

Ironist vs. Empiricist: The Political Battle Royale in Percival Everett's *Cutting Lisa* and *Erasure*

Caitlin McConkey-Pirie

Introduction

Percival Everett's writing poses any number of challenges. Just to take the two examples concerned here: Cutting Lisa presents a sixty-six-year-old obstetrician—John Livesey—who visits his son, daughter-in-law (Lisa), and granddaughter in Oregon and discovers that no one seems pleased about Lisa's pregnancy. Livesey attempts to reconcile himself with the life his family appears to live and with his son, from whom he has drifted with time. The novel ends with Livesey aborting his grandchild on the family's kitchen table. Erasure presents the story of a university English professor named Thelonious "Monk" Ellison who writes complicated postmodern novels that no one reads because they are not ostensibly "black enough." Monk is black. To register his critique about this regime of unexamined readerly assumption, he writes a satire about "black life" in "black slang." The satire is loosely based on Richard Wright's Native Son, and it's awful. However, it becomes the literary sensation of the year, and the narrative of Erasure subsequently requires some difficult decisions from Monk.

From here, the questions asked by Everett's fiction are: why do we ask different questions from black writers than from white writers? And what happens when black writers produce art that we have been trained not to expect from them? One way to approach such questions is supplied by Richard Rorty's notion of the ironist, the individual who recognizes and engages with the contingency of existence and with the vocabulary that he or she has assembled in order to make sense of some truth. Caitlin McConkey-Pirie's excellent argument invites us to engage with some of the many challenges posed by Everett's work and Rorty's philosophy.

-Dr. Anthony Stewart

Percival Everett's characters have a problem with irony. Both Thelonious 'Monk' Ellison from *Erasure* and John Livesey from *Cutting Lisa* seem to find themselves perpetually vexed by the ironic—Ellison as a result of his failed attempt at satire and Livesey as a result of his inability to either recognize or employ irony. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty presents the ironist, in her imaginative capacity, as a fundamentally progressive figure. She continually questions the stability of what Rorty calls a "final vocabulary"—that is, "the words which [all human beings] use to justify their actions, their beliefs and their lives [...] words in which we tell [...] the story of our lives [...] these] words are as far as [one] can go with language."¹ The ironist is someone who does not assume any final vocabulary to be immutable, is "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires."² Rorty aims to define a liberal utopia where irony and human solidarity are universal. He sees art as integral to the realization of these political ideals, with the novel functioning as "a principal vehicle of moral change and progress"³ insofar as the novelist opens his reader to a new understanding of suffering that is not her own. Everett, too, writes towards a utopian world in which the prejudices against black writers no longer hold sway. His novels have the political aim of creating an artistic space where a black writer is held to the same standard as any white writer. In doing so, Everett confronts both the negative and positive possibilities of an

instrumentalization of irony. Thus, a reading of Everett's work through the lens of Rorty's concept of moral irony allows for a more complex understanding of Everett's project.

In *Erasure*, Monk Ellison turns to irony as an outlet for expressing his frustration with the expectations placed upon him as a black writer. Monk writes his parody, *My Pafology*, in response to Juanita Mae Jenkins's bestselling novel, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, in order to criticize the mainstream propagation of black stereotypes. By employing irony, however, his act of interpretation is moved outside his control and authorial intention. Here, Everett suggests the inherent danger of irony's being misinterpreted: when this misinterpretation is taken to an extreme, it risks becoming that which it seeks to critique. Of course, this is exactly what happens to Monk's parody. The positive public reaction to *My Pafology*—which, just before publication, Monk renames *Fuck* in one final ironic flourish—affirms the ironist's worst fears. Monk, however, stands by his work, even as it becomes more and more grossly misread. The ironist always affirms the freedom of interpretation of his audience. By refusing to explain to his readers how to interpret his work, Monk never compromises his art.⁴ Through Monk's private failure to have his work read as he originally intended, Everett calls attention to the personal integrity that the ironist must necessarily possess when facing the public dissemination of his work. However, this faith in his readership, misguided or not, unequivocally affirms the ironist's belief in individual freedom and responsibility. It is in this vein that the ironist serves progressive liberal politics.

