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ROMANTIC IRONY AS A SOURCE OF VALUE JUDGMENT IN MODERNISM AND NEW CRITICISM

ABSTRACT: This article discusses how the reception of Romantic irony in modernism and New Criticism bears significant implications for the emergence of irony as a key evaluative term in contemporary literary criticism. In particular, this article shows how irony usually alludes to a feature of the artist's intelligence, as expressed by Ezra Pound, André Breton, Walter Benjamin, and Thomas Mann for instance. It also addresses how the concept of irony, as identified in North American New Criticism by Cleanth Brooks, among others, takes on an ambiguous and self-serving meaning, ultimately at the service of the critics' value claims.

KEYWORDS: Romantic Irony, Modernism, New Criticism, Cleanth Brooks, Value Judgment.

This article focuses on how modernism and New Criticism inherit and transform the concept of romantic irony. As proved by Dane (2011), among others, Romanticism is a key moment in the history of the de-rhetoricisation of the word "irony". Since Friedrich Schlegel at least irony is not only (and less frequently is in following literary criticism) the figure, or trope, by which "*contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est*", according to the canonical definition by Quintilian (2001, 58-59). In the first half of the 20th century, irony is a stable presence in the vocabulary of the literary critic. According to Ernst Behler (1993, 141), "irony is virtually identical with that self-reflexive style of poetry that became accentuated during early German Romanticism and constitutes a decisive work of literary modernism". The New Critics, and especially Cleanth Brooks, take full advantage of this coincidence, and elevate irony to a principle of literary value. However, the term remains ambiguous, arbitrary, and is often used in a self-serving manner by New Critics, who use it as a pseudo-scientific reason behind the construction of a canon within which modernism enjoys a central position.

Irony is certainly not the only critical term that suffers from a lack of clarity, or that can be used if one accepts its degrees of ambiguity. Due to its very nature, perhaps, irony has nonetheless attracted a unique rhetoric indefinability. Eleanor Hutchens (1960, 62), while acknowledging how New Critics' mentions of irony are endangering irony by emptying it of its "usefulness through indiscriminate applications", also admits that "its capacity for extension is one of the secrets of its vitality". Similarly, Lilian Furst (1984,

11) concedes that “from whichever angle irony is approached, it is always its elusiveness that emerges as its primary characteristic. However disconcerting, this has to be accepted as pivotal to the nature of irony. If we are unable to pin down its meaning, it is because irony sets out to evade specificity”. Furst (1984, 15) also argues that “irony can be regarded as a secret language, a channel of communication between the initiates”: the initiates being, in the praxis of hermeneutics, the author and the critic.

It seems necessary to understand whether “to question the New Critics’ ironic stance is to threaten the authority of their purportedly disinterested language and to subvert the basis of their claims to objectivity” (Buttigieg 1983, 31). This article aims to undertake this challenge, for the function of irony as a covert evaluative term continues to be relevant for contemporary cultural and literary discourses. More broadly, this article aims to renew a debate about the unexpressed political biases and value judgments implied in the use of supposedly neutral key terms, such as “irony”, in today’s theory and criticism.

Romantic irony and its discontents

The concept of romantic irony bears paramount implications for following literary practice and criticism. However, Schlegel’s references to irony only appear in fragmentary form on the journal *Athenaeum* and in his late notebooks. Schlegel provided several different definitions, or, better, suggestive elaborations on the concept of irony. One of the most famous is the following: “irony is a permanent parabasis” (Schlegel 1963, 85).¹ The parabasis is a part of the ancient Greek drama, when the chorus addresses the audience directly to vehiculate the perspective of the author on what is being performed by the actors on stage. It is a digression, as well as a rupture of theatrical mimesis. It is legitimate to assume that for Schlegel romantic irony takes place “when texts become self-reflective about their construction as texts and authors show genuine scepticism about their own aesthetic control of their products” (Handwerk 2000, 206).

At the same time, romantic irony stems from an epistemological intuition about the paradox of human reason, which is both limited by natural boundaries and infinite in its scope and curiosity. Perhaps, the best representation of this condition was stated by Immanuel Kant (1965, 7) at the beginning of his *Critique of Pure Reason*: “Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer”. Schlegel’s irony represents an aesthetical answer to the epistemological conundrum posed by Kant’s transcendental turn. According to the Romantic philosopher, irony should be a poetic translation of the Kantian self-consciousness of one’s own epistemological limits.

