

## IRONY, POSTMODERNISM, AND THE "MODERN"

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"Irony is duty" („Ironie ist Pflicht“) states Friedrich Schlegel in the 481<sup>st</sup> fragment of his ›Fragments Concerning Literature and Poetry‹ (›Fragmente zur Literatur und Poesie‹), which were collected between 1797 and 1798. In the following analysis, I intend to take this pronouncement literally. On the one hand, I don't intend to see irony simply as a rhetorical figure, nor can I on the other hand detect any heuristic value in so-called objective irony, which denotes an unchangeable state of affairs. To me, Schlegel's statement seems to presuppose an understanding of irony as a *mode of consciousness* which, under certain historical circumstances, can be seen as inevitable. This would imply that Schlegel does not use the term *duty* in a strictly ethical sense; instead, it has to be considered in a more general philosophical context. Irony, for Schlegel, is an indication of modern man's growing historical awareness within the development of mankind; moreover, it is an expression of the mind reflecting upon itself and the conditions of human consciousness as such.

It is within this epistemologically broad though historically limited context that irony as a mode of consciousness can be related to postmodernism. Thus, understanding this connection rather than tracing its possible historical sources, will be the purpose of this paper. After first severing what I consider to be the all too superficial links that have been established between irony and postmodernism up to this date, I shall proceed to a discussion of the term *postmodernism* itself in order to establish its historical usefulness, if not its validity, as a term denoting special features of a form of the literature in the Eighties. Finally I shall try to show how the irony which is to be found in postmodernist literature (especially in the works of John Barth and John Hawkes) might help to clarify my central thesis that postmodernism, while indeed designating a new literary epoch, has fallen short of ushering in a new aesthetic revolution.

If, as Schlegel claimed, the development of irony becomes more prominent historically with each successive stage of reflection, then the irony of postmodernism ought to show a marked advance over that of modernism — assuming, of course, that *postmodernism* and *modernism* denote genuine periods, and that irony is a significant feature of either of those periods. That and how irony was important for modernism (and, tentatively, postmodernism) has been best demonstrated so far by Alan Wilde in his study ›Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism,

and the Ironic Imagination<sup>1)</sup>. Wilde calls modernism an age of absolute irony. Of course, it may be called into question, as does C. Barry Chabot in his comments of this study, whether "the entire range of modern novelists employ absolute irony"<sup>2)</sup>. He charges Wilde with presenting a part of modernism — that which is largely defined by irony — as if it were the whole, and this for the sake of creating an impression of uniformity, so that postmodernism can then be presented as a frontal attack on this *uniform* movement.

In the present context there is no need to take sides in this dispute. What matters is that evidently neither party denies the role that irony plays in the characterization of the periods in question. Whether irony is the *essential* characteristic of modernism (or of postmodernism) is not at issue here. And that it is *a* characteristic of modernism not even Chabot is willing to contest. Nor does he deny that irony might be characteristic of postmodernism; the point of his argument is precisely that postmodernism should not be seen as a period in its own right, but as a continuation of modernism. Admittedly, if we take the attitude of Chabot and Wilde towards irony as representative, we would only ascertain a tentative significance of irony for the definition of the two periods; but even if this were so, it would not conflict with the limited importance that was attributed to irony even in its heyday, namely the Romantic era. Schlegel has a good reason for speaking of irony as a duty: in his time irony as duty was anything but self-evident. The acrimonious exchange between Schlegel and Hegel, as a result of which Schlegel reached the point where he would no longer speak on the topic of irony at all, shows how far from self-evident the notion was. Finally, the need to support it is manifest also in the views of philosophers such as Adam Müller and Karl W. F. Solger, who believed it was only through objectivizing Schlegel's subjective irony that one could ensure its continued survival.

Therefore, in relating irony to the concept of the *postmodern*, the critic should not be content to distill certain features from a conception of what is typical today, calling those features either ironic or postmodernist and to define one in terms of the other. Of course, it may well happen that a particular form of irony coincides with a period that has already been defined in other terms, in which case those terms may help to demarcate this form of irony from others — from earlier, and perhaps also from subsequent forms, as in *Romantic irony*. In other words, it isn't that postmodernism is defined by some particular form of irony. Rather, it might be the other way round — that it is this form of irony which could be seen as defined or characterized by postmodernism. It should be kept in mind, however, that at the present time the term *postmodernism* cannot play the heuristic role that is played by a concept like, say, Romanticism. For postmodernism has not yet come to an end — even if there are many signs that it may come to its end soon.

