

Poststructuralist Unravellings: In Pursuit of Irony

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Rampant Oedipus pursues himself, Socrates is accused of dissembling, Chaucer's subtly nuanced Prioresse disturbs religious convention, Shakespeare's Antony declares Brutus "an honourable man," Swift's "Modest Proposal" turns the art of double-play into ridicule and satire, and so on. However elusive its definition, irony has indeed a very long history of critical interest, a history that includes the classical rhetoricians, Samuel Johnson, the German Romantic theorists and New Criticism together with continuing attention to so many of the best-known works of world literature.

Part of the uncertainty about irony and, no doubt, the fascination lies in the matter of intention, and the intentionalist fallacy, in assuming an intended meaning that thereby allows the play of otherness, that suggests a disjunction between words spoken or written and the user's intention. Thus Johnson's illustration: "Bolingbroke was a holy man." And, in this limited sense, the surface play of *falsehood* indicates well enough the deeper *truth* of the real intention — provided, of course, the listener or reader is up to the mark and aware of the double-play. But from the late eighteenth century the possibilities become more complicated. Schlegel's reconsideration takes irony beyond conscious and deliberate ambiguity; it is, he says, "the recognition of the fact that the world in its essence is paradoxical and that an ambivalent attitude alone can grasp its contradictory totality" (Wellek, 14). In this sense, irony is endemic, a marker of "God's art" once ideas of complete order and harmony give way to their other, to the confusions of relativity, complex interplay and multiplicity. It is thus situational, embedded in the very nature of things in their complexities. It is *ironic*, then, and notwithstanding Cleanth Brooks' attention to incongruities, that New Critical emphases should focus upon the play of oppositions and tensions while retaining a notion of containment, or, in Richards's phrase, "balanced poise" (250). This is just one way we may choose to read a Swift or Pope, De Lillo or, in film, a Greenaway, for the works will always both invite and resist the reductions we may place upon them.

Wayne Booth's work (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1961; *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 1974) comes between New Criticism and poststructuralism in a double sense, chronologically and with respect to dividing up author-reader possibilities in

the play of language. Distinguishing the "implied author" from the narrator and the actual author, Booth opens the way to consideration of an "implied reader" as well and his formalist analyses of fiction lead to his later study of irony. In the book on irony, he acknowledges the influence of Kierkegaard (*The Concept of Irony*), D.C. Muecke (*The Compass of Irony*) and E.D. Hirsch (*Validity in Interpretation*), and devotes Part I and most of Part II to consideration of "stable irony." Although he begins with a customary gesture ("There is no agreement among critics about what irony is," ix), he sets about the business of defining stable irony with the sort of care and richness that mark his earlier study of fiction. Booth is aware of the large assumptions involved in establishing ideas of stable ground and shared understandings about intent and, therefore, about effect. Even so, he begins Part III Instabilities with a confidence that poststructuralists, for example, might understand but find hard to share:

Though the ironic works we have read so far have ranged widely in difficulty, most of them have been quite simple in two basic respects: the authors have offered us an unequivocal invitation to reconstruct, and the reconstructions have not themselves been later undermined. If there were victims (and there usually were) they were never the implied author (whatever victimized masks he assumed in passing) and they did not include the true implied reader: the reader and author were intended to stand, after their work was done, firmly and securely together. (233)

It is a remarkable claim because, when we look at the works considered, there they all are, the usual suspects: Shakespeare, Bunyan, Defoe, Swift, Pope, Fielding, Austen, Poe, Dickens, Browning, Twain, Eliot, Joyce, Mann et al. Nevertheless, in Part III Booth concedes the existence of "rough beasts" that challenge the solid ground of definition. His resulting grid (involving combinations of stable-unstable, overt-covert, local-infinite) is more an acknowledgement than solution of the difficulties, as he indicates in recalling the old story about an Eastern prophet ("There are elephants *all the way down*"). But have we, with Booth, crossed "that formidable chasm" (240) between stable and unstable ironies or, persistent travellers, are we simply discovering the limitation of our own labels and metaphors?

