has no limits: it wants to totalize and petrify everything, including art (as is the case in the operetta, the composer Shostakovich's furtive expressive reaction to the attempt to eliminate musical formalism from the Soviet artistic scene) and even voting (which turns into agreements like "We'll carry this theme, that is, these discourses, though. That's right, isn't it? The proposal is accepted."¹⁴) and laughter (orchestrated, scripted, canned, disciplined: Numbertwo: Comrades! I don't intend to introduce with my speech any dissonance... / Chairman & Musical Activists: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! / Numbertwo: ... Or atonality... / Chairman & Musical Activists: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!). It is a scenario where musicians are not musicians, they are musical activists. Where free artistic and musical composition is suspended and placed in service, instrumentalized, for the political ideology. The desire for control solidifies and burdens everything, while leaving space for free creation softens and lightens it. The fact that Shostakovich composed his "Anti-formalist Rayok" in secret and kept it hidden for so many years raises doubts as to whether, in Rortyan terms, we are facing an exercise of thought for the public sphere of solidarity (as a com-

¹³ It is, moreover, from the point of view of feminist historians such as Melchior-Bornet (2023), also a typically feminine gesture in the sense that it has been the way through satirical, jocular, scathing forms and intervention, how women have been able to say without saying so many things that we were not allowed to express.

¹⁴ In the wonderfully satirical "La mort de Stalin" by filmmaker Armando Iannucci and released in 2018, he tells the story of what happened in the days immediately following Stalin's passing: the quarrels between his collaborators and the organization to seize power. of the obsequies of his multitudinous funeral. In one of his scenes with Stalin already deceased, but fully prisoners of his gestures, those who are fighting for leadership carry out several comical votes in which he satirises the difficulty of exercising the vote as a manifestation of what one thinks, demoted to a try to guess what the leader of the conversation or the partner next to you will vote so as not to be left out of the majority. By the way, although Russia ceased to be Soviet, the comedy was not amusing there and, in fact, its projection in cinemas was prohibited (AFP agence, 2018).

position intended to help be less cruel by warning of the negative effects of institutions on people) or, on the contrary, for the private sphere of his own fantasies (as a composition that would help him feel more free by constructing an individual fantasy or sharing it within a small and discreet community).

Faced with Soviet impositions on public life, Shostakovich responded by composing a private satire. I imagine him playing the chords on the piano alone in his house, singing softly, perhaps, if there was someone in his life he trusted enough, with other colleagues, secretly rehearsing the script in his mind and thus escaping. To make an artistic existence liveable, constrained by imposed political ideology. It is difficult to know what would have brought him more satisfaction, those private performances or, finally, the free and very public premiere for the American audience in the late 1980s¹⁵. The political burden experienced under totalitarianisms necessitates creative instances to enable educational and existential resistances—and a nuanced combination of direct and indirect interventions. While direct actions are indispensable in confronting the immediate challenges posed by any authoritarian regime, there exists a parallel avenue for resistances through subtler, yet in many respects potent, indirect interventions.

This operetta, as a form of satirical intervention, occupies a unique position in this resistance spectrum. Its light and engaging form, while providing a momentary reprieve from the weight of political oppression, carries a profound substance within its narrative. Through satire, the operetta achieves a delicate balance, simultaneously entertaining and challenging the status quo. It becomes a vehicle through which necessary survival strategies and creative forms of resistance find expression. In the interplay of its artistic elements, the operetta opens spaces for critical reflection that might be stifled in more overt forms of dissent. Within this artistic expression, the intertwining of necessary survival and creative struggle takes centre stage. By adopting new and innovative forms, the operetta not only captures the complexities of survival but also serves as a conduit for the articulation of suppressed dissent. It introduces novel avenues for criticism that might be rendered impossible through more direct means. Survival, creativity, and criticism converge in a harmonious symphony, offering a pedagogical counter-narrative to the oppressive forces of political totalitarianism.