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1) ALAN WILDE, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*, Baltimore and London 1981.

2) C. BARRY CHABOT, *The Problem of Postmodern*, in: *New Literary History* 20, 1 (1988), p. 11.

An unwarranted ironic use of the term *postmodernism*, that should not be confused with the role irony plays for an understanding of postmodernism, seems to be particularly widespread in the U.S. The explanation for this lies in a specifically American phenomenon, which has been exposed in particular by Gerald Graff and Charles Newman. It is the role played by the literary canon in American universities. Only by being anthologized and subsequently canonized can the works of contemporary authors secure a place in academic life. Newman, for instance, observes: "One rarely finds the word Post-Modern used in disciplines in which there is not a canonical structure to attack or dismiss"<sup>3</sup>). No wonder so many efforts to define the concept *postmodern* are off the mark; what they really try to do is to circumscribe an institutional rather than a literary phenomenon. Graff once remarked that when an academic institution refers to itself as a *center*, we can be pretty sure that it is located somewhere on the periphery. Implicit in this observation is the opinion that as an institution the university is party to a postmodern inflation of terms. It hypostasizes a phenomenon — postmodernism — for whose definition it should provide no more than an external context.

We need not concern ourselves, either, with attacks on the notion of postmodernism which focus on the compositional form of the term itself — pointing out that you cannot append, by means of the prefix *post*, the notion of *what came after* to a concept which, as *modern* is bound to do, denotes what is contemporary. Such attacks can be dismissed for the simple reason that, whatever problems may attach to the *term*, the *concept of postmodernism* is by now well beyond elimination. It is worth recalling, in this connection, the position of a critic such as Hans Robert Jauss, who voiced the opinion that the time has come to take "the specter of 'postism' seriously" („das Gespenst des ‚Postismus‘ ernst zu nehmen"<sup>4</sup>). It should also be noted that even the two components of the *term*, through their mutual relationship, point towards a significant — if ironic — state of affairs: modernism and postmodernism relate to each other in a way reminiscent of the relationship between early Romanticism and late Romanticism. *That* is the historical dimension designated by the prefix *post*-. This historical dimension and the contemporaneousness alluded to in the element *modern* create an ironic tension. They show that in postmodernism — as in late Romanticism — conservative tendencies coexist with innovation. Indeed, I shall try to demonstrate that the innovative impulse in postmodernism lies precisely in its tendency towards self-reflexive conservatism. To my mind this complex state of affairs is effectively captured by a term that confirms through its prefix *post*- the historicity of modernism — an epoch that always saw itself as radically avant-garde, even at a time when it had started to fade away; whereas normally not even the advocates of the term are truly convinced by the explanation that is usually given for it, in which postmodernism

<sup>3</sup>) CHARLES NEWMAN, *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation*, Evanston 1985, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup>) HANS ROBERT JAUSS, *Der literarische Prozeß des Modernismus von Rousseau bis Adorno*, in: *Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewußtsein, Poetik und Hermeneutik XII*, edd. Reinhart Herzog and Reinhart Koselleck, München 1987, p. 244.

names two contradictory tendencies in contemporary art and, especially, literature: the continuation of modernism, which is accounted for by the retention of the term *modernism* itself, and the revolt against it, highlighted by the prefix *post-*. In summarizing this common opinion, Linda Hutcheon has unwittingly laid bare its illogical basis: "postmodernism's relation to modernism [...] marks neither a simple and radical break from it nor a straightforward continuity with it: it is both and neither."<sup>5</sup>) But as I said before, the problem is not one attached to the *term*, but related to the *concept* of postmodernism. The true problem with Hutcheon's way of putting the matter is the psychologizing slant it suggests – as if postmodernism were the outcome of a kind of father-son-conflict – an implication with which especially the postmodernist artist himself would be displeased, since it reduces him to the unappealing role of a son who never grows up. Thus it is not surprising that precisely postmodernist artists themselves continue to resist such a simple-minded classification, even if they have failed to prevent the consolidation of the concept of postmodernism as such.