As a topic and effect of poststructuralist theory and criticism, deconstruction of "the real" includes radical unsettlings of stable notions of reference, experience, identity, and discourse. Rather than serving as the grounds of meaning, they too are variable products of negotiation. With Nietzsche and Bataille as intellectual precursors, Derrida's post-Saussurean focus on language and writing, on the play of *différance*, supplementarity and the trace, invites a new take on irony, one that shifts Schlegel's *ambivalence* into another gear, as it were, by replacing the concept of authority (and

limitation) with the critical opportunism of undecidability, heterogeneity, intertextuality and theoretically endless multiplicity. This instability is irony's double-play tripled and quadrupled in the play of language and meanings.

Effectively wide-ranging and provocative, *Narrative Ironies* is organized as a tribute to Lilian Furst's substantial contributions to the matter of irony; she is herself one of the contributors. As Raymond Prier reminds us in his Editorial Introduction, the link between irony and narrative is ancient. But if it is evident in the Classical period, its narrative connection does not have to wait upon the appearance of Fielding, Richardson, Swift and Co. Narrative in Chaucer and in Shakespeare, for instance, provides abundant evidence of the associations. Nevertheless, as he suggests, the contributors to this volume share Lilian Furst's observation that "Narrative is ... a good base from which to explore ironies" (Furst, 19) and the eighteen essays are arranged in four parts: irony as a theoretical issue, irony and ambiguity, irony as mystery and intergeneric irony. In its concentration on European narrative from Goethe to Modernism, the collection provides significant explorations of the complex connections between literature and culture with a view to highlighting irony in operation.

Beginning with reflections upon ideas and the novel, Walter Strauss presents a comparative analysis of Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* and Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* that elucidates their different means of addressing interrelationships between reality and imagination, self and world. For them, the novel is a means of quest but with Proust seeking paradisaical "recovery of time and self" (17) whereas Musil seeks new utopian possibilities of experience and existence. Emphasizing their different conceptions of time and contrasting metaphors, Strauss locates irony in the linguistic negotiations of identity and experience. Clayton Koelb presents a deft and persuasive analysis of the ironies in Kierkegaard's mystifying *Either/Or*, a possible "postmodern novel *avant la lettre*" (22) by concentrating on the rival interpretations made by characters A (the aesthete) and B (the judge) of Scribe's sex comedy *Les Premières amours*. Irony is linked with deception and, taking up the author's invitation, Koelb examines the implications of Kierkegaard's claim that it turns about the distinction between "phenomenon" and "essence." Gerald Gillespie compares Joyce, Kafka and Butor (*Ulysses*, *The Trial* and *Passing Time*) in terms of the idea of Theseus questers in the labyrinth of uncertainty, possibility and incompleteness. Taking emblematic figures (the questers) and emblematic situations (at the gate), he defines them as readers for whom the epiphanic insights are simultaneously promised and withheld. With its attention to spatial and temporal matters, the essay offers a fine reading of mythological motifs and the sort of interplay of ancient and modern, classical and contemporary, past and present that Eliot defined as the "mythic method" in his famous reading of Joyce's *Ulysses*. In the final essay of Part I, Frederick Burwick takes a line from Schlegel's fragments on transcendental

irony and Lilian Furst's analyses of metafictional referentiality to look at the twice-told tale and then three novels: Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799), Hoffmann's *Kater Murr* (1820/21) and Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). Focussing upon multiple narrators, opposed values and uncertainties, doublings, repetitions and difference, he links romantic irony to the structural ironies characteristic of the bifurcated novel and, with passing reference to Hawthorne, Ford, Cortázar and Roth, considers those ways in which the reader is caught up in the ironies of competing versions of the real. The examples are endemic in postmodernist fiction.

