Cómo recuperar la realidad. Ironía neorromántica en la ficción estadounidense post-postmoderna

(*How to Recover Reality. Neo-Romantic Irony in Post-Postmodern American Fiction*)

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Resumen: Si bien el trascendentalismo nunca dejó de estar presente en la cultura estadounidense, durante la primera década del siglo XXI, la mirada de artistas y teóricos se volvió hacia las ideas del renacimiento estadounidense con una esperanza que no tenía cabida durante el reinado de la ironía posmoderna. Teniendo esto en cuenta, el propósito de este artículo es discernir la adecuación de la filosofía de Emerson para la recuperación del realismo a través de la trascendencia del lenguaje y un nuevo uso de la ironía romántica. El análisis anterior nos llevará al movimiento de la Nueva Sinceridad. Los escritores de la generación que siguió a la de David Foster Wallace actuaron como puente entre la narrativa postmoderna y la post-postmoderna de comienzos del nuevo milenio. Estos jóvenes escritores basaron su ficción en una crítica de la ironía institucionalizada para allanar el camino a la nueva novela post 11 de septiembre.

Palabras clave: Postmodernismo. Post-postmodernismo. Ironía romántica. David Foster Wallace. Ficción estadounidense. Nueva Sinceridad.

Abstract: Even though transcendentalism never ceased to be present in American culture, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the gaze of artists and theorists turned to the ideas of the American Renaissance with a hope that had no place during the reign of postmodern irony. With this in mind, the purpose of this article is to discern the adequacy of Emerson's philosophy for the recovery of realism through the transcendence of language and a new use of Romantic irony. The previous analysis will take us to the New Sincerity

movement. The writers of the generation that followed in the wake of David Foster Wallace's acted as a bridge between the postmodern and the post-postmodern narrative of the beginning of the new millennium. These young writers based their fiction on a critique of institutionalized irony in order to pave the way for the new post 9/11 novel.

Keywords: Postmodernism. Post-postmodernism. Romantic irony. David Foster Wallace. American fiction. New Sincerity.

In the essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction" (1993), David Foster Wallace made a clear statement. Irony was pervasive and the role of the new generation of writers—bred in the era of television and pop music—would be to regain the terrain of single-entendre values in order to recover a lost referentiality. In accordance with Wittgenstein's philosophy, on which Lyotard relies to explain postmodernism, language constrains the limits of knowledge and creates a plethora of incommensurable truths. Post-postmodern writers use transcendental intuition to overcome the corset that language imposes on knowledge and, thus, recover realism. In this article, I will try to identify the linguistic nature of the crisis originated by postmodernism that places the role of irony in a new context. In order to do that, I will trace the place of transcendentalism in the writers' new use of sincerity and honesty to create fiction. I find it fruitful to explain why the only way to recover a causal, referential and essentialist reality—without the danger of falling into the authoritarianism to which pre-postmodern Lyotardian metanarratives led—is to balance the univocity of that sincerity with a new constructive irony of a Romantic nature. In order to do this, I will rely on the idea of a metamodern oscillation, as described by Tim Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker.

1. The transcendentalist alternative

The classic vision of events in reality was causal and realistic, since, as chaotic as they seemed, there was a need to believe that there were laws that governed them. Arkady Plotnitsky explains that, from a modern point of view, the presupposition of this need is fundamental. A cause is needed, even for events that appear to be the result of chance. The need for a law, a project, behind each event that occurs in nature is key to its understanding:

> Classically, chance or, more accurately, the appearance of chance is seen as arising from our insufficient […]

> knowledge of a total configuration of forces involved and, hence, of the lawful necessity that is always postulated behind a lawless chance event… The presupposition of necessity is, however, essential for and defines the classical and specifically modern view as causal and as realist […] even if not necessarily deterministic (Plotnitsky 2002: 206).