Perhaps, the most telling summary of this attempt at translating Kant’s words into an aesthetic as well as epistemological concept is provided by Schlegel himself, in his

¹ Translated in Roy 2009, 107.

renowned review of Goethe's *Meister*: "Why should it not be possible to perceive the smell of a flower, and then contemplate the never-ending veins of every leaf, and to lost oneself entirely in this contemplation?" (Cusatelli 2000, 251; my translation). For Schlegel, romantic irony is having the chance to enjoy an object aesthetically, while at the same time being able to glimpse into its mechanical working; the wisdom of the artisan joined with the pleasure of the critic, the fragment as a symbol of the whole, and vice versa.

Despite or in virtue of Schlegel's suggestive elaborations, the unique success of romantic irony within the field of literary criticism is fundamentally due to its critiques; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1975) and Søren Kierkegaard (2013) primarily.² Moreover, "the phrase 'Romantic irony' was virtually never used during the Romantic period to characterize specifically Romantic texts, and debates persist even today about what texts best exhibit it" (Handwerk 2000, 206-207). Romantic irony, then, not very differently from Socratic irony, is a concept almost entirely shaped at its reception (initially critical, in this case), rather than at its origin.

What is romantic irony for a literary critic, anyway? Gary Handwerk (2000, 207) defines it convincingly:

As a technical device, Romantic irony has most typically been identified as the disruption within a text or performance of its aura of aesthetic illusion. This disruption can take the form of direct intrusion by the author or narrator in commenting upon the process by which the text has been produced (while authorial asides that simply comment in a direct way upon the characters or events, as in so many nineteenth-century novels, for instance, are not necessarily ironic). It can also manifest itself in the self-reflexivity that occurs when characters see or read the text in which they themselves appear. Or it can simply show up in abruptly disjunctive transitions from one mode of reality and one narrative thread to another. In all these cases, the disruption signals the fictional status of literary artifacts and the provisional nature of aesthetic experience. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*, the plays of Aristophanes and Tieck, Byron's *Don Juan* and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* provide signal instances of the first trait. Part two of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Brentano's *Godwi*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, and Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* contain striking examples of the second. The tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann (*Kater Murr* and others), the plays of Shakespeare (with their plays within plays), and even the echoing between framing tale and main narrative set up in Romantic novels such as Shelley's *Frankenstein* neatly illustrate the third.

Romantic irony allows the poet to be, metaphorically, both within and outside of their oeuvre; within and outside of a literary tradition; within and outside of art itself. In Friedrich Schiller's terms, one could say that romantic irony allows the sentimental poet to restate their sentimentality in their endless, ultimately failing attempt at producing naïve poetry. However, although apparently purely aesthetical and epistemological in its nature, romantic irony carries an unequivocally metaphysical aftertaste. The ironic moment of disruption, which allows the creator to look at their own oeuvre from an outside perspective, becomes a double-edged symbol of human limitation, as well as of

² Cfr. also Dane 2011, pp. 73-82. For a comprehensive review of Hegel's critique of Schlegel's irony and the development of the question in the 20th century, cf. Behler 1990, pp. 37-110.

human capacity to transcend that limitation. The fundamentally subjective nature of romantic irony is what Hegel could not tolerate in Schlegel's irony when he defines it as "absolute infinite negativity" (Hegel 1975, 68). As for the aesthetical nature of Schlegel's irony, Hegel is not kind about it either: it is "neither fish nor fowl, neither poetry nor philosophy" (Hegel 2018, 43). Kierkegaard, on the other hand, identified romantic irony as a fundamental trait of a disenchanted modernity; at the same time, he "sided with Hegel in arguing for the need to overcome the ironic stance" (Roy 2009, 108). It is because irony had a "kinship with Romanticism", as well as "with Socrates, in whom dialectical thinking was born" (Behler 2021, 13), that Friedrich Nietzsche will later associate irony with the senescence of Western societies.³

The legacy of romantic irony, as Handwerk (2000, 222-225) points out, is vast. Particularly relevant are the implications of romantic irony for the reader, as well as the reader's active participation in the formation of the meaning of the oeuvre. In this sense, romantic irony contains an "openness with respect to meaning [...], captured in Novalis's idea of the reader as an 'extended author'". One reason why a speaker or author cannot hope to control the significance of what they express is that the full meaning of their words lies not in them alone, but in the expansive force that the words have as they move through other people" (Handwerk 2000, 223). Moreover, by disrupting a linear aesthetic illusion and by observing their work as if they were readers, the Romantic ironist gives birth to the figure of the author as a critic (self-critic, firstly), as well as of the critic as author. Through the multi-layered development of romantic irony, irony is not only entirely cut from its rhetorical or Socratic roots; it also turns into an aesthetical issue where the lines between authors and critics are blurred. First a rhetorical strategy for the rhetorician and a philosophical attitude incarnated by Socrates, then a fashionable pendant for the cultivated gentleman in the Renaissance and the Baroque,⁴ after Romanticism, irony is finally on the path to entering the vocabulary of the hermeneut.