If "Ambiguous Ironies," the title of Part II, seems a tautology, it does emphasize this primary characteristic while inviting its postmodernist extension along the pathways of indeterminacy. Befitting her status in the project, Lilian Furst provides a very fine analysis of narrative structure in Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar*. Suggesting that concentration on Mann's portrait of Goethe and consequent debates about truth and fiction have led to neglect of the novel's narrative qualities, she argues that the strategies of decentering, deferral, interplay and dualism not only create the ironic mode but invite variability in understanding and interpretation as the appropriate response. That Mann was affected by Goethe's influence, she suggests, is evident in the series of essays he wrote on Goethe, essays that reveal a contradictoriness in Mann's perception of his famous predecessor and provide an introductory framework for *Lotte in Weimar*. Thus the alternative images in the novel, in this narrative "shaped like a prism, in which an array of mirror images is refracted" (88), are held to be, in their multiplicity, a most suitable mode of expression for the fascinating subject. That the play of ironies may lead indeed to variability and multiplicity rather than to resolution is indicated further in the essays from Madeline Levine, E.F. Kaelin, Barry Jacobs and John and Carol Garrard. In her discussion of Polish writer Andrzej Szczypiorski's highly political novel *Początek* (translated as *The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman*), Madeline Levine notes the grimly ironic parallels between Nazi and communist oppression and the ease with which the oppressed may become oppressors. Focussing upon moral ambiguity, her reading certainly supports the view that this novel "is poised precariously between nostalgic idealization of the apocalyptic past and self-lacerating outrage at the course of Polish history" (96). Kaelin examines the multiple narrative voices in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, a work that is built so ostentatiously upon conflicting subjectivities and perspectives. It is curious that Vardaman, the child, is typed as an idiot; Faulkner's attempt to convey the consciousness of an "idiot" is presented, rather, in *The Sound and the Fury*. Barry Jacobs' analysis of Strindberg's novella "The Roofing Ceremony" is assured and interesting in its concentration on story structure and metaphors. Framed by an opening paragraph, Gustaf's monologue takes the form of intertwined narratives and, as Jacobs shows, ironic possibilities abound in the discrepancies between

Gustaf's self-portrait and the views of him presented by other characters. Arguing that forgiveness/vengeance is the major opposition in *Anna Karenina*, the Garrards explore character, event and narrative structure in terms of this dynamic. With attention to biblical narrative and to the influences of Dumas and Schopenhauer on Tolstoy's work, they present Dolly as the exemplary figure of benevolence and Anna as the sinner beyond divine forgiveness. Measuring characters according to their capacity to forgive, and to be forgiven, Anna and Vronsky come out badly. This is a morally conservative line; but as the Garrards point out, the novel deals in sufficient complications to avoid narrow preachiness.

The essays of Part III Mysterious Ironies are held to offer examples of that disturbing connection between irony, mystery and notions of the "real." Patricia Merivale's excellent essay presents a stylish analysis of the detective story as an intertextual form that foregrounds the challenges of incomplete texts, reading and interpretation. She traces a genealogy from Poe's classic Dupin stories and "The Man of the Crowd" to postmodern variations, a trajectory in which "this by now negatively hermeneutic allegory joins up with the postmodern rejection of closure" (166). Rich in suggestions and assured in its attention to critical histories, the essay looks at developments in G.K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, Kobo Abe and Paul Auster. Her conclusion refers to Auster's detective story sequence, *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, and *The Locked Room*:

his Trilogy is a fugue on the collapsing of personalities into identities, of identities into a single uncertain, shifting identity-base, and of that, in turn, into the game or play of the postmodern text, a process first adumbrated a century and a half ago in Poe's always-already postmodern hermeneutic allegory of the inaccessibility of the dark secrets in our hearts. (178-9)

Elaborated in the processes of detective fiction, the metaphors of game and play turn attention not only to narrative structures, clues, strategies, challenges and mysteries but, as well, to the dynamics of language and to the attractions of the pursuit itself as distinct from the end-game of "solution." In her discussion of Maupassant's short fiction, Deborah Harter emphasizes his attention to the ambiguities of the city (Paris), to those ways in which the promised source of delight and pleasure is also the centre of alienation and despair. Although the practice has a very long history, it is Harold Bloom who figures reading inevitably as misreading, a view that acknowledges not only the slipperiness of language, writing and texts but also the complications of reading practices and of readers themselves who come to the task with such different loads of baggage. Hans Eichner examines the misreading of three major works of fin-de-siècle aestheticism, Huysmans' *À Rebours*, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Hofmannsthal's *Der Tor und der Tod*. As he

points out, the cautionary tales are also wish-dreams and any condemnation of the aesthetic life is modified by its simultaneous celebration. The three main figures in the texts are wealthy noblemen who lead privileged lives; their creators, in their writing and in their life experiences, knew well enough the attractions and the penalties of pursuit of the cult of beauty. Exploring the intertextual influence, Albert Gérard tracks Zola's attention to the incest theme in his novel *La Curée* and his play *Renée* back to Euripides, Seneca and, in particular, to Racine's *Phèdre*. Willi Goetschel examines the metaphors of economy and love in Keller's short fiction finding there a degree of commodity fetishism and transference that constitutes a critique of original accumulation.