Unlike Monk Ellison, who rides the ups and downs of a devotion to ironism, John Livesey in *Cutting Lisa* has no such faith: he is an empiricist living in an ironist's world. Irony requires an acceptance of one's own historical contingency, something Livesey adamantly opposes. Doc Livesey is an old-fashioned man. He confronts the world as data he can objectively observe and control. Even in relating to his family, Livesey is methodological. He imagines that he can control his family's behaviour in order to ensure the continuation of his progeny in the face of his own eventual demise. His need to control life's chaos asserts itself most strongly in the unconscionable act of performing an at-home, ambiguously-authorized abortion on his adulterous daughter-in-law Lisa. The ambiguity of Lisa's agency underscores the way in which the operation is of primary, symbolic importance not to Lisa's character but rather to Livesey's. To take another's life so firmly attests to the dominion of the taker's formal vocabulary. Livesey leaves no room for contingency to threaten the stronghold of his central belief. In his world, traditions of family and fidelity must be protected at all costs. Livesey's unerring strictness of personal belief demonstrates the flip side of the danger of irony: if critics accuse ironists of relativism, they could equally charge the empiricist with dogmatism. Everett lucidly shows how John Livesey's empiricism negates the possibility of creating the kind of world in which Everett hopes we can one day live.

Livesey is a man who lives by the adage 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks.' As a self-professed old man and an experience surgeon, Livesey believes that his life experience and profession give him privileged access to objective truth. Livesey embodies what Rorty calls the metaphysician's mindset: "he assumes that the presence of a term in his own final vocabulary

ensures that it refers to something which *has* a real essence.”⁵ Alternative final vocabularies do not upset the stability of the old doctor’s central beliefs. “Faith is faith,”⁶ the old man says, and whether that faith supports his belief in family or his belief in the Atlanta Braves, John Livesey’s fundamental beliefs go unaltered even as everything and everyone around him threatens to change.

Livesey’s obstinate loyalty to traditional values in the face of change alienates him from younger generations; he finds himself allied with members of his own generation, in particular Oliver Turner and his wheelchair-bound wife Lorraine. In his crass-talking, sharp-shooting neighbour Oliver, Livesey sees a kindred spirit. His friendship with Turner grows exponentially as they bond over beer, bacon, and talk of women. Livesey and Turner are two men cut from the same cloth. Livesey is a man obsessed by the notion of protecting his family name, and Turner stakes his claim on the ground for which he pays: “The road on either side of Turner Way is Beaver Pond, but the paved surface squarely set in front of my property on which I pay taxes is Turner Way.”⁷ The common values and common language shared by both men ultimately lead John Livesey to regard this as a relationship marked by “a new plateau of closeness.”⁸

Monk Ellison, by contrast, is a man who has no friends. Intimacy with others escapes Monk because, unlike Livesey, he doubts the legitimacy of a stable and common final human vocabulary. Monk fits Richard Rorty’s description of the ironist as “someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that [his] central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance.”⁹ Where language is contingent and subject to doubt, communication between individuals becomes all the more difficult. Monk confesses to his sister this sense of communicative alienation, admitting, “Sometimes I feel like I’m so removed from everything, like I don’t even know how to talk to people.”¹⁰ Monk’s sense of the contingency of language is what allows him insight into the real commonality to be found among human beings: susceptibility to humiliation. As Rorty argues, “the ironist takes the morally relevant definition of a person, a moral subject, to be ‘something that can be humiliated.’”¹¹ Monk lacks Livesey’s knowledge of friendship as something experienced through a common vocabulary. Despite this lack, he is still able to extend offers of kindness in moments of common humanity. This happens when another’s susceptibility to humiliation calls him forth to action.