The third example, dedicated to *intellectual wit*, illustrates a witty conversation in a mundane (familiar) setting about truly extraordinary events: an apparent typhus epidemic on the small Greek island of Corfu. The sharp, intelligent, and clever interventions of the older siblings are witnessed by young Gerry, who does not participate in the conversation, but he observes, listens, and registers everything. It is, in this sense, a beautiful example of powerful and imperfect family pedagogy: informal education about the decisions a human group encountering a new problem (the typhus epidemic) can make through a disorderly conversation with sufficient doses of humourousness. It is a place where familiarity allows not taking things seriously so that it is possible to say whatever comes to mind, in a competition among siblings to have the last word (like a boxer training in the gym, moving with light feet), where the condition of being siblings equalizes them all in a very fundamental and basic way, where they are simply Margo, Larry, and Leslie. There is something harmful and cor-

¹⁵ There would be much more to say about whether irony can be a form of political criticism and to what extent it is in danger today. See, some of the works in this regard that have appeared in recent years on the Spanish publishing scene, Bonete (2023), Gerchunoff (2019), Lijmaer (2019), Soto (2021, 2022). See as well, this article from Grimwood (2021).

rosive in a lightened parenthood that is lived and believed to be “cool” (Lipovetsky 2016)¹⁶, but being good parents is also, and above all, finding the impossible balance¹⁷ between serious concern and joyful trust. The dialogue we witness in the excerpt from Durrell’s novel (“There’s nothing unnatural about dying... people do it all the time.” / “Yes, but they don’t die like flies unless there’s something wrong.” / “Perhaps they save ’em up and bury ’em in a bunch,” suggested Leslie callously.), is a great example of collective thinking, where witty intervention is essential to advance the conversation so that some kind of determination can finally be made about what to do (“Well,” Mother said with determination, “there’s nothing for it. We’ll have to move. We must get out of the town. We must find a house in the country at once.”).

It is a dialogue that touches upon death and human frailty, which may be the most unbearable load of all within our existence. It is also within the family, through a loss of a loved one or by taking care of elderly family members, that one experiences for the first-time what human finitude is truly about and, thus, when one can be in most need that an unplanned wit chat come to our rescue. Sometimes, practicing irony, ironizing, subverting the order of things, joking, is the way to find the solution to problems. A witty collective conversation can often be the way to change the question about the problems we encounter, injecting a dose of lightness into the way we observe the problem from a new perspective. The transformative power of witty humour, embedded within a collective conversation, has the potential to reshape the very nature of the issues we confront. The notion that joking and irony can be instrumental in addressing challenges goes beyond mere levity; it taps into the capacity of a witty discourse to fundamentally alter the way we perceive and approach problems. Within this framework, irony serves as a dynamic tool for dismantling conventional perspectives and challenging the current state of things.

This deliberate act of destabilizing the normative can be a catalyst for creative problem-solving, encouraging a departure from rigid frameworks and fostering an environment where inventive solutions can emerge. The power of a collective conversation infused with wit lies in its ability to redefine the very questions posed by the problems at hand. Witty humour has the remarkable capacity to inject lightness into the discourse, breaking down the emotional barriers that often accompany serious issues. In this kind of altered state of perception, individuals are more open to exploring alternative viewpoints and embracing a more flexible mindset. A witty conversation becomes a vehicle for cognitive flexibility, allowing for the consideration of unconventional solutions that may have been overlooked in a more sombre context. Confronting challenges with wit forms of humour not only alleviates the emotional burden but also creates a shared space for resilience within a community (or a family as it is the case of the example at hand). The collective nature of witty exchanges fosters a sense of

¹⁶ “Permissive education, in effect, favours the development of restless, hyperactive, anxious and fragile children, because they have been educated without rules or limits, without a figure that represents authority, without assigning clear places that are like indispensable norms for the construction and structuring of the self. The considerable increase in children cared for by psychologists or public psychiatric services is NOT due to another reason (...) Cool educational logic tends to produce psychological insecurity, personality breakdown, inability to control impulses and desires. Such is the irony of hypermodern lightness, which does not stop, due to its permissive excesses, turning against itself.” (Lipovetsky 2016, p. 281).

