

Stephen Prickett

Postmodernism and Irony¹

What I want to do this afternoon is to explore the difficulty that Postmodernism has got itself into, and to see if we can find some of the reasons for the hole it seems to have sunk itself into. I think it would be too much to suggest a way out but we need at least to ask how this difficulty has arisen. I have a text for us from the well-known Hungarian philosopher, Michael Polányi, who I imagine is not well known to most of you. He was a Hungarian refugee to Britain before World War II, and published all his works in English, but he is, I think, a much-neglected linguistic philosopher. The quotation I have from him is “only undefined terms can have any meaning,” and the obvious application of that, of course, is to some of the terms we should be dealing with this afternoon.

Let us start with Romanticism. You will be well aware that this is a hugely problematic term and there has been a vast amount of ink spilt on the subject of how one might start to define Romanticism. I do not intend to join that group now at all, I am going to leave the word loosely defined for the moment, just calling attention to the fact that Lovejoy in his classic essay, which I am sure you all know, “On the Discrimination of Romanticisms,” draws attention to three major forms of Romanticism, which I shall be referring to.

The first is what you call the descendants of the Wartons, that is, a kind of early form of Romanticism from the 1740s in England; the second is English Romanticism proper, the movement often referred to as beginning in 1798; and the third, of course, the German Romantics, the Jena Group, also really dating from 1798 through to the early years of the 19th century. Strictly speaking, it is

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only the third group, the German Romantics, that have any real right to be called Romantics in the normal sense, they after all appropriated the word for themselves.

Postmodernism is an equally difficult and problematic word, it is applied to architecture, it is applied to various forms of art, it is applied to styles of thought in literature, sociology and philosophy. I am going to draw largely on Lyotard's famous essay, "The Postmodern Condition," and that only in a critical rather than in a supportive fashion. There are two other words I want to draw your attention to, which I shall be dealing with in the course of the afternoon, and those are fundamentalism and irony.

By fundamentalism I mean a belief in an all-embracing system of explanation. It was originally coined for Biblical fundamentalists, who believed that the great drama of the Bible provided a total explanation of everything that was happening in the world. In more recent years it has been applied to Marxists and Freudians and, most recently of all, to the strange group of neo-Darwinians, the socio-biologists. You may know Daniel Dennett's extraordinary book called *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, in which he argues that natural selection applies not just to the development of species but to almost everything that has happened on this planet including the development of the solar system. This is Darwinism with a vengeance, a spectacular example of Darwinian fundamentalism, which I do not, of course, accuse Charles Darwin of possessing.

Irony I also want to define because it is a popular term with the Postmodernists in particular. There was never yet a Postmodernist who did not claim to be an ironist in one form or another. And I want to suggest that a great deal of the use of the word 'irony' by Postmodernists is in fact a wrong use. They use it to mean scepticism, a conscious scepticism towards grand narrative and towards a whole range of other possible things. I wish to use the word in the sense used by Socrates and by Kierkegaard; that is, the sense of there being a hidden meaning, or an awareness of a hidden meaning. In some cases, of course, this does not amount to a knowledge of the hidden meaning, only to an awareness of its existence. I was given a wonderful example of hidden meaning the other day. Most of you would be too young to remember the Gulf War, but there may be a few people present who recall it. At the beginning of the Gulf War, Mrs Thatcher phoned George Bush at a time when George Bush was not sure whether he wished to attack Saddam Hussein or not, and the story is: she said "George, this is no time to go wobbly!" Now, this was translated, I gather, in the Hungarian press

as “this is no time for your knees to start shaking with fear.” Going wobbly, however, is a more interesting term than that, it also has a sexual connotation, the loss of an erection. This is then an attack directly on George Bush’s virility. A female prime minister saying this to a male president, she was, of course, delivering one of the most deadly insults – “where is your virility, man?” or, indeed, worse than that, “you cannot maintain an erection.” While the first meaning is absolutely correct, it is incomplete without the second layer of what we might call hidden meaning. This will do as an example of irony in the sense I want to use it.

Let us start with the initial problem of Postmodernism itself because we need to try to explore the difficulty it has got itself into. Lyotard in “The Postmodern Condition” argues that Postmodernism is actually to be defined in terms of its resistance to any kind of grand narrative. I quote from the English translation:

I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind, making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. [...] I define Postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it.