On the other hand, in the post-quantum theory approach to this matter, in order to establish a paradigm for the practice of "normal science" in Thomas S. Kuhn's terms, this classic vision of reality must be renounced. There is no knowledge, be it is accessible or not, behind natural events that can replace chance by necessity. Plotnitsky explains that, after the discoveries in the field of quantum physics, there is an inability to adapt the classical framework to elementary processes, which results in "a final renunciation of the classical ideal and perhaps any available or conceivable concept of reality as well" (2002: 207). This is the basis of postmodernism's agenda. There is no causal explanation behind natural events, it is not deterministic, and it does not make a knowable reality concept available.

This non-deterministic view creates an unstable framework in which it becomes impossible to discern anything through logic in a non-discreet way —since all truths conform to a system of incommensurability within Wittgenstein's theory of language games. This suits both reality and the individual's own identity, who, by accepting the absence of causal knowledge belonging to a total configuration in reality, also accepts that absence of knowledge in itself. Vermeulen and van den Akker attribute to this liminal or interstitial post-postmodernity the quality of naive, which translates into credulity or faith. Reason does not allow for unity and not being deterministic is a matter of using logic—once the entropy of the universe has been proven. However, the lack of causality creates a void that leads to solipsism. The return to a naive modernity can recompose identity. In other words, the individual knows through reason that nothing has an integral meaning, but they want to believe in a monistic system in which there is a total configuration based on causality in order to eliminate the crisis factor. A naive modernism founded on faith, on a total causal and realistic structure, but informed by postmodernity.

Very roughly, but also very illustratively, John N. Findlay explains the correspondence that the thoughts of Plato, Kant and Wittgenstein keep with reality in *Kant and the Transcendental Object: A Hermeneutic Study*:

> Kant, however, tried to do away with philosophical theses, controversies, and antinomies in much the same manner as

> Wittgenstein, though Wittgenstein performed the slaughter more thoroughly than Kant. For, if Plato placed men in a cave from which egress was with effort possible, Kant placed them in a cave from which escape was impossible in this life, though it remained thinkable and desirable. Wittgenstein, however, constructed a habitation for hermits (or for a single hermit) from which escape was not only impossible, but neither thinkable nor desirable, except owing to a confusion (1981: 370).

Wittgenstein made it impossible to establish a connection with reality not mediated through language, which imposes the limits of what can be known. Point seven of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (1981: 89). Wittgenstein, thus, circumscribes the knowable to what can be expressed through a semiotic system. The hermit's room in Findlay's previous quote is none other than language. Although Wittgenstein's approach to language changes from the *Tractatus* to *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), in both works the principle of his thinking is the same: that the problems of philosophy come from a lack of understanding of how language works. Wittgenstein's philosophy is the basis of disbelief towards metanarratives due to the relativism that emerges from the denial of an absolute truth—which is linked to the disbelief of a necessary holistic structure. To regain lost realism, it is necessary to transcend the language that constrains the limits of knowledge; transcendentalism meets that requirement.

German idealism reaches Ralph Waldo Emerson after going through a series of filters and modifications that will lead to the amalgam that will become the Emersonian thought as it is known today. Among the first American scholars to experience German thought of the time significantly and first hand were George Ticknor, Edward Bancroft and Edward Everett[1]. These intellectuals met in Europe in the early nineteenth century with figures such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, August Wilhelm von Schlegel or Wilhelm von Humboldt. Everett and Ticknor were Emerson's professors at Harvard and had a great influence on him. Bancroft befriended Emerson during the 1830s, eight years after Emerson

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[1] According to what O. W. Long says in "Goethe and Bancroft", "One of the most important contributions to American intellectual life in the early nineteenth century was the romantic impulse which impelled a group of scholars to pursue their studies in foreign countries. George Ticknor, Edward Everett, Joseph Cogswell, and George Bancroft, as students at Göttingen between the years 1815 and 1820, were the pioneers of this movement" (1934: 820).

went to see him lecture at New South Church, Boston[2]. William, Emerson's brother, studied philosophy at the University of Göttingen, which helped create in his brother Ralph a predisposition towards German thought and language. The influences come from many sources, but probably one of the most relevant was Emerson's trip to Europe in 1832, in which he toured Italy, France, England and Scotland for seven months, just after breaking with the Unitarian church[3].