Romantic irony as an evaluative term in modernism and New Criticism

The practice of irony as a means of disrupting the aesthetical illusion influences modernism greatly, as several critics clearly identified.⁵ Modernists authors are generally keener on highlighting the epistemological implications of romantic irony, rather than its metaphysical and aesthetical ones. Exemplary in this sense is Ezra Pound's remarks on the anti-metaphysical and subversive power of irony. He writes in his 1917 manifesto about the "Things to be done": "Codes, etiquettes and moralities have wavered and varied. Irony is still set down as a 'sin' in manuals of devotion. The last heretic was burnt at the stake in 1758. We are not yet out of the forest" (Pound 1917a, 314). In the same year, he also writes a well-known article about the relevance of Jules Laforgue as a model

³ Cfr. at least Nietzsche 1997a; 1997b.

⁴ Cfr. at least Knox 1961; Accetto 1997.

⁵ Cfr. at least Handwerk 1985; Wilde 1987; Martens 2007; Stratton 2014.

for covert satire. There, Pound (1917b) produces a suggestive definition of irony as “the citadel of intelligence”, and of the ironist as the “one who suggest that the reader should think, and this process being unnatural to the majority of mankind, the way of the ironical is beset with snares and furze-bushes” (Pound 1917b, 95). Incidentally, it is also noticeable how Pound’s formulations around irony are burdened by violent classist biases, which are certainly not unique within the critical discourse of the time.

The idea of irony as intelligence informs other coeval expressions of modernism, often in some of its most canonical texts. In 1916, Tristan Tzara writes in one of the first manifestos of Dadaism “DADA is neither madness, nor wisdom, nor irony, take a look, dear bourgeois” (Danchev 2011). In a programmatic text, irony is refuted as a bourgeois category, a sign of that intelligence of creation that Dada wanted to tackle and destroy. When André Breton presents Marcel Duchamp in his *Anthology of Black Humor*, he (2009, 254) writes:

In this resides what Duchamp has called ‘the irony of affirmation,’ in contrast to ‘negative irony, which depends solely on laughter.’ The irony of affirmation is to humour what fine-milled flour is to wheat. The miller in question – he who, at the end of the historical process tracing the development of dandyism, has agreed to act as ‘voluntary technician’ (to use Gabrielle Buffet’s term) – our friend Marcel Duchamp, is certainly the most intelligent and, for many, the most troublesome man of this first half of the twentieth century.

Again, irony and intelligence are tied together, the former being the transparent translation of the other on the aesthetic level.

Irony is a key word in the early 20th-century Germany too, especially amongst the intellectuals fascinated by the ideal of the *Konservative Revolution*. In 1921, Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s essay “The Irony of Things” proposes a re-reading of his own, and his own generation’s artistic development under the light of irony.⁶ Hofmannsthal’s intervention starts with a quote by Novalis: “*After an unlucky war, one must write comedies*” [my translation]. Hofmannsthal admits that he has found this sentence odd for a long time, but that the outcome of the First World War has clarified the subtle meaning of Novalis’ prescription to him: the primary element of a comedy is irony, and nothing like a lost war suggests to an artist that a tragic irony governs all things. Hofmannsthal’s version of irony is significantly different from the one mentioned by Pound or Tzara, as well as from Thomas Mann’s, which will be discussed later. For Hofmannsthal, irony coincides with humour and features as an essential element of the comic. Rather than from Schlegel, Hofmannsthal’s irony derives from Schopenhauer’s theory of the laughable, and this conceptualisation of irony (which is not far from Luigi Pirandello’s *umorismo*) will be an essential element for the contemporary comic tradition in the German language.⁷ On the contrary, for Schlegel irony is no philosophical laughing

⁶ The complete German text is available here: <http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Hofmannsthal,+Hugo+von/Essays,+Reden,+Vortr%C3%A4ge/Drei+kleine+Betrachtungen/Die+Ironie+der+Dinge> [accessed 10-12-2022]. Cfr. also Raponi 2006.