This is, I think, a familiar definition to all of you, and what we have to do now is to work through some of the ways in which it works out. What Lyotard has done, of course, is to borrow arguments from other areas of the social sciences; in particular, the ideas of his fellow Frenchman Michel Foucault, whose avowed objective is to expose the way in which modern societies control and discipline their populations through the knowledge claims and practices of the human sciences such as medicine, psychiatry, criminology and sociology. Foucault’s self-declared concern is not with the meaning of particular statements but with the often concealed social and intellectual rules that permit them to be made, in the first place. What he is really interested in is the nature and exercise of power, which, incidentally, caused the marvellous repost made by one academic; if Foucault is really interested in the nature and exercise of power, what is he doing in a university – which is a good point not properly answered. But for Foucault truth, so far from having any absolute validity, is simply the effect of a certain kind of language. “Truth,” he writes “is a thing of this world, it is produced only

by multiple forms of constraint, and it induces the regular effects of power," or, as Bertrand Russell put it perhaps rather more simply, "truth is what you tell the police."

There is a problem, of course, with Lyotard's ideas of narrative because what he means by narrative is a collection of stories that explain the world, and of course the word we would normally use for this is myth. They reach out from the practical, from the concrete to the here and now and can be extended to cover the unknown as well as the known. In other words, myth is the description not of content but of function. Myths are the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of the disparate and fragmented state of knowledge. It is not their truth but their task which is important. Whether stories of Australian Aboriginal rainbow serpents, Greek gods and heroes, the events of the New Testament, or great national figures like Napoleon, or the conquest of disease by ever advancing medical science, such stories seek to explain the world as it is. A myth is a just so story. For Lyotard this makes them always a delusion. For him, narratives are always plural, they must always be in competition with one another. Not merely the great narratives of the kind provided by Christianity, Darwinism or Freudianism but even the great moral abstractions that have moved mankind in the past, such as justice or truth, are simply the constructs of whatever group exercised social control at the time. They have no validity beyond that.

For us in contemporary, post-industrial, postmodern society, Lyotard insists, the grand narrative has lost its credibility. That word, 'credibility,' is very interesting; what he would like to say, of course, is 'the grand narrative has no truth,' but he cannot say this because truth does not exist. So he has to substitute the word 'credibility' for 'truth' at this stage. But what he has done is simply to replace the idea of a grand narrative by a negative term. To insist that there is no such thing as a grand narrative is simply to insist on yet another grand narrative: there is no such thing as a grand narrative. It is the complete mirror image of the positive grand narrative. To insist that in contemporary, post-industrial, postmodern society all grand narratives have lost credibility is not, of course, an empirical or verifiable statement at all but a metaphysical generalisation. It is yet another myth. To refute it, presumably, all you will have to do is to find somewhere one grand narrative that has survived within a post-industrial, postmodern society, and the thesis would collapse.

One might cite, for example, estimates of the number of fundamentalist Christians in the United States alone, which, we are told, amount to some 48 % of

the population, that is, 110 million people, rather more than twice the entire population of Lyotard's France. But to look for actual examples of this kind is to reveal how logically slippery the generalisation is. I suspect one could point out to Lyotard that 110 million American Biblical fundamentalists, however first-world they might be in their living standards, however much they might be employed in service and communications rather than in manufacturing industry, and however much they might surf on the Internet in their spare time, would not qualify as postmodern, post-industrial people as far as he is concerned. Or, perhaps, to take a rather fairer example, if you were to produce a substantial body of working biologists throughout the world who believe in Darwinism and natural selection as the grand narrative that explains all life on earth as well as the actions and interactions of human societies, I do not think he would be prepared to count them, either. His argument is better seen itself as being the grand narrative rather than any kind of testable hypothesis. We cannot think of an empirical test that would falsify these arguments. It is in fact clearly a myth in that sense. The origins of this are quite interesting, and there are two sets of roots lying behind. It is a kind of a molar rather than a front tooth if you want the image. There are two sets of roots leading to this Postmodern position, and obviously the problem with it is that he is locking himself into a Cretan paradox. You will be familiar with the implications of the following statement: "The statement on this blackboard is false." If it is true, it is false, if it is false, it is true, and there are lots of variations of this. Basically, if there is no such thing as truth, how can you make any statement whatsoever? How do we know that his statement is itself true? Some kind of verification creeps in.