According to Gura, another important figure, Johann Gottfried Herder, was introduced to the American intellectual circle of the time through a translation, made by James Marsh, of *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1833), which gives rise to the explanation of what there is of "myth" in the Bible. Herder points out that the stories of the Bible are true only poetically. There is a symbolic relationship between these stories, reality and idealism. The Bible should be treated as a case of complex symbolist literature. This type of texts derives from the culture of a people, from its "spirit", a new concept at this time, linked to the also novel concept of nationalism. Herder's influence on Emerson is also evident in his theories on language, which are linked to the above. Gura indicates that Elisabeth Palmer Peabody, Emerson's friend and disciple, was an admirer of Herder. It was through him and his idea of an "Edenic proto-language", she concludes, that "Primitive languages, thus, were 'naturally poetic'" (Gura 2008: 41)[4]. However, society "deadened the impressions they naturally made by a thousand arbitrary and accidental associations of words and ideas" (2008: 41). According to Gura, "Peabody welcomed Herder's suggestion that if one went back far enough in the study of a language, he not only located a tongue's original roots but also could ascertain how these roots themselves were derived from nature" (2008: 42). Thought, which takes shape through language, is a reflection of nature—the central idea of Emersonian thought. Emerson's idealism is an amalgam of

[2] For more information about this friendship and its transcendence, see Daniel Koch's *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Europe: Class, Race and Revolution in the Making of an American Thinker* (2012).

[3] According to Gura, "[d]uring these troubled years Emerson joined his cousin George Ripley, [Orestes Augustus] Brownson, [Amos Bronson] Alcott, and [Frederic Henry] Hedge in their criticism of Unitarianism. Like them, I have rebelled against the empiricism on which it was based, and I welcomed, via Marsh, Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*" (2008: 91).

[4] Francisco J. Contreras Peláez speaks about this: "[i]n the 'national songs' of the 'wild and uneducated' peoples, the primal astonishment, the echo of the Edenic proto-language. Such 'national songs' […] are characterized by their compact profile, by the 'need for content [Nothdrang des Inhalts]': being the work of the collective genius, they are exempt from the characteristic vacillations of subjective inspiration […] As the lyrical genius national-collective was displaced by the 'artificial' inspiration of individual vates, the quality of poetic creations irretrievably decreased" (2004: 68; translation, my own; square brackets and italics in the original).

influences of very different nature[5], including Emmanuel Swedenborg, of whom Emerson speaks in his collection of essays *Representative Men* (1850). The influence of this Swedish philosopher and scientist, along with Herder's, was reflected in his conception of language. Matthiessen draws attention to this in his seminal book, *American Renaissance*, and quotes a couple of passages from Emerson. He starts with this one taken from his essay "Language":

> "[…] Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. Nature is the symbol of spirit". He instinctively inclined towards the point that he reached in his long essay on "Poetry and Imagination": "The poet accounts all productions and changes of Nature as the nouns of language, uses them representatively too well pleased with their ulterior to value much their primary meaning". The representation he is thinking of is Swedenborg's correspondence between the physical world of appearance and the real world of spirit (Matthiessen 1968: 40).