⁷ Cfr. Weitzman 2015.

matter: “*Mit der Ironie ist durchaus nicht zu scherzen*” [“there is absolutely nothing to joke about irony”],⁸ he once wrote in the *Athenaeum*.

Particularly significant is then the case of Thomas Mann. The last essay in his *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, heavily influenced by Nietzsche and published in 1918, draws a dichotomy between irony and radicalism, or the ironist and the activist. This collection of Mann’s writings is a point of reference for the whole *Konservative Revolution*, an influential ideal amongst several German intellectuals between the two world wars. Mann intends irony as the tendency to identify life, rather than intellect, as the “final, decisive, absolute” (Mann 2021, 454) argument. Radicalism, on the other hand, considers truth to be of the primary importance: “But is truth an argument — when life is at stake?” (ib.), asks Mann rhetorically. Irony, art, and conservatism go hand in hand: for irony is the only “*decent* relationship of the artist [...] to artistic nature” (ib., 458). Mann’s essay is eminently political, and the object of his own critique is the democratic Republic of Weimar, even before than its ‘activist’ artists. Mann’s essay is then about moral, and “irony as modesty, as skepticism turned backward, is a form of morality” (ib., 460). Nonetheless, irony is viewed amongst the majority as an old junk, a “*vieux jeu*, a sign of burgherly nature and of shabby quietism. The activist has arrived — *pulcher et fortissimus*” (ib., 458). The activists Mann is denouncing are supporting “false, confused, and deceptive concepts of freedom and equality, [...] maxims, arguments, declamations, and associations that aim at or also [...] lead to anarchy, revolt, violent overthrow of the burgherly order” (ib., 471). What Mann’s essay shows again is that irony is primarily associated to an artistic predisposition, a (positive) tendency which belongs to true artists. Against them, stands a mass of pseudo-artists who claim to sustain the boldest, most progressive ideas, while in truth they remain faithful to the democratic regime and its conformism. Mann ends his essay with the promise to work with all his might against these positions.

In 1930, Walter Benjamin will vigorously attack the poetry of Erich Kästner, a member of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, a movement that made large use of irony both in its theory and aesthetical practice: “The subject and the effects of Kästner’s poetry are limited to this class [*the bourgeoisie*], and he is not able to talk to the dispossessed with his rebel cries, in the same way he is not able to strike the industrialists with his irony” (Benjamin 1974, 28). Irony again is intended as wit, as the critical tool that the intelligent and cultivated intellectual makes use of in society: a trait that Benjamin sees at play in the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and that he despises, similarly to Tzara. The Schlegelian idea that irony “originates in the union of *savoir vivre* and scientific spirit, in the conjunction of a perfectly instinctive and a perfectly conscious philosophy” (Schlegel 1991, 13) keeps on inspiring Mann’s and Benjamin’s polemical approaches to irony, which is not a trope nor

⁸ The complete German text is available here: <http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Schlegel,+Friedrich/%C3%84sthetische+und+politische+Schriften/%C3%9Cber+die+Unverst%C3%A4ndlichkeit> [accessed 31-05-2023].

a stylistic feature, but an enigmatic aesthetic feature of the author, even before than their work of art.

The modernist appreciation of irony as an evaluative term finds a consistent translation in the literary theory of the time. Inspired by T. S. Eliot's essays on poetry, opposed to the politicisation of literary criticism carried forward by Marxism, as well as the historicisation of the study of literature, New Criticism rises in order to examine the literary text as the expression of a specific type of language, with its rules and forms.⁹ The privileged position enjoyed by modernism in the canon shaped by New Criticism is, to a certain extent, self-evident since the title of the 'manifesto' of this critical trend: that is, *The New Criticism: An Examination of the Critical Theories of I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, Yvor Winters, William Empson*.¹⁰ Cleanth Brooks also played a decisive role in determining the poetic primacy of T. S. Eliot in North American universities since the 1930s.¹¹ The connection between New Criticism and modernism, however, runs deeper and significantly concerns romantic irony too: for it is that 'Romantic' self-reflexivity of modernist texts that Brooks and others call "irony", and raise as a principle of literary value. Douglas Muecke, a most influential scholar of irony, claims that "to study Romantic Irony is to discover how modern Romanticism could be, or, if you like, how Romantic Modernism is" (Muecke 1980, 182). Romantic irony, that is, increasingly coincides since New Criticism with metatextuality *tout court*: a prominent feature of modernist texts, as it is known.