There is a more sophisticated version of this argument, by the way, that has been advanced in the 1990s by the American philosopher Richard Rorty. He says that "language does not refer to the way things are, it only refers to other language." And we might say, well, how do you test this hypothesis? He is quite ruthless about this. He says that Newtonian science succeeded over the previous science not because Newtonian science was shown to describe the world better but because people just stopped thinking in one way and started thinking in another. Yes, but then we might argue there is still a truth proposition behind this. How do we know they actually stopped thinking in one way and started thinking in another? And the answer is that we live in a print culture. We can actually read scientific debates and scientific reports. Somewhere along the line you will root this back into a testable truth claim which is either true or false.

And Rorty is very smart trying to evade this. He says, "my description of the world does not correspond to the way things are because nothing corresponds to the way things are because there is no way things are to which it might correspond." And then he says language is a tool like the pulley block which replaces the rope, though some languages are better than other languages. What is very cunningly done here is to supply two middle level technologies: that rope has to be attached to something at some point, whatever kind of tool you are using. And so you are still caught in this dilemma. At some stage you have to touch earth, at some stage some kind of verifiable statement comes in, otherwise discussion about it is quite impossible. And this is the impasse that Postmodernism and Postmodern linguistic philosophy in particular, which is the area that I am interested in, has got itself into. This is why we have to pursue a historical enquiry: how did intelligent and sane people get themselves into this hole?

To begin with, there is the old debate about whether one can produce models to describe the world. Of course, the whole of the social sciences rests on an analogy with the physical sciences. Just as Newton had apparently explained the motions of the planets and in particular the orbit of Mars by a grand theory, so it was thought there must be some kind of social grand theory that would explain human society in general, and the science of economics in particular. I am referring to Marx's successes or failures in explaining human development, human society and, in particular, economics. In fact it was only about 1959 that the American sociologist C. Wright Mills first declared that grand theory was impossible and the social sciences should abandon grand theory. Lyotard has substituted 'grand narratives' for 'grand theory' but he is following along in a tradition of what one might call revisionist social sciences from the mid-years of the 19th century. The term Postmodernist itself has a rather different origin. It seems first to have been used by the English historian Arnold Toynbee to postulate a moment in Christian history. He was trying to formulate a version of Christian history, an unredeemed future moment which history and humanity came to, and he wrote a very engaging, very interesting essay on what he conceived as Postmodernism; only, unfortunately, he produced this essay in August 1939, which was not perhaps the best moment for suggesting that the Christian millennium was just around the corner. This particular theory was somewhat lost in the events of that autumn, and Lyotard was able to take the term and dust it off and reuse it at that stage.

But the paradox into which Lyotard and Rorty and the other Postmodernists have got themselves is also to be explained by a second root which goes back into German Romanticism. Now I do not propose to trace out this course in detail, it has been brilliantly done in two recent books. One is the well-known work by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe called *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, which was an extremely influential book of the 1980s. But I think Andrew Bowie's book of 1997 called *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* also traces this, and I regard both these books as being excellent. So the trail is well marked and I do not intend to follow that trail in any great detail. What I am interested in is the way in which German Romanticism was taken up. Now we have to note a number of interesting factors.

The first is the natural unwillingness of any post-Second World War Frenchmen to admit any kind of intellectual debt to the Germans. This is one reason for covering one's tracks but there are also some very interesting sidelines to this general point. Many of you will know Roland Barthes's famous essay "The Death of the Author." Of course, it will not have avoided your notice that the death of the author is also the death of your sources in academic work. In other words, if you are taking an idea from Friedrich Schlegel or Schleiermacher, for instance, the death of the author means also that the way you adopt Schlegel's or Schleiermacher's ideas can equally blot out the origins of your ideas because it is all how you read it not how the author intended it. This is obviously understood as a complete counterbalance to the intentionalist fallacy. Reading is everything. Roland Barthes goes on to clarify a point here. He describes the reading activity where you destroy the author as an anti-theological and revolutionary activity. Both these words are worth looking at. Notice that I do not know what the exact connotations of the word 'revolutionary' are in Hungarian but I know the Western European position on this, of course.