In this last fragment, some of the most important points of Emerson's thought can be found, which are used by the proponents of new alternatives for the cultural change to post-postmodernism. If in postmodernism reality is not knowable because of the loss of the need for a total deterministic structure, and the truth depends on discrete and incommensurable instances, American transcendentalism helps to recover realism through a use of symbolic language, linked to what Herder calls *Ursprache*—in this case, Hebrew—or protolanguage. In this *Ursprache*, the instances of language have a direct relationship with natural events. This relationship is also visible in the work of some figures who influence Emerson, such as Wordsworth or Carlyle. They defended literature as a natural discourse in the same sense of the search for an Edenic protolanguage empty of artifice that aspires to transcendence through symbolism. Poetic language can generate universal visions. The key to Matthiessen's previous quote is undoubtedly the concept of symbol. The symbolism used by the poet—a central figure in Emersonian thought—is the tool that helps to transcend reality, which

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[5] "[H]is idealism originated more in a long-term interest in Plato and Neoplatonism, an immersion in Goethe (whom he read in German since the 1820s), the mediation of British writers like Carlyle and Coleridge, and Sampson Reed's redaction of Swedenborgian thought. Emerson knew of Cousin, too, through the translations of the early 1830s; and he learned of Schleiermacher, Herder, and de Wette from the pages of *The Christian Examiner* as well as from his friends and classmates" (Gura 2008: 91-92).

puts language in direct contact with nature and, thus, with oneself, since it is a symbol of the spirit. Taking all this into account, the transcendence denied by Wittgensteinian thought can be achieved, among other ways, through a symbolic use of language. If Kant's ideas placed human beings in a cave from which they could not escape, Emerson raises the possibility of transcendence. For this, he uses intuition, which, as Gura explains, "allows us to move from knowledge to faith" (2008: 54).

2. Essentialist and referential realism

> Perhaps the fall of George W. Bush's cynical administration (with its reliance on tenuous truth claims and its blind support of neo-colonial capitalism) and the massively popular rise of Barack Obama's overtly "sincere" administration (with its renewed faith in global ethics and transparent communication) finally signals the culmination of a grand epochal transition (Toth 2011: 2).

The transition from cynicism to sincerity, and a return to realism and causality, were the perfect synthesis of the post-postmodern paradigm shift during the first years of the new millennium. The previous quote by Josh Toth is a speech about the symbolic crossing of the Rubicon. By trying to lose sight of cynicism, the defences are lowered and the neo-nihilism of the—also—prefixed "neo-" liberalism is exposed. Cynicism versus open sincerity; blind support against faith; neo-colonial capitalism versus world ethics; and futile truths versus transparency: this was the intended nature of the new order. According to Toth, "[t]his revival of some type of "realism" was further solidified by the American writer Tom Wolfe in his 1989 "literary manifesto for a new social novel". In fact, by 1989, the demise of postmodernism was, for most, an inevitability" (2011: 2). Wolfe uses the modernist resource of the manifesto to try to recover realism in an attempt to adapt reality to a Kuhnian paradigmatic framework. The article "Stalking the Billion-footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel" (1989) recounts the troubled years of postmodernism since World War II and the rise of an artistic elite that aimed to make the United States what Europe represented in cultural terms in the 19th century. The old continent continued to be a benchmark, and the philosophy of the new post-Holocaust era finds its place in the ranks of what was shaping up to be the new American intellectual aristocracy. Faced with mass culture, this new intelligentsia positioned against realism in literature and in the arts in general, since it was unable to describe the fragmentation advocated by the new cultural project. Popular culture

was opposed to that group of higher status, producing a schism between the narratives that, although equally valid within their community, did not recognize each other. The speculative spirit of the University of Berlin was definitely banished from the cultural scene.

The new cultural phase needed a new language; in fact, it needed a multiplicity of new languages to be able to explain the large quantity of narratives that coexisted, based on the destruction of the classic vision of causality. The state of the postmodern question reached levels of atomization of knowledge unprecedented in the history of humanity due to technological advances that make information travel faster and faster. If already in 1983, explains Toth, Bill Buford appealed to a recovery of a different realism —"Dirty Realism"—, Wolfe crystallized it in 1989 with his manifesto. This impulse reaches our days with momentum after going through the messianic experience of David Foster Wallace. Dirty realism began in the 1970s. It aimed to strip fiction of all unnecessary artifice. In *The Mourning After*, Neil Brooks and Josh Toth explain what Buford developed:

> Bill Buford argued that a 'new' type of Realism had emerged in response to the pretensions of postmodernism […] Bill Buford positioned, what he referred to as 'dirty realism', in direct contradistinction to both traditional forms of realism and the metafictional devices of postmodernism (2011: 4).

