

Weitzman, Erica. *Irony's Antics: Walser, Kafka, Roth, and the German Comic Tradition.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015. XI + 257 pp. \$144.84 (hardcover).

In the closing chapter of *Irony's Antics*, Erica Weitzman tries to steer her readers away from three *misreadings* of irony that have informed most of its modern interpretations: the “utopian/romantic,” the “melancholic/modernist,” and the “sentimental/humanist” (187). Each of these variants is, for Weitzman, decidedly *anti-ironic* and therefore antithetical to the modern tradition of “comic irony” that she illuminates in select works by Robert Walser, Franz Kafka, and Joseph Roth. Combining philosophical erudition with close and considered literary readings, Weitzman insists that what is genuinely modern—and genuinely ironic—about these works is their ludic and boundless self-consciousness, the most faithful embodiment of irony as such.

Chapter 1 explores the “origins of comic irony” in Schopenhauer, Hofmannsthal, Wittgenstein, and Freud, but reserves its most substantial critique for Hegel, whose aversion to romantic irony is a well-documented phenomenon in the history of aesthetics. Weitzman argues that the distinction Hegel draws in his *Aesthetics* between a positively construed “objective” humor and an *anti-aesthetic* “subjective” humor can only be sustained through the “ruse” of his end of art thesis. His attempt to delineate sense from nonsense—a move that Freud rehearses a century later in his discussion of *Witz*, and a distinction that Benjamin takes up in his critique of romanticism—thus collapses into itself, leaving us with the newfound freedom of ironic play, infinitely open to the blurring of subject and object, representation and reality. Where we might expect at this juncture for figures such as Schlegel or de Man to emerge victorious, Weitzman makes the more original argument that both the romantics and the (post)modern champions of romantic irony also fall prey to a false understanding of irony. They, too, tether it to a notion of wholeness or totality: irony becomes, for them, the expression of a wistful mourning for something past, or a hopeful longing for something yet to come. Neither of these solutions satisfies the demands of Weitzman’s proposed criteria for a truly comic irony.

Chapter 2 introduces the first case study of comic irony in action: Walser’s *Fritz Kocher’s Aufsätze* (1904). Arguing against the more conventional claim that Walser’s proto-modernist collection of stories re-instantiates a variant of romantic irony, Weitzman argues that Walser’s singular gesture is to be identified in his narrators’ obsession with the mundane and with issues of writing itself; these stories both play with representation and thematize it at once. Walser’s staging of irony’s self-consciousness thus marks the novel’s inauguration of “post-realist fiction” (68), which carries out the traditionally mimetic practices of literature to their absurdly logical conclusion. In this way, Walser’s jokes provide implicit rejoinders to Hegel’s notion of subjective humor and Freud’s strict separation of play from reality.

Chapter 3 addresses Kafka’s first and unfinished novel, *Der Verschollene* (1911-1914, 1927). Within the vast field of Kafka scholarship, Weitzman makes a bold interpretative move by suggesting that this novel evinces a fundamental comic structure informing arguably the entirety of Kafka’s oeuvre. *Der Verschollene* is most suited for analysis precisely because it stages what Weitzman calls Kafka’s “meta-situation” comedy (130). If situational comedy entails a pre-given set of possibilities within which all action must necessarily unfold—and is thus inherently conservative—Kafka’s theatrical (it is no coincidence, for Weitzman, that this text culminates in the *Theater* of Oklahoma), meta-situation comedy presents a world in which almost all possibilities for action are foreclosed from the outset. And yet, the show goes on: this is Karl Rossmann’s (and other Kafkan protagonists’) permanently paradoxical predicament. Kafka’s work, Weitzman finally argues, makes a joke out of Kant’s notion of causality and his separation of the

transcendental from the empirical world, insofar as it disavows the quasi-divine perspective that such theological-philosophical certainty presupposes.

Chapter 4 presents a close reading of Joseph Roth's feuilletons, specifically those which take this particular form—a modern, whimsical hybrid of literature and journalism—as their theme, enacting yet another kind of ironic self-awareness. Roth's postwar satires, argues Weitzman, do not assume an Archimedean point of view à la contemporaries like Karl Kraus, with all the ethical or political dubiousness that such a perspective entails. Rather, Roth's feuilletons perform a satire of satire, that is, of the very statist positions that invariably emulate the authorities or structures of power they intend to mock. Using Carl Schmitt as this chapter's primary philosophical discussant, Weitzman shows how Roth's playful irony deconstructs such hierarchical writing, exposing the paradoxes of authority without becoming authoritative itself.

The author presents a compelling and nuanced set of readings throughout *Irony's Antics*, yet I was left with a few lingering questions. While Weitzman's engagement with philosophy is no doubt rigorous, at times the necessity for choosing particular interlocutors was not made clear. I am not entirely convinced, for example, of how Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* enriches our understanding of Kafka's comedy any more than, say, other metaphysical dualisms. The reading of Roth is provocative and should go a long way in the effort to abstract his work from its immediate environment, but I was similarly less persuaded by the need for Schmitt (Kraus makes much more sense to me in this context, even if this reviewer disagrees with Weitzman's reading of Kraus). Finally, on a broader level, one wonders why the comic irony Weitzman diligently expounds upon must always be treated as irony's only viable form: is there simply no place left in the modernity thus conceived for melancholy, utopianism, or dialectical critique? Must we disregard all other forms of comedy or satire (and their respective theoretical foundations) as outdated or insufficiently secular? Admittedly, this is less an immanent critique of the work than a possible objection to the seeming exclusivity of its conceptual framework.

The major accomplishment of *Irony's Antics* is in its demonstration of how previous readings of these authors have perpetuated an ultimately limited, and indeed, theoretically untenable view of irony within the German tradition. Weitzman has written a thoughtful, thorough, and challenging work of criticism, which should be of great value to scholars of irony and comedy within and beyond the walls of German and Austrian Studies, as well as scholars of the three primary authors in question. It joins Kevin Newmark's recent book, *Irony on Occasion: From Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and De Man* (Fordham 2012) as a novel take on both the playful potential of comic irony and its appearances in literary works where one might least expect to find it.