The word 'revolution' was originally a word from Newtonian physics, and it was used as such throughout a great deal of the 18th century. Things go round and come back again; what goes around, comes around, as they say. Revolution was the movement of the planets and when applied as a very self-conscious metaphor to politics, it was intended to indicate a return to the starting point. Thus the English Civil War and the victory of the Cromwellians in the 1640s was the Great Rebellion, whereas the Restoration of the monarchy and Charles II finally came to its culmination in the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

When I first came across this term, I imagined in my innocence that it meant nobody had been killed, but that is not what it means at all. The Glorious Revolution is a return to the monarchy. Politics have come back to their starting point. This is not true, of course, but you know we are not concerned with truth; I will be sufficiently postmodern about that. It is what and how people conceived of politics. In 1789, when what we now call the French Revolution broke out, it was hailed by Richard Price, a leading British dissenter as a revolution in the sense that the French were returning to their ancient Gallic liberties. What exactly these ancient Gallic liberties were we need not to enquire, but Price actually preached a famous sermon on this to the English Revolutionary Society. The English Revolutionary Society was a body of staid middle-class people of academic inclination, the last people to turn out on the streets to riot and cause a revolution. And he hailed the French Revolution as being a restoration of liberty, and as you may know Burke read this report with indignation and wrote his bitterly ironic title "Reflections on the Revolution in France." His message is: what revolution? There has not been a restoration of anything. This is nothing but a tyranny. Within five years, by the mid-years of the 1790s, Burke's irony had been completely lost, a new meaning had been attached to the word 'revolution,' meaning a clean break with the past in politics, the overthrowing of a previous regime, and so on. Of course, the word 'revolution' in France, especially for someone of Lyotard or Foucault's political affiliations, has strongly positive connotations. This is the moment, the overthrow of the *ancien régime*, and thus a revolutionary activity by a post-structuralist or a postmodernist is the overthrowing of the *ancien régime* of thought; that is, of people who believe in some notion of truth and verification and some other preposterous ideas like those.

The second point is that Barthes described the reading activity as being an 'anti-theological' activity. The first application of this is to French anticlericalism and an antifundamentalist move, if you like, that the church would seek to explain the world by some kind of simplistic fundamentalism, but he is overthrowing and destroying that kind of truth embodied in the original text by saying, "I will read this, as the author is dead. I can read this in whatever way I like." One is removing any need to be dominated by the text. But there is a second thing behind this, as well, and that is the fact that one of his targets and his chief sources is Friedrich Schleiermacher, who, of course, was a theologian. And so once again one is covering one's German sources and accusing them of being

atheological and having a theological bias at the same time. This is very largely true, of course. The Jena Romantics, the Schlegels, Fichte, Novalis, Schelling, Hölderlin, Tieck, Schleiermacher, etc., are quite an extended and rather fluid group associated with the University of Jena and the last years of the 18th century. It was a hotbed, at least, of theological debate. Most of them, including Friedrich Schlegel, who later became a Catholic, were strongly anticlerical or antireligious. Indeed, they were a rather wild bunch. I seem to remember that Dorothea Michaelis, pregnant by one lover, escaped across the battle lines of the Napoleonic war to another lover... Then I think she married Schelling; there is a crossover anyway. There is a strong theological debate running through this. In 1798, Schleiermacher is at work in his flat in Berlin when there is a great knocking on the door; it is his birthday, and the rest of the Jena Group have all come to Berlin especially for this and burst in, waving bottles of champagne and shouting surprise party. He is caught up in this party, and during the party he is challenged as a Christian to give some kind of theological account of his own position. And what you get is the *Reden*, the speeches on religion, which is one of the great classic restatements of Christianity for modern times.

But at the same time there is another element here that is equally powerful in Schleiermacher and the Schlegels' thought and that is English literature. It will not have escaped your notice that when Goethe wishes to invoke the novels of the past in a novel like *Wilhelm Meister*, which is often hailed as being the first great German novel, he rapidly goes through Fielding, Richardson, Oliver Goldsmith, etc. All his references in *Wilhelm Meister* are in fact to English literature. Of course, the central character is Hamlet and the whole plot; Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the kind of theme piece with 18th-century English novels built into it. It is a most extraordinary work. Goethe is not unique in this. Friedrich Schlegel is constantly taking ideas from English literature. He denounces the English in passing as being a nation of shopkeepers and very myopic and having no aesthetic taste, etc. But the fact is that they are desperately short of German literature to use at this stage. They have only got *Wilhelm Meister*, and look where that comes from. So it is actually very difficult. A further point: Schleiermacher's first two publications were Fawcett's London sermons and the sermons of Hugh Blair who was the first professor of English at Edinburgh University, and indeed the first professor of English really anywhere in the world. He had a third contract for a third book. It was in German this time. (The other two were translations from the English into the German.) A