Realism started to be abandoned, Wolfe tells us in his manifesto, in the 1960s. The generation that grows under the aegis of narrative fragmentation felt safe within experimentation. Sticking to realistic modes of representation was not enough. Students of English at universities at the time were eager to explore the new qualities of the emerging postmodernism. In the early 1990s, the pendulum takes the opposite direction. Young writers wonder where to look for an identity, not only their own, but an American identity in general. "For a serious young writer to stick with realism after 1960 required contrariness and courage" (Wolfe 1989: 48). Wolfe refers in the previous quote to an attitude that some authors continued to maintain, but which did not imply a change in attitude worthy of the promise of revolution until, in Nicoline Timmer's words, there was a "turn to the 'human'" (2010: 51) in the new generation of writers. Jerry Saltz refers to this turn and endows it with essential characteristics that, one could say, are the essence of the new generation of writers. The title of his article, "Sincerity and Irony Hug It Out", suggests the fusion of two terms, irony and sincerity, that symbolize the two cultural phases from which post-postmodernism is nurtured;

the concepts between which, in the words of Vermeulen and van den Akker, the new paradigm 'oscillates'[6]: "I'm noticing a new approach to artmaking in recent museum and gallery shows […] They grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind—what Emerson called 'alienated majesty'" (Saltz 2010).

Two decades before, the world of literature treated the concept of sincerity with cynicism. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, authors were shedding the fear of talking about subjects that have a correspondence with their own humanity without having to resort to sarcasm continuously, so that the look at their own existentialism was not painful. Saltz draws attention to that absence of fear that constrained postmodern creation:

> It's an attitude that says, I know that the art I'm creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn't mean this isn't serious. At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial (2010).

Klaus Stierstorfer, after speaking about the death of postmodernism and the analysis of the time of crisis, appealed to a widespread feeling in the world of theory and culture in general of treading common ground trying not to fragment it. The intention was to be able to deal with the important issues without deconstruction undermining any hint of coherence[7]. For this, Stierstorfer insists on the need for referentiality and essentialism. There is a desire to rescue reality and it is unavoidable to return to a non-atomized language, one reminiscent of Herder's *Ursprache*. In this context, Timmer's "turn to the human" (2010: 52)

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[6] In "Notes on Metamodernism" Vermeulen and van den Akker point out that "each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm" (2010).

[7] "Whether it is the more universal interest in the possible foundations of a general or literary ethics in a World of globalisation, or the more specific and local issues of identities, scholars and writers alike nevertheless continue to find themselves in the dilemma of facing the deconstructive gestures inherent in postmodernist thought while at the same time requiring some common ground on which ethical agreements can be based. Hence some sort of referentiality, even some kind of essentialism is called for" (Stierstorfer 2003: 10). Josh Toth quotes that passage in The Passing of Postmodernism to illustrate that "this return to seemingly prepostmodern ideologies has been somehow tempered by the lessons of postmodernism […] In terms of the apparent shift to a type of neo-realism, we might say that some form of mimesis is called for—that is, some type of renewed faith in the possibility of what postmodernism narrative has repeatedly identified as impossible: meaning, truth, representational accuracy" (2011: 4).

refers to giving a meaning—an essence—to what it means to be a person. The transcendentalism with which the unfinished project of modernity is to be recovered conforms to this scheme, I argue, because it fits the prerequisite of the need to get rid of the incommensurability of the language games. Similarly, referentiality is also connected with Emersonian thought and its closeness to Herder's ideas.