New Criticism is responsible for the modern creation of a notion of irony as the tell-tale sign of aesthetical value. In 1930, William Empson (1991, 1-47) uses irony as a *de facto* synonym for the term 'ambiguity', which the critic meticulously implements, albeit defining it in quite broad terms, as the primary measure for the evaluation of aesthetical value for the literary art. Kenneth Burke (1941) later identifies irony as a critical simulacrum, that is a term that truly stands for something else: in his sense, dialectics. By dialectics, Burke means both the struggle that the audience engages with when enjoying a work of art, and the mechanism of dramatic *peripeteia*: "as an over-all ironic formula here, and one that has the quality of 'inevitability,' we could lay it down that 'what goes forth as A returns as non-A.' This is the basic pattern that places the essence of drama and dialectic in the irony of the 'peripety,' the strategic moment of reversal" (Burke 1941, 438). Northrop Frye, whose work on irony "seems both a reaction to New Criticism and a product of many of its assumptions" (Dane 2011, 158), tries to rehistoricise irony by using it to define one of the key modes, as he calls them, of contemporary narrative. According to Frye, the ironic mode signals the influence of a philosophy of history that

⁹ Cfr. at least Wellek 1978; Newton 1988; Crowe Ransom 2001.

¹⁰ Cfr. Crowe Ransom 1941.

¹¹ "It is hardly surprising to note that Eliot, high priest of modernist poetics, shaped Brooks, high priest of New Criticism. Cleanth Brooks's admiration of Eliot, both as poet and essayist, manifests itself in a myriad of way" (Duvall 1992-93, 24).

reads historical development as a recursive series of cycles, as theorized by the pre-Romantic philosopher Giambattista Vico.¹²

It is however only with Cleanth Brooks that irony becomes a forthright critical expression of positive artistic value; and quite an arbitrary one at that (if value judgments can ever be otherwise). In 1947, while dealing with poetry and how to read it, Brooks (1960, 3-20) establishes (following thus a similar path to Empson's) that the key trait that should be used to measure poetical value is paradox. Unsurprisingly, Brooks finds himself using the word "irony" in an extensive manner and as a synonym of paradox.¹³ Self-conscious of the Romantic and post-Romantic connotations of the word, Brooks (1960, 209-210) suddenly writes, as if in an *parte* digression from his analysis:

By using the term irony, one risks, of course, making the poem seem arch and self-conscious, since irony, for most readers of poetry, is associated with satire, *vers de société*, and other "intellectual" poetries. Yet, the necessity for some such term ought to be apparent; and *irony is the most general term that we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context.* This kind of qualification, as we have seen, is of tremendous importance in any poem. Moreover, *irony is our most general term for indicating that recognition of incongruities — which, again, pervades all poetry to a degree far beyond what our conventional criticism has been heretofore willing to allow.* [emphasis added]

As Dane (2011, 3) rightly puts it, in this moment irony simply becomes "that on which the critic's eye fall". For Brooks, irony is a term that critics use to talk about the textual loci where the friction between the contexts in which words are inserted and those words is apparent. In a later article, Brooks further delves into the function of irony as intended by him only to reiterate this position and emphasise the broadness of the concept: "We had doubtless stretched the term too much, but it has been almost the only term available by which to point to a general and important aspect of poetry" (Brooks 1971, 1045). As for the breadth of its possible applications, Brooks asks on the same page: "what indeed would be a statement wholly devoid of an ironic potential— a statement that did not show any qualification of the context? One is forced to offer statements like 'Two plus two equals four,' or 'The square on the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares on the two sides'". With Brooks, irony expressly becomes a peculiar, as well as significant entry in the critical lexicon: namely, that which the critic considers to be worthy of attention.

Just like the shift from modernism to what comes after is a story of continuities and subtle discontinuities, rather than abrupt breaks, New Criticism influences greatly the so-called postmodernist theories. It is not surprising that Paul De Man, in his influential treatment of philosophical irony in relation to allegory (a canonical text of postmodernist theory), will acknowledge his debt to both Schlegel (who pioneered an ironic mode of reasoning on aesthetics that he and the deconstructionists allegedly inherited and

¹² Cfr. Frye 1957, pp. 33 passim.

¹³ Cfr. also Bredin 1998.

perfected)¹⁴ and New Criticism (although De Man disguises this homage in a footnote).¹⁵ Faithful to Schlegel's *Lyceumfragment 42*, by which "philosophy is the real homeland of irony, which one would like to define as logical beauty" (Schlegel 1991, 5), De Man reclaims irony for philosophy when he celebrates, at the same time, the aesthetical dimension of romantic irony, as well as the arbitrary and inherently positive connotation of irony devised in New Criticism.