Berlin publisher, a man called Steiner, wrote to him in 1798 and invited him to contribute to the *Jahrbuch* of Geographical Discoveries that he had been publishing for eighteen years. Every year he brought out this great compendium of what had been discovered during the year. This is the great age of the exploration of the Pacific. Remember, Captain Cook is sailing around the world, his three voyages, La Peruis, Bourgonville; all these people are bringing back amazing reports. There is a huge amount of discoveries going on. Schleiermacher undertook to write a history of Australia. (Incidentally, this is a piece of my own research – does anybody here happen to know about Schleiermacher’s *History of Australia*? I am rather proud of myself on this.) There had been five books written on Australia at this stage, and Schleiermacher had read all five. He also even read the reports of the parliamentary debates about the colonisation of Australia. The five books altogether are about so thick; the book Schleiermacher produced on this is about so thick.² It was in two volumes, and when Steiner saw it he said my God... He got it in August and had to produce it by November, it was basically a Christmas *Jahrbuch*, and he just panicked, he said I cannot do this. And here is a research project, only two pages. We have the correspondence about this book, we know how big it was, but the book itself has not apparently survived, only two pages of it survive. But the two pages we have concern the Aborigines, and Collins’ account of the state of the Australian Aborigines. Collins says it has been remarked by a well-known divine (i.e. Hugh Blair, once again; remember that Schleiermacher had already translated Blair, as we know very well) that no people anywhere in the world have no sense of God. Everybody has a religion of some kind. Collins says that there is one great exception to this, the Australian Aborigines who have no idea of God at all. Well, it is a little difficult to verify that statement, since the Europeans, i.e. the British, subsequently wiped out that particular tribe altogether, but there is actually no reason to believe this is true at all. (But ‘truth,’ once again, does not enter into our arguments.) Schleiermacher believed this to be true and so he was sitting down to write his *History of Australia* at the same time as he was writing his *Speeches on Religion* in the autumn of 1798 and at the same time as Friedrich Schlegel has moved in with him to encourage him to write his *Defence of Christianity*. I am personally convinced Schleiermacher was actually addressing the state of Australian Aborigines. He wanted an Ur-humanity that had no religious background whatsoever. He was therefore seeking

² [The author demonstrated the thickness of the actual publications with his fingers, showing how much larger Schleiermacher’s work was than all the rest – the Editor.]

to include the Aborigines as being human. There was quite a debate going on as to whether they were human or not, and there was another school of thought that said they were not human and therefore could be exterminated quite easily. Schleiermacher belonged to the group that thought they were human and were children of God just as he was.

But all this is by a way of background to this ferment of ideas coming up in German Romanticism. Now I am just going to read you one very famous statement which is Friedrich Schlegel's idea of Romantic poetry:

Romantic poetry is progressive, universal poetry. Its aim isn't merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric; it tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical. [...] It embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest systems of art, containing within themselves still further systems, to the sigh, the kiss that the poetizing child breathes forth in artless song. [...] It alone can become, like the epic, a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age. It is capable of the highest and most variegated refinement, not only from within outwards, but also from without inwards; capable in that it organises – for everything that seeks a wholeness in its effects – the parts along similar lines, so that it opens up a perspective upon an infinitely increasing classicism. [...] Other kinds of poetry are finished and are now capable of being fully analysed. The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterise its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free; and it recognises as its first commandment that the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself. The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic.

(Athenaeum Fragment 116)

Well, I will not give you a full analysis of that extraordinary passage but I want to pick out certain elements of it which are interesting. The first is the extraordinary ambiguity between what is prescriptive and what is descriptive. That is, Schlegel is constantly 'swithering' between what is apparently description and saying what should be. It is very unclear in the end whether he is describing