The contingency of language complicates the ability to be interpreted by one’s own criteria. The difficulty of being understood on one’s own terms—of not being misinterpreted—can easily become grounds for one’s humiliation.¹² From a young age, Monk displays an acute understanding of this. No stranger to the tension between his intentional identity and the way in which others perceive him, Monk comes to his brother’s rescue by employing language in all of its contingency. Unsuccessful at having kept his sexual identity under wraps, Monk’s gay brother Bill finds himself publicly embarrassed by two ‘letter-jacketed’ jocks from his school. Noticing his brother’s impending humiliation, Monk inverts the homophobic joke and re-describes the meaning of the varsity letter that Roger, the bully, so proudly bears.

What are those guys doing?” I asked.

Roger was thrown. “What?”

“On your jacket. Is that what you got a letter for? What sport is that?”

Bill and the kid behind the counter started to laugh.

“What?” Roger said. “It’s for wrestling.”

“You mean rolling around on the floor with another boy.”¹³

Monk employs irony to demonstrate that one can never ensure being taken on one’s own terms. This gesture of solidarity enacts the progressive, political aim of the liberal ironist: “The liberal ironist just wants our *chances of being kind*, of avoiding the humiliation of others, to be expanded by redescription.”¹⁴ Monk thus strives to protect his brother’s dignity by playing with language, which is, for Monk, is a kind of reliable tough ever-changing constant.

Language is to Monk Ellison what family is to John Livesey. Livesey stakes his life on the claim that, in the words of his Oliver, “family is sacred.”¹⁵ His unwavering belief in the foundation of family is strengthened by his metaphysical belief that essences lie behind appearances. Thus, for Livesey, the news that his daughter-in-law is carrying a second child fills him with elated relief: “Maybe a boy this time, eh?”¹⁶ The hope of a child brings the possibility of a male heir, someone to carry on the Livesey legacy. Livesey’s unwavering belief in the importance of patrilineal family legacy underscores his position as an empiricist-metaphysician whose beliefs are impervious to change.

Livesey’s dogmatism, especially with regards to value of family, places him in direct confrontation with the modern world. Ever the traditionalist, he never once conceded to extramarital temptation throughout the course of his marriage. However, he lives in a world where his case is undoubtedly an exception to the rule. Even Oliver, who shares many of Livesey’s beliefs and values, does not prize monogamy. His admission to having sex with women other than his wife and his belief that such a transgression is not the equivalent of being unfaithful shocks his neighbour and does not assuage Livesey’s guilt when he has a love affair.¹⁷ Livesey—a widower—admits to his son: “I feel like I’m doing something wrong. What would your mother say?”¹⁸ Elgin’s pointed response—“Mom’s dead”—emphasizes how those around Livesey have moved forward while the doctor has nevertheless remained still.

The realization that his young lover Ruth does not feel tied down by monogamy shakes but does not disrupt the stability of Livesey’s fundamental beliefs. Upon seeing Ruth with another man, Livesey simply feels old: “He felt his entire weight, the weight of all his years, of everything he had come to know, settle where his stomach used to be.”¹⁹ The new world presents itself to him not as an alternate vocabulary, as another way to tell the story of his life, but as a horror that strengthens and necessitates an even more stringent belief in everything that he has already invested his faith in.

Unlike the old doctor, Monk finds comfort in the fact that even his most cherished beliefs are vulnerable to the ebb and flow of temporal contingency. Monk struggles even to take his vocation seriously. On attending a conference given by the *Nouveau Roman Society*, Monk

lackadaisically attempts to undermine his own professionalism. He admits: “I was scheduled to present my paper at nine the next morning, so my intention was to get to bed early and maybe sleep through it.”²⁰ Monk’s resistance to taking his writing career seriously reflects Rorty’s assertion that ironists are “always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves.”²¹ So, upon hearing a woman at a clinic give her opinion on Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Monk admits to himself: “I had expected this young woman with blue fingernails to be a certain way, to be slow and stupid.”²² That Monk is open to having his preconceptions exposed speaks to the openness of mind necessary to the ironist’s project.