What happened after, and a daring comparison

Romantic irony is a multi-faceted concept, shaped by the reception of Schlegel's elaborations on irony, whose implications were originally of aesthetical, epistemological, and metaphysical nature. The development of the concept during New Criticism, mediated and substantiated by modernists such as Mann, added another face to Romantic irony, for it transformed it into a key word of the critical discourse, a spy of the critics' own biases and convictions. Paradoxically, one of the effects of New Criticism's recovery of romantic irony as the primary sign of artistic value is the perpetuation of a critical discourse founded on the authoritativeness of the writer. By favouring metatextuality, New Critics reinstated the figure of the author, which both Marxism and historicism already relied upon for their critical practice, and against which New Criticism was originally devised. As Handwerk pointed out, when romantic irony breaks into a text the narrator might speak directly to the reader, or remind them of the fictionality of the story. While building an influential, especially in educational terms, canon of Western literature, New Critics privileged works of art in which the author sneaks, however indirectly, into the text. It is not by chance, therefore, that at the end of 1970s the reader-oriented turn, emblematically represented by Stanley Fish's *affective stylistics* (1980), will mark their distance from New Criticism by acknowledging that interpretative efforts, despite well-intended claims to objectivity, are always partial. Readers' responses, rather than authorial or textual intentions, should and will be the object of further theoretical attention.

The extent to which postmodernist theory inherited and made use of the same self-serving ambiguities around irony displayed by New Criticism is still unexplored. What seems true is that when certain theorists of postmodernism felt the need to distance themselves from the contradictions of New Criticism, they spent much critical vigour on redefinitions of irony.¹⁶ Candace Lang, for instance, compares and contrasts irony and humour in a vast array of canonical and contemporary literary texts, and ends his book by remarking that "postmodern literature's and poststructuralist theory's preoccupation

¹⁴ De Man 1996. Cfr. also Roy 2009; Cometa 2019.

¹⁵ De Man 1983, 187 (footnote 1).

¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon's development from the study of metatextuality (Hutcheon 1980), through postmodernism (Hutcheon 1989), to irony (Hutcheon 1994), is in this sense quite emblematic of a broader critical tendency.

with language and subjectivity has nothing in common with the narcissistic, onanistic, and potentially solipsistic discourse commonly termed romantic irony” (Lang 1988, 195). When postmodernist theories too started falling out of fashion, metatextuality (irony often coinciding with it) became the object of critical concern: synonymous with narcissism and escapism, self-reflexivity began to be perceived as an ideological trait, rather than as an inherent sign of value, of literary texts.¹⁷

To conclude, it is helpful to take a step back from the history of literary criticism and discuss two occurrences of literary romantic irony that might be telling of a slightly different focus between modernists and so-called postmodernists. Postmodernists undoubtedly make abundant use of romantic irony; however, their concern is mostly aesthetical, rather than epistemological, as used to be the case for the modernists writers analysed above. An unconventional comparison might highlight, in succinct form, how modernism uses romantic irony to produce statements on epistemological questions in an aesthetic form; and, on the other hand, how postmodernism uses romantic irony to produce statements on aesthetic questions in aesthetic form. The passages compared come from very different texts and eras; nevertheless, they are both hyper-canonical (each in their own way), and share two formal similarities: romantic irony occurs at the very beginning of the *œuvre*, and in both cases irony is delivered through, and hidden at the same time in an adverb. Firstly, the incipit of the poem “Man Carrying Thing” (1947) by Wallace Stevens: “The poem must resist the intelligence / *Almost* successfully [emphasis added]. Secondly, the beginning of Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose* (1980): “*Naturalmente* un manoscritto” [emphasis added]. Stevens warns the reader about overly cerebral readings of his poem, but at the same time invites them to make use, if marginal, of their own intellectual power. Eco tells the reader that the narrator knows that the reader knows that the stratagem of the manuscript is a well-known stereotype in the tradition of the novel: his novel makes no exception, but the narrator needs to acknowledge this legacy in a disingenuous way: therefore, ‘naturally’, a manuscript. Both texts make use of irony through an adverb in order to talk about epistemological and aesthetic problems at the same time: although, and it is not irrelevant, Stevens is more concerned about the former, while Eco is more concerned about the latter.

¹⁷ The literature on this topic is vast: for their impact on contemporary fiction, cf. at least Vollmann 1990; Wallace 1993.

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