an actual state of affairs or how he thinks things ought to be and, of course, this is quite deliberate because part of the aims of the German Romantic movement is to create a German national literature, and if you get in before anybody has ever written on this stuff, you can lay down the rules by which it should be formed, whereas the English have the distinctive disadvantage of coming in afterwards and trying to work out what has happened. The second, and it is closely associated with this, is the Aristotelian idea of *entelechy*, the idea of becoming, that Romanticism is not something that has happened or is on the ground; it is in the process of becoming all the time. The third is the fact that it is vague and unspecific, it is very hard to know what it is actually saying apart from making grandiose claims. And the fourth is a certain degree of self-conscious irony; he is mocking a statement and almost mocking himself while making it. This is a typical form of German Romantic irony in particular. Presumably you do not need me to trace these elements back towards Postmodernism. All of them can be found in Postmodernism – the point that one is never clear whether they are actually prescribing a state of affairs or describing how they think things should be; the idea of some vast intellectual movement that is not actually rooted in facts but is somehow coming about even as we talk about it; and then the wonderful word ‘irony,’ which means you do not have to hold me down to any particular statement because I was only being ironic when I made it, which enables one to put the statement forward and then retreat from it tactically, which is a very good way of debating. Friedrich Schlegel says “Irony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos.” Well, exactly so. For him it was the inseparable twin of the fragment which, of course, was practised in the Athenaeum.

Like any other word, however, ‘irony’ comes to us with its own history of meaning. We cannot quite take it as it stands, for much of the history of European literary criticism, of course, was dominated not by Socrates and Plato, which is where irony originally comes from, but by Aristotle. Irony was seen primarily as a characteristic of a particular personality type, the *eiron*, the person who deliberately deprecates himself – and this is not a compliment for Aristotle at all. It is the kind of nasty trick that Socrates would get up to. Though it is better than the impostor who pretends to be more than he is, the *eiron* is more effective than dangerous because he is pretending to be less than he is. In the *Ethics*, Aristotle is quite clear that both of these are devious and rather disreputable tricks of rhetoric. When in the *Poetics* he writes specifically on critical theory, Aristotle

is, of course, much more interested in anagnorisis (recognition), and the relationship between anagnorisis and peripeteia (reversal) than in the actual ironies that lie behind both these techniques. Among the German Romantics, as you all know, irony rapidly became a key critical term. For Fichte, Friedrich Schlegel, Tieck and Solger it constituted latitude, a way of thinking that better than any other represented the intense self-consciousness of the modern world. For them, as for the ancient Greeks, however, irony was an essentially negative attitude, an implicit assertion of the superiority of the ironist over his fellows, often a cult of effective boredom and by implication typified, for instance, by Byron's narrative persona in *Don Juan*. Kierkegaard has a rather neat put-down on this, he says that "both Germany and France at this time have far too many such ironists and no longer need to be initiated in their secrets of boredom by some English lord, a travelling member of a spleen-club" and that "a few of the young breed of young Germany and young France would long ago have been dead of boredom if their respective governments had not been paternal enough to give them something to think about by having them arrested," which is rather a nice comment and, of course, it points to a huge revival in the study of irony. Kierkegaard's own PhD thesis, submitted in 1841, was, as you know, on the concept of irony with special reference to Socrates, and again one of Schleiermacher's earliest books is a study of Plato. So there is a growing interest in Platonic and Socratic irony coming through. But this definition of irony is very different from that practice still by the German Romantics. Tennemann, Friedrich Schlegel, Hegel, Schleiermacher, and not least Kierkegaard's own Danish tutor, Paul-Martin Müller all take part in this debate. In a curious twist of the Aristotelian idea that irony was first and foremost a character trait, in German Romanticism irony was the inescapable product of a long historical process of human subjectivity. Socrates was important not least because he was one of the first in human history to assert his subjective individuality. Solger, the aesthete and chief exponent of Romantic irony believed that by his own time irony had become the inevitable condition of every artistic work. The Romantic artist demonstrates his own superiority to his work by deliberately destroying or interrupting the illusion created by it. Schlegel himself wanted to use his own novel, *Lucinda*, as an example of this. The problem is that it was virtually unread, and denounced as obscene by the few people who had read it. I have to say I read it with deep disappointment looking for the obscene bits, as I could not find them at all. But Byron's *Don Juan* again would be better known to a Danish, German

or English audience at this stage, and there is a continually running dialogue between the author and the reader in *Don Juan*. It is easy to see how all these elements, as I say, figure in Postmodernism, but one can see that the idea of irony is now emerging in a very different form from the way in which I described it. Kierkegaard reverses German Romanticism by insisting that irony is an awareness of something hidden. But the only thing that is hidden in German Romantic irony is the author who keeps popping up in effect and saying, you know, "Hi, it's me and this is an illusion, this is a work of art."