If the ironist’s beliefs are continually set in flux by alternate yet equally formal vocabularies, if the ironist believes that, as Monk states, “all propositions are of equal value,”²³ how does the ironist respond to a vocabulary that reeks as flagrantly of humiliation as that of *We’s Lives in the Ghetto*? Monk chafes at Jenkins’s account of black American life not because he passionately disagrees with her representation of black speech as consisting of “*dint, ax, fo, screet, and fahvre,*” but rather because of the book’s claim to authenticity. As an ironist, he cannot accept that any one formal vocabulary can claim a privileged access to truth. As a *black* ironist he doubly cannot accept the notion that the misogynistic, homophobic, convoluted, and chiefly artificial construct of thug-life language represents a vocabulary that speaks an essential truth about black American experience. Faced with a vocabulary that claims authenticity at the same time as it humiliates the very audience it intends to represent, Monk responds the only way he knows how: he sits down and writes a parody.

My Pafology represents the reactive nature of the ironist’s project. Rorty writes: “Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated.”²⁴ Without *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto*, Monk would not be moved to transcribe his parody. Monk reacts against Jenkins’s critical acclaim, against the literary legacy that expects him to write the next *Native Son* or *The Colour Purple*,²⁵ and against the publishing world that lapped up his first novel, *Second Failure*, not in spite of, but perhaps *because* it featured a young black man who reacts to racism with terrorism and murderous rage. The result is *My Pafology*—a lampoon send-up of *Native Son*. Monk explains his ironist’s impulse to his agent Yul: “Look at the shit that’s published. I’m sick of it. This is an expression of my being sick of it.”²⁶ Monk feels sufficiently alienated by dominant cultural ideology to send his work out with no disclaimer: “If they can’t see it’s a parody, fuck them.”²⁷ And with Monk’s metaphorical flip-of-the-bird to his unsuspected readership, irony maintains its reactive impulse at the same time that it asserts its progressive potential.

Unlike monk, Livesey responds to crisis not with the ironist’s destabilizing narrative, but with an empiricist’s acumen. Livesey observes that something is amiss in his son’s household. He detects, “There’s something not right around here. [...] Every time I mention the new baby I feel like I’ve done something wrong.”²⁸ Elgin’s inability to “set [his] house in order”²⁹ infuriates the doctor, who admonishes: “You’d better get control of things.”³⁰ When Elgin fails to carry out his father’s orders, Livesey intervenes with scientific methodology. He collects data, makes

observations, tests his hypothesis, and comes to the conclusion that Lisa is having an affair with his son's best friend, Greg Yount. The betrayal affronts the very core of Livesey's beliefs: "This man is hurting my son, my grandchild. He's threatening my child."³¹ Livesey thus divides his world into a dichotomy of 'Us versus Them,' implicitly asserting his agency by outlining his territory—"my son, my grandchild."³² Lisa, on the other hand—an important half of the extramarital affair—has no such agency; she has no place in Livesey's fixed, formal vocabulary. It is only through such rigid familial and moral definitions that Livesey can go on to act with self-assured impunity.

Unlike the ironist, who accommodates alternative vocabularies as destabilizing but progressive, Livesey reacts to Lisa's affair by digging his heels even deeper into the ground.

It was the betrayal, not the lies nor hurt nor the ignorance, that smelled so badly. [...] He hated Yount, and as he thought of him, he became like a target at the end of a rifle barrel, flat and without history, just a place where the bullet would go. This man was destroying his son, his family.³³

His unwavering faith in his beliefs shields him from the spectre of doubt that continually haunts the ironist. His self-certainty allows him to focus his rage on a single target as though the situation could be broken down to simple cause and effect. Livesey articulates his ambition to stop the momentum of this problem: "Sometimes, sometimes you just have to do something. [...] Do something. [...] Things just start to pile up. The instinct to protect and all that."³⁴ His desire to assert control over a situation that does not directly involve him underscores the ontological problem of his empirical outlook. In Livesey's universe, he is the sole agent of moral change.