¹⁷ “The task of the parents, Freud affirmed, is an impossible task. Every parent is called to educate their children on their behalf, based on their own shortcomings, exposed to the risk of error and failure. For this reason, the best are not those who present themselves as exemplary, but those who are aware of the impossible nature of their profession” (Recalcati 2014, p. 63).

camaraderie and solidarity, enabling individuals to confront difficulties with a united front, and transforming the very experience of grappling with problems into a shared quest.

Practicing irony as a post-critical tool arises from the need to challenge dominant forms of thinking and address current challenges. Irony becomes a tool that lightens up discourses and practices that threaten free and open conversation, while also offering the possibility of generating new forms of thought and action that are more tolerant, light, and graceful, both for our public and private lives. It is difficult to think of any form of education that seeks to pass on something from our democratic heritage without addressing these values. This way of taking ourselves less seriously, to walk through life with light and precise steps. Sometimes, sadly, it is difficult to laugh, and being too serious can become ridiculous in the end. The petrifying expansion of cancel culture often leads us to self-censorship: returning sarcastic, satirical, and even witty and biting conversations to the safe space of small circles, where we know that “no one is listening,” because “this cannot be said even in jest.” It may be a testament to greater civilizational excellence, this higher form of caring and concern for others’ feelings, or perhaps not (and it may be the beginning of our own civilizational downfall). Irony can become dangerous, and as Ramón del Castillo reminds us (2018, 2020), jokes and humour, as manifestations of the practice of irony, are quite serious things that can be extremely useful. Teaching how to navigate and get to master their codes is part of every educator’s task.

Conclusions

As I have tried to show so far, practicing irony and humour are ways of thinking about and working with our problems that can be especially useful in certain circumstances. I know that practicing irony and making jokes are not the same thing, but they are also not entirely opposed. The ironic spirit and its lightness operate best in a relaxed environment where there is good humour (criticism is in a bad mood, post-criticism laughs more). These two practices have been presented by some as opposites, with humour being good and irony being bad. However, an essentialist value ascription to either of these two practices is, in my opinion, a total mistake: a joke can only be fully understood, it only develops its complete meaning, within the context in which it is produced. This essay has thus addressed the defining tensions between forms of practicing irony that share common elements but can also be differentiated and nuanced, such as sarcasm, satire, and wit.

One of the key epistemic characteristics offered by the pragmatist tradition (embodied by the figure of Rortyan ironist) with which I wanted to engage in a dialogue with Calvino in this article is that laws and theories are instruments, not sacred totems. Calvino’s *Memos* are also tools for facing the next millennium. They are, in practice, tools and intellectual dispositions for the exploration of experience, tools that can be used and guided differently depending on the context being investigated. The reason why we sometimes fail to find satisfactory (though always temporary) solutions to our problems is not that we are not applying the correct laws or principles, but rather the question itself. As Thayer pointed out in his classic work: “It is not that questions need detailed answers or can be answered. It is rather that any expected answer is futile because the questions are misguided” (1981, p. 380).

When irony is practiced, whether in the form of sarcasm, satire, or wit, with the light precision of a woodpecker (“You have to be light as a bird, and not as a feather,” Calvino

2016, p. 19), it can lighten the weight of things in such a way that it becomes possible to rise above them, to distance ourselves from them through laughter, so that new and better articulations of the questions can be found. Irony and humour as conversation switches with the ability to lighten our senses and thus illuminate our imagination. Irony and humour as tools to confront the petrifications of the world: “Sometimes I felt that the whole world was petrified: a slow petrification” (Calvino, p. 4). Irony and its possible forms of practice as realizations of lightness through which “to prevent the weight of matter from crushing us” (Ibid., p. 10). Living lightly has nothing to do with taking existence lightly. On the contrary, when existence is heavy, when living becomes unbearable, living lightly can be the best possible response: to free us from the corrosion of the environment, to distance ourselves from forms of cruelty, and to unite through tolerant relationships of solidarity with others.

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