I believe that the crucial error in most debates about postmodernism consists in its being considered only in relation to modernism, but not in relation to a more comprehensive concept of the *modern*. This concept was introduced between 1795 and 1798 (the year in which the ›Athenäum‹ was first published) by Schlegel and Schiller, initiating a revolution in art that was to be the aesthetic counterpart to the great political revolution of 1789. The principal concern of this early Romanticism was to transcend the apparently unresolvable conflict between nature and civilization that had been one of the central themes in the work of Rousseau – specifically, to transcend it through historical projection: nature was placed in antiquity, civilization in the present *modern* age; and since the experience of antiquity was over, it was quasi inevitable that modern art should on the one hand be directed toward a utopian future and on the other attempt to achieve the status of what Schlegel called universal poetry („Universalpoesie“), that is, a poetry that would encompass all aspects of civilization: religion, law, philosophy, and art. Thus Jauß remarks:

Nothing is farther from the essence of this first phase of the modernist movement, of the 'progressive universal poetry' of the early Romantic era than the slogan 'back to nature', this memorable misinterpretation of Rousseau which would initiate the turn towards the conservative Romanticism that was to occur soon after. (Nichts liegt dem Anbruch dieser Moderne, der ‚progressiven Universalpoesie‘ der frühen Romantik, ferner als die Devise einer ‚Rückkehr zur Natur‘, die als das denkwürdige Mißverständnis Rousseaus die bald danach eintretende Kehre der konservativen Romantik einläuten sollte!)<sup>6</sup>)

All subsequent literary epochs should be seen in the context of this first phase of modernity; indeed, they may be seen as variations on the theme it set. In this light, the different aesthetic revolutions, if not the epochs which they initiated, appear

<sup>5</sup>) LINDA HUTCHEON, *Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism*, in: *Textual Practice* 1 (1987), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup>) JAUSS (cited fn. 4), p. 256.

to be marked by a reflection of increasing depth and transparency on the role of, in particular, irony: the constant struggle to overcome, and the repeated insight into the impossibility to resist, the tug of nature. This does not strictly entail that every literature or art which considers irony a duty thereby automatically betrays a new historical awareness or is the sign of another aesthetic revolution; but the conclusion seems warranted that it at least implies a reflection upon the possibility of such a revolution.

Jauß recognizes in the development of literary modernity three "thresholds that clearly distinguish the transition from one epoch to another" ("emphatisch als Epochenwende apostrophierte [...] Schwellen"<sup>7)</sup>). After the first aesthetic revolution around 1800, between German Classicism and Romanticism, there is a second representing the aesthetics of *modernité*. This movement is characterized primarily by Baudelaire's theory of the transitoriness of the beautiful and by Flaubert's doctrine of the fragmentation of perception. The third revolution is the modernism that immediately precedes postmodernism and which adopts the avant-garde as a political paradigm. During each transition from one of these periods to the next the gap between nature and civilization widens. As a result, irony in Schlegel's sense becomes more important. As Schlegel's theory of irony presaged, each new stage of reflection on the conditions of the age demands a deeper conscious commitment to nature and, at the same time, a greater distance to it than was required at the previous stage. It seems as if each of the three aesthetic revolutions was launched out of an urge to escape from this ironic dilemma.

In the course of this development the alleged importance of the past decreases steadily; but the ironic consciousness recognizes the price of unreflected contemporaneity. There is a growing need to aestheticize the achievements of civilization — that is, of the new industrial era. We can of course find only a dim awareness of this kind of development in Schlegel, despite his view of the modern era as a period of irony par excellence, when for the first time civilization managed to leave nature behind. Still, since it was only through confrontation with antiquity that Schlegel seemed able to define modernity at all, he concentrated on the future rather than the present for an understanding of civilization as such. This is clear from his essay 'On the Study of Greek Poetry' ('Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie'). By contrast, *modernité* articulates an aesthetic revolution which — to quote Jauß once again —

rejects, in the cataclysmic experience of novelty, nothing other than itself, thereby creates its own *antiquité* and finally converts historicism into an aestheticism which has unimpeded access to all pasts within the space of the 'imaginary museum' ([...] sich in der schockartigen Erfahrung des Neuen nur noch von sich selber abstößt, derart ihre eigene *antiquité* hervorbringt und schließlich den Historismus in einen Ästhetizismus umschlagen läßt, der im Spielraum des 'imaginären Museums' frei über alle Vergangenheiten verfügt<sup>8)</sup>).