The essays of Part IV, Intergeneric Ironies, explore processes of intertextual influence. They consolidate readings in some of the earlier pieces in this collection that analyse connection as variously ironic interplay and modulation. In his reading of Hoffmann's "Ritter Gluck," John Neubauer considers Hoffmann's attention to music and the intertextual influences of Goethe's translation of Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau*. George Kennedy examines the complex matter of history and its uses in fiction in the example of Disraeli's *Coningsby* and with comparative attention to Stendhal's *Le rouge et le noir*. Gregory Maertz provides an interesting analysis of intellectual and literary history in his focus on William Godwin's fiction. Noting a number of critical readings that compare Godwin's *St Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* with *Candide* and *Rasselas*, he argues that it is an anti-Bildungsroman, finding in its generic diversity a manner more in keeping with Schlegel's definition of "romantische Poesie." Finally, Raymond Prier offers a reading of Goethe's *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers* that focuses upon Goethe's debt to Goldsmith (*The Vicar of Wakefield*) and to other antecedents (Homer, Macpherson, Klopstock, Lessing). Looking at the interweaving of different voices and partial understandings in Goethe's novel, he defines a hybrid form of irony that complicates the eighteenth-century model and reminds us of the attractions of multiple interpretation.

There is no question that the great works of European narrative provide intriguingly complex versions of human consciousness, identity, relationships and social-cultural conditions. In their modes of interplay, in matters of narrative voice, character, perspective and ideology, irony is inevitable. A well-practised element of conscious presentation, of writerly choice, it is also implicit in the operations of language once we concede the "post-Saussurean" invitations to metaphoric play, multiplicity, provisionality and misreading. In the range of their attention and in the rigor of their comparative practice, these essays offer valuable insights into the operations of irony in texts and in the exchange processes of critical interpretation.

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Das Gesicht der Vernunft: Anmerkungen zur Dialektik der Aufklärung anlässlich der Herausgabe des Briefwechsels zwischen Johann Kaspar Lavater, Charles Bonnet und Jacob Benelle

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Der Topos *Aufklärung* ist das Thema eines derart umfangreichen Spektrums differenzierter Diskurse in den verschiedenen Kulturen Europas (engl. *enlightenment*, franz. *les lumières*, ital. *illuminismo*, span. *Ilustración*, russ. *prosvěšćenie*) und der übrigen Welt von China und Japan bis Kanada und Lateinamerika (Clarke 1997), daß sein Volumen von einer Person allein nicht mehr zu überblicken ist. Um dennoch die kürzlich erschienene wichtige Edition des Briefwechsels zwischen Lavater, Bonnet und Bennelle (Luiginbühl-Weber 1997) mit wenigen Worten einzuleiten, was zur Entwicklung des folgenden Arguments hinsichtlich der Bedeutung des Anorganischen in der Denkhaltung der Aufklärung notwendig ist, einige allgemeine Hinweise zum theoretischen und historischen Rahmen.

Grundsätzlich bezeichnet *Aufklärung* einen "Erkenntnis-, Wissens- und Epochenbegriff im Range eines geschichtsphilosophischen Fortschritts- und Perspektivebegriffs", der allgemein als ein Zeichen des Progressiven angesehen wird (Schröder in Sandkühler 1990: 276; s. auch Foucault 1984; Bahr 1974; Dupront 1996; Marx 1996). Damit befinden sich im Umfeld der aufklärten europäischen Philosophie, Kunst, Literatur und Religion viele bekannte Namen, beispielsweise Kant, Herder, Mendelssohn, Lessing und Lichtenberg in Deutschland, Hobbes, Locke, Gibbon, Pope, Richardson und Swift in England, Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu, Condorcet und Rousseau in Frankreich, Vico, Galiani und Goldoni in Italien und Lomonosov, Novikov und Krylov in Rußland (Alt 1996; Osborne 1998; Rabinow 1996; Saine 1997; Wilson 1996; Yolkon 1991).

In der Geschichte des Begriffs (O'Keefe 1974) und heute wieder in den Debatten der postmodernen Kultur- und Gesellschaftstheorie (Davies 1995; Racevskis 1993; Rengger 1995) stellt sich besonders eine Frage mit irritierender Hartnäckigkeit, und zwar das Problem des rigorosen kognitiven Anspruchs der Aufklärung. Angesprochen ist das epistemologische Axiom, daß Bewußtsein und Materie eine Struktur besitzen, die auf einem rationalen Code