It is true that the books written by the new generation of writers in the 2000s, like Wallace's own, aspire to referentiality and essentialism in order to solve the identity problems caused by postmodernism, but the resources of the previous cultural phase have not yet been banished. It becomes almost impossible to think realistically, and even redeem a past scheme, when the only paradigm these writers have known is postmodernism. They use metafiction, but as a paradoxical literary game. To describe reality is, for these novelists, to describe the episteme in which their mental scheme has developed. Their reality is unrealistic. In other words, to be able to flee postmodernism and understand their identity in a realistic way, using referentiality and essentialism is an inconsistency.

3. The Romantic nature of the new irony

Timmer refers to Wallace's opinion on the "'tyranny' of irony" as "unsurpassable" (2010: 101). Indeed, "E Unibus Pluram" became the reference text on the subject. In a society dominated by the media, irony was everywhere. The influence of this medium in the 90s is total and in it the "rapt credulity most of us grew up with" was replaced by "weary irony" (Wallace 1993: 157). Television encompassed everything and this "was made for irony […] Its displacement of radio wasn't picture displacing sound; it was picture added. Since the tension between what's said and what's seen is irony's whole sales territory" (Wallace 1993: 161). Irony became the sign of the times at the turn of the century.

The distance with the previous generation, which grew in the pre-Cold War and Vietnam War era, was evident in the way of conceiving reality due to the transformation of perception of what was considered reality. The cultural gap that occurs as a result of this fact was manifest in postmodern fiction, where an entire generation was represented living in dysfunctional nuclear families. In postmodern fiction, characters do not speak with the same level of linguistic referentiality, just as the students and the professor of the literature seminar did not in the anecdote that Wallace relates in his article[8]. Wallace's generation

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[8] "In one of the graduate workshops I suffered through, an earnest gray eminence kept trying to convince our class that a literary story or novel always eschews 'any feature which serves to date it', because 'serious fiction must be timeless'. When we finally protested that, in his own well-known work, characters moved about in electrically lit rooms, drove cars, spoke not Anglo-Saxon

encountered a kind of unsolvable aporia. Their identity was constituted by the ironic self-referentiality of the late postmodernism chance identity from which they wanted to escape; the only way out was to create an identity based on single entendres, that is on sincerity/honesty. However, if they were truly sincere/honest, they would only be able to build on top of a self-referential postmodern reality. According to Wallace, escaping irony, "whose weird pretty hand has my generation by the throat" (1993: 171), was practically impossible and, although he heralded the coming of a generation of young rebellious writers trying to change things, according to him, this was impossible.

The term irony was pervasive in the world of theory and criticism. Wallace is far from being the first to speak about the excess of this resource in the postmodern era. Linda Hutcheon, for example, had already written extensively about irony before Wallace, noting the ubiquity of the notion[9]. Wallace, I contend, is responsible for the resurgence of its popularity by actively opposing it to sincerity and giving a narrative form to the latter. The passage from irony to sincerity/earnestness/honesty is associated in most cases with the death of postmodernism. Buford pointed out that dirty realism was opposed to the claims of postmodernism, but using irony:

> This is a curious, dirty realism about the belly-side of contemporary life, but it is realism so stylized and particularized—so insistently informed by discomforting and sometimes elusive irony—that it makes the more traditional realistic novels of, say, Updike and Styron seem ornate, even baroque in comparison (Qtd. in Brooks and Toth 2007: 4).

but postwar English, inhabited a North America already separated from Africa by continental drift, he impatiently amended his proscription to those explicit references that would date a story in the frivolous 'Now'. When pressed for just what stuff evoked this F.N., he said of course he meant the 'trendy mass-popular-media' reference. And here, at just this point, transgenerational discourse broke down. We looked at him blankly. We scratched our little heads. We didn't get it. This guy and his students just didn't imagine the 'serious world the same way. His automobiled timeless and our FCC'd own were different" (Wallace 1993: 167).

[9] In the introduction to *Double-Talking: Essays on Verbal and Visual Ironies in Canadian Contemporary Art and Literature*, Hutcheon asks: "[a]re we living through an 'irony epidemic'? In March in the mass media as well as in what we like to call 'high art' and the academy, there has been a lot of talk about irony lately. Why? After all, irony is nothing new; it has been around for a long time, if Quintilian and Cicero are to be believed" (1992: 11).