<sup>7)</sup> Ib., p. 249.

<sup>8)</sup> Ib.

Finally, the relationship of civilization to nature shifts yet again in the third phase of modernity, the beginning of which is usually identified with Virginia Woolf's famous line from ›Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown‹: "In or about December, 1910, human character changed."<sup>9</sup>) The significance of this third transition is that art leaves even the concept of the past behind and replaces the diachronic by the synchronic, the simultaneity of the unsimultaneous. Thus what we find in this stage of modernism, in the experimental literature of Proust or Brecht, Joyce or Beckett, Pound or Faulkner, is a style of writing that is polyphonic to such an extent that Rainer Warning could sum it up with the words: "What distinguishes the art of modernism from all preceding periods is the loss of epochal unity" („Was die Kunst der Moderne von der aller vorausliegenden Epochen unterscheidet, ist der Verlust epochaler Einheit")<sup>10</sup>). In the light of such assessments it is hardly surprising that postmodernism has problems in defining itself as an epoch, since it has to set itself apart from a predecessor that did not perceive itself as a period, and whose only credo was the constancy of the avant-garde. And yet, postmodern writers manage to create their own epochal unity by concentrating on an innovative use of tradition, as for example in the use of parody.

This achievement offers an opportunity for understanding a basic difference between postmodernism and modernism. On the one hand, it is truly ironic that the main features of modernism – self-reflexivity and formal experimentalism – had to become the distinctive hallmark of postmodernism before they were even recognized as modernism's main features. For both self-reflexivity and formal experimentalism are dynamic concepts, in other words, their impact becomes more obvious the more often they can be found. On the other hand, increased self-reflexivity and formal experimentalism also indicate a form of conservatism in the end, and need to be counteracted by a renewed impulse towards innovation. This ironic ambivalence or tension I take to be indicative of postmodernist fiction, describing, if not defining, a new epoch – but not another aesthetic revolution. It can take two extreme forms, expressed in what I will call temporal and spatial irony. The whole range of postmodernist ambivalence falls between these two poles, represented in the following analysis by the fictions of John Barth and John Hawkes. The method of spatial irony resembles what Gilles Deleuze calls *imbricolage*; the method of temporal irony demonstrates parallels with deconstruction. The resemblance between Hawkes' narrative method and Deleuze's *imbricolage* (which, significantly, Deleuze regards as a modernist technique) becomes obvious when we examine Hawkes' much-quoted 1974 essay, ›"The Floating Opera" and "Second Skin"‹:

I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel are plot, character, setting and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about

<sup>9</sup>) VIRGINIA WOOLF, Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, Collected Essays, London 1966, I, p. 320.

<sup>10</sup>) RAINER WARNING, Surrealistische Totalität und Partialität der Moderne: Zur Lyrik Paul Eluards, in: Lyrik und Malerei der Avantgarde, edd. Rainer Warning and Winfried Wehle, München 1982, p. 481.

fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained. And structure—verbal and psychological coherence — is still my largest concern as a writer<sup>11</sup>).

This could be seen as an early attempt at a definition of *imbricolage*. On the one hand, Deleuze postulates what he calls a divergent series that counteracts the law of narration; the law of narration itself, on the other hand, is defined by the convergence of all narrative elements. This convergence of all narrative elements corresponds to Hawkes' "verbal and psychological coherence", while the divergent series finds a parallel in his rejection of those narrative elements that traditionally make up the structure of a novel: plot, character, setting and theme. The paradoxical nature of this rejection becomes plain when we take into account that Hawkes can and will not completely do away with those traditional narrative elements — which otherwise would no longer be *true enemies*. It is only through the confrontation between the divergent and the convergent series that the status of the traditional elements as *enemy* is established. Thus the effect that is achieved when the divergent and the convergent series interfere with each other is the same for Hawkes as it is for Deleuze. According to Deleuze, the modernist writer distributes non-reconcilable narrative elements within a narrative space in order to weave them into new patterns — just as each night Penelope unravels the tapestry she has woven during the day only to weave it again the next day, or as Cyril in Hawkes' ›The Blood Oranges‹ keeps reweaving the tapestry of love he himself has helped to destroy.

