

MATTHEW STRATTON, *The Politics of Irony in American Modernism* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013), 304 pp.

We live in a post-ironic age, or so much contemporary criticism would have us believe. Ironically enough, however, as Matthew Stratton points out in *The Politics of Irony in American Modernism*, the discourse on the obsolescence and end of irony is hardly new. Its repeated pronouncement must be understood, he argues, as “recurrent symptoms of a chronic disease within the body politic” (3) that has seen irony invoked in lieu of the issues that are actually under debate. Stratton’s book argues that an analysis of the uses of the term “cast as much light upon the values of the user [...] as it does upon the object of the characterization” (8). *The Politics of Irony in American Modernism* is thus precisely about the question of what the various uses of the term irony really meant and which politics were mobilized or obscured through invoking it.

To speak about irony all too often involves exclusive definitions of irony, and indeed the study of modernist irony is no exception. A prime example of this may be Franco Moretti’s suggestion that though irony is an “indispensable component of any critical, democratic and progressive culture, its modernist version has a dark side with which we are not familiar enough.”¹ It is precisely these attempts to say what irony “had” or “was” that Stratton’s study counteracts by its insistence on reading irony in its specific usages. Modernism in Stratton’s reading is a “particularly influential period where ‘irony’ exploded as a term to describe features not only of life and art of the possibilities for aesthetics to orient the lives of social individuals toward political goals” (5). Stratton is not interested in defining the highly complex term “irony” and looking for it in modernist novels; rather, his—let it be said straight away, excellent—study traces the “particular ways in which writers in both canonical modernism and mass culture (with no particular divide adduced between them) used the term ‘irony’ to describe themselves, their texts, and their world” (10). The term irony is used, as Stratton points out, by different authors and critics in different ways for different ends, but in all of these individual manifestations of modern-

ist irony, “the concept [...] came to represent intersections between politics and aesthetic practices” (13). In other words, it is a form of mobilizing literature’s integral potential as a praxis “to bring about, affect, and effect the field of ‘the political’” (14).

Stratton’s four chapters span forty years from the 1910s to the 1950s. The first chapter, “The Eye in Irony,” reads the writings of cultural critics Randolph Bourne and Benjamin De Casseres through Friedrich Nietzsche. Irony, Stratton points out, served Bourne as “a central term for representing aesthetic-political action through intersecting contemporary discourses about photography, visibility, politics, and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche as it circulated in the early twentieth-century United States” (24). Bourne compares irony to photography’s acid bath, bringing “clearly to light all that was implicit” before (27), a conceit which reveals Bourne’s belief that irony functions to transmute the “photographic negative of the truth” to “re-value, trans-value, or de-value [...] received truths” (32-3). Delving into the contemporary pragmatist debate over facts and values, irony for Bourne and Nietzsche alike reveals the world as “the product of concept formation” rather than “unitary political or moral truth” (42) and gleans its power from this capacity of revelation. Stratton concludes this chapter with a comparative reading of De Casseres’s much more radical vision for irony and suggests that the two competing versions of irony highlight the way in which the paradoxes of democracy may be visualized.

The second chapter of *The Politics of Irony in American Modernism* examines Ellen Glasgow’s novels of the 1920s to show how “irony has not only a history but a gendered history that is inextricable from the politics of gender in literary modernism” (53). Stratton argues that Glasgow promoted “‘irony’ as the lens through which to read her fiction” (85) as well as a “means of advancing an explicitly feminist political ‘freedom’ by dislodging habits of reading and thinking” (88). Irony in Glasgow’s writings is both reception and production, a means of aesthetic judgment, which Stratton reads through Hegel and Kant. The basic message of the chapter is clear: fighting against a tradition that considered irony a dangerous tool for women, modernist women writers wielded it both successfully and critically. The details of the argument, however, are difficult to follow through Stratton’s various interjections of theoretical excursuses.

¹ Moretti, Franco (1987). “The Spell of Indecision.” *New Left Review* 164 (1), July-August, 27-33, 28.

Stratton's book regains its stride in the third chapter, devoted to John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy. It expands Stratton's discussion of irony to take in Dos Passos's particular form of satire. Dos Passos, Stratton argues, "deploys satire as a mode of activist irony to educate readers' aesthetic sense of print, image, and text" (110). Dos Passos's experiments in form—the familiar camera eye, the newsreels, the multiple points of view and shifting narrative perspectives—"force readers to recognize the aesthetic conditions under which new means and ends of politics might be possible" (115). Activist politics can result from such literature because, as Stratton persuasively argues, political representation (for example) constitutes an aesthetic relationship between representative and constituent, and thereby is open to manipulation by "stimulat[ing] action [...] in the context of an aesthetic disposition of the world" (133). Satirical irony provides readers with the "visceral and emotional" (135) impact required to "instantiate aesthetically a new democratic order" (143).

Stratton's strongest chapter is the fourth and final one on Ralph Ellison. Suggesting that "it is [...] Ellison's invocation of irony that render the activist political aesthetics of *Invisible Man* both coherent and plausible" (145), Stratton interweaves a close reading of Ellison's novel with a discussion of Kenneth Burke's use of the term irony. Only reading "irony as a conceptual political schema," rather than merely treating "individual instances of irony," makes it possible to see *Invisible Man*'s engagement with problems of democratic law and justice. Irony in Ellison describes "the subjective process of recognizing and ameliorating" deplorable conditions of oppression (153). Fostering an "ironic disposition" in readers, Stratton argues, *Invisible Man* offers at least the potential to allow readers to conceive of their own valuations of contested political principles such as freedom and security (187).

The strength of the chapters on Ellison and Dos Passos derives from the clarity of their exposition, the strong close readings, and the suc-

cessful and neat integration of contemporaneous literary criticism and literary practice. This bears pointing out because the few weak points of this book exist exactly where clarity goes by the boards. Stratton's study is dense and often difficult, and the long chapters are sometimes a bit unwieldy for the reader. Some of this clearly is necessary simply because of the argument itself: if irony carries different meanings and uses for the authors Stratton discusses, and these different meanings are founded in readings of different kinds of philosophical precursors, the unraveling and re-braiding that Stratton undertakes inevitably becomes complex. Yet upon occasion, Stratton's style obscures an otherwise sound point: "'Irony' both describes and demonstrably produces agonistic recontesting of how aesthetic representations help constitute forms of democratic individualism; if irony uniquely describes the irreconcilable, incommensurable frictions and fictions of democracy, it does so only when the critical terrain of 'democracy' itself is allowed to be both pragmatic and antipragmatic, careful and wild, sympathetic and pitiless" (52).

Despite such minor lapses, however, *The Politics of Irony in American Modernism* is a necessary study for anybody interested in either the political rhetoric of American modernists, or more generally the ways in which we conceive of and study irony as a multifarious term today. Beyond the study of the individual authors discussed by Stratton, the value of this study lies in its approach of its central terms—irony and politics—on their own, and shifting, an approach that is inherently pragmatic. His insistence on seeing irony as a heuristic device, clearly foregrounded of course by modernist writers themselves but ultimately to be seen multifariously as encoding related, but by no means monolithic conceptions of political action, may also help us understand our own apparently post-ironic age, simply by insisting upon the question: what does irony mean *here*, and who is politically mobilized or demobilized by its invocation?

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