This type of realism continues to make use of postmodern forms. The writers of the works of fiction that contribute to the intended paradigm shift after postmodernism use irony in a very different way. They use it as an escape valve, as an element of metamodern oscillation as described by Vermeulen and van den Akker. This oscillation is necessary in view of the historical consequences of intuitive univocity and its opposite. Paul Maltby uses Richard Rorty's ideas to oppose these two visions: "[i]n Rorty's terms, postmodernism produces 'ironists', people who acknowledge the contingency of their beliefs, in opposition to 'metaphysicians', people who defend their beliefs as beyond time and change" (2007: 42). Maltby explains how postmodernism is descended from a whole tradition "of secularist assaults on the idea of the transcendent" (2007: 41):

> The proto-postmodern Nietzsche exhorted philosophers to root out residues of transcendentalism in post-Enlightenment thinking […] [Richard Rorty] called for a Wittgensteinian approach to language, whose effect would be to "de-divinize the world" […] Foucault explained that his "essential task was to free the history of thought from its subjection to transcendence […] to cleanse it of all transcendental narcissism" […] In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze affirmed, "Philosophy is at its most positive as critique: an enterprise of demystification […] Derrida's programmatic assault on philosophy's ingrained transcendentalism" (2007: 41-42).

Irony was present in postmodernity since the beginning. At first, along the lines of Wallace, and as Charles Jencks comments in *Critical Modernism: Where Is Post-modernism Going?*, as a strategy for minorities and disadvantaged cultural groups:

> A certain type of irony characterises minority cultures forced to accommodate themelves (*sic*) to a system not of their choosing: the blacks in America, the Poles under the Soviet control, the Jews in racist cultures or the Palestinians under Israeli law. These situations force a double coding on the subject people, and a sophisticated form of irony that still allows the heretical opinion to be expressed, often with black humour (2007: 82).

But that strategy turned into a double-edged sword when it became mainstream, predictable and rude (Jenks 2007: 82). Irony, then, became

pernicious cynicism; it became self-referential and served no purpose other than the exploitation of those values that it originally criticized; it lost the emancipatory power that it held in its conception.

The concept helped create a multiplicity of contradictory meanings, making the individual feel increasingly alienated. The rejection of irony is the sign of post-postmodern times. Even today, 27 years after Wallace's essay, irony, or the absence thereof, remains one of the central themes in fiction and in theory and criticism. Indeed, during the second half of the twentieth century, postmodernism aimed to get rid of idealism and its proven historical result, fanaticism with its totalitarian potential. However, by adopting a completely relativistic opposite position, based on the use of the double ironic codification, postmodernism stripped the relationship between signifier and signified, reaching undesired levels that helped to create the atmosphere of crisis. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace justified the use of irony and cynicism in the 1960s to end the hypocrisy of the 1950s (McCaffery 2012: 147). The use of irony was perfect for this type of situation, since, Wallace pointed out, the irony "splits things apart, gets up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicates" (McCaffery 2012: 147), but

> [t]he problem is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, 'then' what do we do? Irony's useful for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S. has now been done and redone […] Postmodern irony and cynicism's (*sic*) become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving (McCaffery 2012: 147).

Once the problems of the previous era had been exposed, irony did not help with solutions. The new attitude towards irony adopted by the new generation of writers transformed into an instrument to highlight inconsistencies or, in Wallace's words, to remove the mask and reveal the unpleasant reality hidden behind it (McCaffery 2012: 147). Thus, Wallace's stance towards irony and his recurring use of it in his work may seem paradoxical, as it goes against the transcendentalist use of language I have developed. However, Jonathan Lear points out that, when Wallace speaks of irony, he does not oppose it in total terms, but refers to the oppressiveness "of institutionalized irony" (qtd. in

Finocchiaro 2020) and points out that, in itself, irony is a great fundamental tool for the human being. Wallace did not attack all the manifestations of this rhetorical figure; he was against the way the establishment used it:

> What do you do when postmodern rebellion becomes a pop-cultural institution? For this of course is the second clue to why avant-garde irony and rebellion have become dilute and malign. They have been absorbed, emptied, and redeployed by the very televisual establishment they had originally set themselves athwart (Wallace 1993: 184).