However, with this novel 1971 Hawkes actually leaves modernism behind and illuminates the conceptual change from modernism to postmodernism. Given Hawkes' *totality of vision*, expressed in the notion of a tapestry of love, *imbricolage* can no longer simply be applied to a modernist form of montage, but has to be seen as an advanced postmodernist technique. The tapestry of love is a metaphor for the spatialization of the psyche. All expressions of the psyche find a place on the tapestry, and by weaving them together through the unifying voice of the narrator, Hawkes changes what would otherwise be montage into a postmodernist landscape of consciousness. We find instances of the confrontation of a divergent and a convergent series as early as ›The Cannibal‹ (1949), but Hawkes' novels remain modernist up to the point in his artistic development where *imbricolage* becomes the expression of an ironic mode of consciousness. Only when the convergent series can be related to the structure of a super-ego, while the divergent series represents the workings of the subconscious, as in ›The Blood Oranges‹, do the novels of Hawkes become postmodernist. In this way postmodernist *imbricolage* can be seen as a substitute for modernist stream-of-consciousness technique. Spatial irony is thus an innovative method applied to a traditional theme: through metaphor the author attempts to create consciousness as text.

The ironic tension between postmodernist conservatism and its innovative power can also be demonstrated in the works of John Barth. There is much that could be said about Barth's extensive use of temporal irony, but it suffices for the

<sup>11</sup>) JOHN HAWKES, ›The Floating Opera‹ and ›Second Skin‹, in: *Mosaic* 8, 1 (1974), p. 19.

present purpose to note that temporal irony too needs to be understood as a mode of consciousness. Like Hawkes, Barth attempts to create consciousness as text, though his method is that of metonymy, not metaphor. This textual consciousness ultimately surfaces as a relationship between the author and the reader which comes to dominate the text in the form of theme. My thesis is that the postmodern ironic author attempts to project a world that is free of ideology, and that he tries to realize this aim by turning the relation between author and reader itself into the exemplary theme that his text addresses. By bringing the reader into the text and distancing the text from external reality — a reality naturally laden with ideology — the author tries to create a purely literary zone in which author and reader can meet free of contemporary constraints. In this manner, the attempt to alleviate the tension between conservatism and innovation, between tradition and the individual talent, not only informs, but actually constitutes the ironic postmodernist text.

Postmodernist literary works thus grant the reader a privileged position, as his special relationship to the author demotes the referential connection between text and reality to a secondary level. Even the so-called *insulting of the audience* (*Publikumsbeschimpfung*) — something that Barth practices in a direct and Hawkes in an indirect mode, mediated as it is by an antagonist — is indicative of the author's efforts to direct the reader's attention towards his need for such a relationship. If we grant that postmodernist literature tries to do more than just put the essentials of modernist literature into clearer focus, yet that this has made postmodernism somewhat more, not less, conservative than modernism; and if we also grant at the same time that postmodernism is yet permeated with the inherently paradoxical modernist pretense of permanent avant-gardism (which, at each stage of self-clarification, implies its own crystallization and, therefore, its own denial); then we see that the author of a postmodern text cannot do without the help of the reader. For it is the reader who, by representing one moment the traditional and the next the innovative element, both complements and differs from the author, thereby demonstrating how the postmodernist position differs from that of modernism. It is the reader's simultaneous presence and his traditional ontological absence from the text which, because it also reflects upon the author's own textual status, underscores the ironic tension specific to postmodernist literature.