Livesey's decision to neutralize the threat to his family's sanctity by 'cutting Lisa'—that is to say, by performing an at-home abortion on his daughter-in-law—undermines the agency of everyone except the ruler himself. Everett shows the dangerous way in which the empiricist responds to the ironist's world with a tyrant's fist. By deciding that his profession gives him privileged access to a transcendental notion of 'truth,' 'good,' or what constitutes proper morality, Livesey takes away moral responsibility from the very people in whom he wishes to instil such values. Livesey's actions will continually subvert his original intentions; he falls into the trap of being an empiricist in an ironist's world.

Everett offers a similarly-dangerous and yet productive alternative to Livesey's action in Monk's use of irony. Monk's refusal to disclaim his intention to the potential publishers of *My Pafology* leaves his work open to acts of interpretation; this risk affirms individual freedom and responsibility and validates any and all formal vocabularies. As *My Pafology* travels from the private realm of Monk's office to the public realm of publishing houses, Monk watches with horror as the book becomes exactly what he strove to critique. A senior editor at Random House acclaims the novel as "true to life," "an important book," and "magnificently raw and honest."³⁵ Nothing could be further from Monk's intention. On confirming his lucrative book deal with Random House, Monk reflects: "Certainly, I felt a great deal of hostility toward an industry so

eager to seek out and sell such demeaning and soul destroying drivel.”³⁶ However, and importantly, he refuses to give up the game; Monk refuses to tell his readers how to interpret his work. For Monk, the meaning of *My Pafology* is transparent: “The novel, so-called, was more a chair than a painting, my having designed it not as a work of art, but as a functional device, its appearance a thing to behold, but more a thing to mark, a warning perhaps, a gravestone certainly.”³⁷ The novel, ludicrously re-christened *Fuck*, takes on a life of its own. Stagg R. Leigh, Monk’s ghetto persona and the alleged author of *Fuck*, signs movie deals, goes on daytime talk shows, and even wins a national book award for which Monk Ellison sits on the jury. Though *Fuck* becomes a kind of walking nightmare for its author, worse would be the writer’s nightmare of telling his readers how to read.

Monk thus affirms the political role of the liberalironist as postulated by Richard Rorty. The ironist’s task is to fight humiliation through her imaginative ability. Monk’s understanding of the necessary contingency of language allows him to value alternate formal vocabularies, something he affirms by leaving the work of interpretation up to his readers. Livesay, on the other hand, has an unwavering belief that his age and experience give him privileged access to transcendental truth; as Rorty’s empiricist, Livesay does not value any formal vocabularies other than his own. His dogmatism pushes him to seek to fit the external world to his vocabulary, heinously performing an abortion on his daughter-in-law. Everett’s rendering of Livesay suggests that the empiricist’s project is ultimately futile: the outcome of his actions will continually subvert his original intentions. By thus contrasting the empiricist’s program with the ironist’s imaginative openness, Everett allows that in our current stage of modernity, the only way to create the kind of world of which he imagines is through the vehicle of irony.

Notes

¹Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73.

²*Ibid.*, xv.

³*Ibid.*, xvi.

⁴Percival Everett, *Erasure*, (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 257.

⁵Rorty, 74.

⁶Everett, *Erasure*, 49.

⁷*Ibid.*, 43.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Rorty, xv.

¹⁰Everett, *Erasure*, 26.

¹¹Rorty, 91.

¹²Everett, *Erasure*, 89.

¹³*Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁴Rorty, 91.

¹⁵Percival Everett, *Cutting Lisa*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 98.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 38.

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- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.
¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.
²⁰ Everett, *Erasure*, 10.
²¹ Rorty, 74.
²² Everett, *Erasure*, 21.
²³ *Ibid.*, 42.
²⁴ Rorty, 88.
²⁵ Everett, *Erasure*, 61.
²⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.
²⁷ *Ibid.*
²⁸ Everett, *Cutting Lisa*, 71.
²⁹ Isaiah 38:1, qtd. in Everett, *Cutting Lisa*, 10.
³⁰ Everett, *Cutting Lisa*, 72.
³¹ *Ibid.*, 98.
³² *Ibid.*
³³ *Ibid.*, 119.
³⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.
³⁵ Everett, *Erasure*, 136,
³⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.
³⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.