This is, thus, the kernel of Wallace's use of this resource: irony and sincerity, and the oscillation between those poles. This is reminiscent of Isaiah Berlin's definition of Romantic irony, which he attributes to Friedrich Schlegel:

> The idea is that whenever you see honest citizens setting about their business, whenever you see a well-composed poem—a poem composed according to the rules—whenever you see a peaceful institution which protects the lives and property of citizens, laugh at it, mock at it, be ironical (2013: 136).

Berlin describes it as a kind of weapon against totalitarianism, exactly the use I have just given to post-postmodern irony. Berlin gives a short explanation of this Romantic irony: "corresponding to any proposition that anyone may utter, there must be at least three other propositions, each of which is contrary to it, and each of which is equally true" (2013: 136). For Schlegel, Socratic irony "contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication" (Schlegel 1971: 256). It seems like a tailor-made description for the paradigm shift. Schlegel's Socratic irony weakens social authority and exercises a controlling function. At the same time, transcendentalism provides content to the inane argument of excess irony that leads to obsessive self-referentiality. That is precisely the way Emerson uses irony alongside the concept of the sublime. Influenced by Schlegel,

> Emerson intermittently becomes a transcendental buffoon […] Just as frequently, though, playful passages intensify into the resonant hyperboles of the sublime. Emerson's irony alternates with his yearning for transcendence and

> teleology, a tonal emblem of his fluctuation between self-
> consciousness and surprise (Ellison 2014: 8-9).

According to the distinction that Alan Wilde makes of irony, accepted by Hutcheon, irony can be divided into three types, pre-modernist, whose purpose is to maintain harmony; modernist, which accepts fragmentation but aims at transcendence; and postmodernist, which recognizes fragmentation and cultivates it, leaving transcendence aside. If Romantic irony had the function of breaking rules by putting relative realities on the same plane of truth to prevent totalitarianism and maintain the freedom of the individual in his solitary search for the sublime, modernist irony is used to highlight that there are inconsistencies in reality that make transcendence difficult. Postmodern irony, on the other hand, rebels against the hypocrisy of the society of the last years of modernism. Wallace's return to sincerity—and that of the generation of writers who followed in his wake—, meant a return to the use of a pre-modern irony. In Wilde's terms, it served—ironically—as a cornerstone for the search for transcendence.

Conclusion

The casual conception of events in reality during postmodernism lead to a relativism, supported by scientific evidence, that left the individual devoid of the tools to build their own identity. This leads to feelings of solipsism and nihilism and, eventually, to a crisis of identity at the turn of the millennium. A return to the unfinished project of modernity advocated by Jürgen Habermas could restore to the individual a sense of purpose and direction that would recompose their lost identity. However, what was learned during the twentieth century could not be consciously unlearned. Vermeulen and van den Akker proposed a naive return to the project of modernity, that is, although it is known that the project of modernity is not real, the individual can pretend that it is. This naive way of thinking would restore the lost causality to the vision of reality. In order to develop this way of thinking, the individual would need to lay hold of faith. The danger of this earnest faith, which can lead to authoritarianism, is countered, according to Vermeulen and van den Akker, with a counterweight to what was learned during the years of postmodernism and with one of its star resources, irony. Nevertheless, this resource had to be adapted to the new situation if it was to counteract the dangerous earnestness on which this new causality would be based. The young writers of the New Sincerity movement turned their gaze toward Romanticism—in the case of Wallace and his followers and American colleagues, to transcendentalism—to continue to use the resource in a constructive way.

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