In other words: the reader's role can no longer be, as it was in modernist literature, just that of involving himself in the process of text constitution *ex post facto*, as the reception aesthetic analysis of modernism has it; instead he must agree to perform a particular role, which the text prescribes, even before he approaches the text. In this respect we find a difference between ironic and non-ironic postmodernist authors, between those who take the *I* and those who take the world as their point of departure. The point is illustrated by an author like William Gass, who, even if he has — despite his own protests — been counted among the representatives of the postmodernist movement, belongs to a different category than Barth and Hawkes, Robert Coover or Donald Barthelme. It is no accident that Gass has turned increasingly to architecture and photography. For his thesis that the self-

referentiality of a text — its quality of being stylistically self-contained — makes it into an object which can compete with other object that populate the world in which we live results in his approaching this fictional object as if it were a building or an *objet trouvé*. This kind of approach emphasizes the role of the recipient, or even the consumer, of art rather than the author or the reader in the text.

Postmodernist authors such as Barth and Hawkes believe that they must redefine the role of the reader. Not, one should add, in a sociological sense — it is not a matter of creating a concrete elite, the elite of "good" readers, but rather in a sense similar to that in which modernism tried to define an elite of "good" authors. The aim is to define new behavioral games in which author and reader are to be jointly engaged — that is, to try and explain to the reader the role he is meant to play within an alternative anti-institutional code of *performance*. It is instructive to see Barth and Hawkes as opposite exponents of such alternative codes. Although their points of departure are different, they both aim at intensifying the reader's engagement, asking for a devotion that ideally should reconfirm the Romantic view of literature as a secular form of religion, complete with the author as God — even if this reconfirmation takes a form in which the irony is complete. Bluntly put, the difference between Barth and Hawkes is this: Barth demands of the reader her love, Hawkes her self-sacrifice. Thus for Barth the ideal reader must be *alive*, while for Hawkes she should be *dead*. But in either case it is the reader who serves as the justification for the criteria by which the author chooses to distinguish between the relevant and the unimportant.

Barth and Hawkes became conscious of how the relation between author and reader determined the structure of their ironic texts only when their ironical phases actually came to an end. Or better: once they perceived the ironical structure of their texts, the ironical phase of their work had reached its climax, to be followed by one in which irony became itself the subject of irony. In Barth's work, this new phase starts with ›Chimera‹ and ›LETTERS‹, which were originally intended as parts of a single novel; in Hawkes' case the crucial work is the book ›Virginie‹<sup>12</sup>). Both novels originated from an awareness that was at once *post-ironic* and *post-postmodern*, an awareness of the ability to delimit an epoch. In ›LETTERS‹, Barth elaborates the thesis from the ›Dunyazadiad‹ that the relation between author and reader should be a *relationship* in the specifically erotic sense of the term. In the ›Dunyazadiad‹, the temporal distance between Barth and Dunyazade's sister Scheherazade had already been suspended in order to render such a relationship possible — so that one could no longer tell whether it was Barth who was doing the telling and Scheherazade the listening or the other way round. In ›LETTERS‹, the relation between teller and listener is transformed into its modern counterpart — the relation between author and reader. Five protagonists from earlier Barth books have been turned into the senders and receivers of letters to or from the author-in-the-text, whereas the real author John Barth attempts to communicate only with

<sup>12</sup>) JOHN BARTH, *Chimera*, New York 1972; — J. B., *LETTERS*, New York 1979; — JOHN HAWKES, *Virginie: Her Two Lives*, New York 1982.

the one new character, Lady Amherst, who — like him — appears to be non-fictional. Or rather, he demonstratively refuses to communicate with her, when he comes to understand that Lady Amherst represents British modernist literature who has become American only after meeting Barth's alter ego in the text, Ambrose Mensch. In refusing, after a single reply, to answer Lady Amherst's letters, Barth repudiates her as reader of his texts, since she cannot meet his postmodernist requirements. The intrusion of Lady Amherst denotes the not-yet-finished struggle between modernism and postmodernism, and as Barth wants to portray himself as a postmodernist author, he himself is willing to receive messages from modernist literature, but refuses to react to them. In this way, the author acknowledges his debt to modernism while emphasizing at the same time that modernism and postmodernism are nonetheless chronologically distinct.