I need, in turn, to go back yet another stage. Behind German Romanticism and these attitudes is yet another figure in the early stages of English Romanticism that we need to look at now, Robert Lowth, who was a young fellow of an Oxford College in 1741, when it became necessary to elect the new professor of poetry. As you probably know the professor of poetry in Oxford is a curious appointment that goes right back to the 17th century. What you do is normally to elect a practising poet. (Matthew Arnold was a professor of poetry, for example, and James Fenton more recently.) But it seems very clear from the records that in May 1741 they had forgotten to elect a professor of poetry altogether. You can imagine this situation; it was a Friday afternoon, and the fellows of the College responsible had gathered and they realised that the first lecture was due to be given on Monday morning but there was nobody to give it, at which point they turned on the youngest fellow in the room, the 29-year-old Robert Lowth and said more or less "Robert, this is your big chance! How would you like to do it?" Poor Lowth was faced with the job of producing these lectures. Normally, you are given a year to prepare them, and he was given one weekend. If one reads his lectures *On the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* with this in mind, they become extremely funny. The first lecture is that classic lecture which every single university teacher in this room will recognise, the lecture in which you have to stand up for an hour and you have nothing whatsoever to say and you have to try to get through an hour and there really is very little content. You have to read steadily into the lectures before he catches fire and warms his theme and he begins to produce some quite fascinating ideas about the sacred poetry of the Hebrews and about the way in which Hebrew verse works. I have no time to go into all of them here but three are important, I think.

The first is the fact that there is no difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose, that is, Hebrew verse works by the principle of parallelism and repetition. There is no rhyme, there is no scansion, there is no

assonance, there is no rhythm. I believe many of you have tried to translate European poetry, and as you know it is almost an impossible task. You can never do more than produce a kind of inaccurate prose version of it. Hebrew poetry, argued Hugh Blair, actually drawing explicitly on Lowth, is unique because God wrote it more or less in prose, so that it could be translated into every particular language and thus it has a kind of universal applicability. The second point is that everyday things have a kind of sublime reach because the poets of ancient Israel were the prophets at the same time, but they also used the common language of the people; they did not belong to a courtly circle. The third and most interesting point I want to take up is the idea of parallelism and that it has a kind of built-in irony to it (Lowth actually distinguishes eight different forms of parallelism); that is, by producing comparisons, it automatically suggests hidden meaning. Thus, one of the examples Lowth himself took is David and Saul returning from battle with the Philistines. Both of them are greeted by choruses of women singing "Saul hath slain his thousands," and the antiphonal choir replies "And David his ten thousands." You do not need to be a political genius, if your name is Saul, to see that there is trouble coming in that one, talk about hidden meaning that makes Mrs Thatcher's attack on George Bush seem mild by comparison with what Saul will do. He tries to go out and have David assassinated immediately. At the heart of this idea of parallelism there is an ironic reading of the Bible.

I want to return to the question with which we began; that is, what went wrong, how did Postmodernism land itself in the position of the Cretan paradox, of being involved in the denial of any connection between words and truth and any kind of verification principle. There are a number of caveats one has to make here. The first is that the history of ideas is a history of misunderstanding ideas, this is Lovejoy's famous point. There is no such thing as an accurate transmission of ideas, we are constantly misreading, misapplying, misunderstanding ideas, especially translated ideas, especially ideas from other cultures, and we can see that at work. The second is a shift in the meaning of the word 'irony.' What started off as a sense of hidden meaning is translated through German Romanticism into an idea of the superiority of the ironist; in other words, a kind of almost self-flattering affectation. We can see this very strongly; for instance, Foucault has the answer. It is all about power, "we alone" understand this, the whole idea of discourse is to conceal the real centres of power, and so Postmodern irony depends much less, I think, on an idea of hidden meaning than on a relationship between author and reader in almost the way they deny. The third point I want

to mention is (to return to my idea of fundamentalism) that Foucault, Barthes, Lyotard and, indeed, Richard Rorty and some of the recent developments of this idea in the US, all claim to be ironists. Rorty claims, for instance, using a feminine persona, that at this stage she is a liberal ironist. But what he means by this is a scepticism. He does not mean a hidden meaning. In the line I have been arguing here I want to argue that all of them are fundamentalists. All of them are people with a universal, mythical explanation. It has to be a universal explanation because they are denying the possibility of any kind of gaps, any kind of holes in the system; there is no way you can reach through to reality. And so, finally, we come to the point where I would want to argue that he who claims to explain everything explains nothing. Thank you very much.