In a truly postmodernist epoch, Barth can postulate a love affair between author and reader; but as soon as he incorporates modernism into his text, if only in allegorical form, such a relationship is bound to remain unfulfilled. Even Barth's alter ego must disappear when he intends to wed Lady Amherst. His courtship, however, proves to be fruitful. It also establishes the conditions for postmodernism. This can be seen in the fact that Ambrose's affair with Lady Amherst not only displays the usual ups and downs, but that it follows a precise pattern, prescribed in detail by Ambrose, in other words, by the author. Here we find concrete proof of the first part of my thesis — that postmodernism has clarified, not rejected, the different forms of modernism. The second part of my thesis — the claim that the innovative momentum of postmodernism cannot be separated from its conservatism — can be demonstrated by referring to ›LETTERS‹ as well. Towards the end of the book Lady Amherst is expecting a child, which is at the same time the novel ›LETTERS‹ itself. Through this device Barth parodies a concept of Proust's and, by his reference to tradition, presents himself as conservative; yet at the same time the child must be seen as symbolic for a new beginning, especially as it will be — for all we know — without a father.

Like ›LETTERS‹, ›Virginie: Her Two Lives‹ is a statement on the author's relationship to *post-irony* and *post-postmodernism*. This, however, is true only if the novel is seen in connection with the *modern*, rather than simply in opposition to modernism. Virginie's first life takes place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, her second life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this way, Hawkes creates a conscious parallel between Romantic and postmodernist irony. Virginie, the reader, sacrifices herself to Seigneur, the Romantic author, who is in turn sacrificed by his pupils, thereby losing his God-like status. Hawkes builds towards this twofold sacrifice through a series of erotic scenes that are closely modelled on de Sade's writings. Eros in this novel paves the way for Thanatos, and even accelerates death through his perverse leanings. Virginie appears to be merely an observer of the erotic scenes arranged exclusively for her benefit by Seigneur. However, since Seigneur also does not personally participate in any of the erotic games he initiates (which in the end causes his former pupils to revolt against him, leading to his death at the stake), his position is, in the final instance, the same as that of Virginie. The lack of involvement

on the part of Seigneur, the Romantic author, anticipates Virginie's becoming the postmodernist reader. What this role involves becomes evident through the double usage of the name *Virginie*, which relates both to the character and to the text bearing that title. Virginie's innocence becomes the condition for Seigneur's creativity, and it is timeless because she is made to exist as his text. When she says at one point that she is the page that burns, she becomes the erotic sacrifice that being Seigneur's reader demands.

Bocage, Virginie's 20<sup>th</sup>-century brother, the postmodernist author, attempts to substitute the physical rape of the body for Seigneur's precarious belief in the power of the imagination, which nevertheless proved strong enough to elicit Virginie's sacrifice of her life. By depriving Virginie of her innocence, Bocage hopes to bring her under his control. He fails because by attempting to rape Virginie, he confuses the role of author with that of character, thus permitting Virginie to escape into her otherness as reader. Only Seigneur and Virginie can truly communicate, and since their communication is a kind of *Liebestod*, their Romantic relationship is not marred by the ideology burdening any kind of life sanctioned by society. This could mean that the same is not true for the postmodernist text. During Virginie's second life, however, the remembrance of her earlier life can be called up with the help of parody. In this way ›Virginie‹ manages to overcome the modernist ideology of perpetual avant-gardism: while undeniably a postmodernist text, it nevertheless belongs, at the same time, within the traditions of Romantic irony.

In conclusion, it seems to me that those postmodernist writers who could be called ironic have played a crucial role in defining the era. For while most other postmodernist writers persistently claim to be essentially late modernist, the ironic writers are able — because of their self-reflexivity — to place their own works within a larger historical context. If modernist avant-gardism attempted to create the simultaneity of the unsimultaneous, the parodic slant of the ironic postmodernist writer affirms the historicity of even that attitude. In other words: the ironic postmodernist writer defines a new epoch within the philosophical context of modernity. And yet, just as any parody remains dependent on the literary model it reflects, postmodernism is not a new *political* assessment of modern aesthetics. It can lay no claim to having ushered in an aesthetic *revolution*, and it remains to be seen, if — given the more or less unconventional attitude in most Western thinking today — such a new aesthetic revolution is already under way.