2006

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Mac Fenwick

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Abstract
The only thing that can be said for certain about irony is that it is the trope par excellence of uncertainty. This is why I have chosen to begin this study not with a statement about irony, but with a couple of ironic moments. Still, the term is so protean that even to claim that the above examples are instances of irony will undoubtedly be contentious. The purpose of this study, then, is not to generate a new theory of irony (the world has no need of that) but to realise what I will be calling the 'promise' of irony within post/colonial texts. I use the word 'promise' in both of its senses: to indicate the potential of irony (a potential that is best realised, perhaps, in never being fulfilled), and as an oath or compact made between irony's co-conspirators: the reader and the text.
Realising Irony’s Post/Colonial Promise: Global Sense and Local Meaning in *Things Fall Apart* and ‘Ruins of a Great House’

Locusts ... were very good to eat.

(Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*)

Ancestral murderers and poets.

(Derek Walcott, ‘Ruins of a Great House’)

The only thing that can be said for certain about irony is that it is the trope *par excellence* of uncertainty. This is why I have chosen to begin this study not with a statement about irony, but with a couple of ironic moments. Still, the term is so protean that even to claim that the above examples are instances of irony will undoubtedly be contentious. The purpose of this study, then, is not to generate a new theory of irony (the world has no need of that) but to realise what I will be calling the ‘promise’ of irony within post/colonial texts. I use the word ‘promise’ in both of its senses: to indicate the potential of irony (a potential that is best realised, perhaps, in never being fulfilled), and as an oath or compact made between irony’s co-conspirators: the reader and the text.

There has been, for a very long time now, a vast and ever-growing list of journal articles and books on the form, nature and use of irony. Given the breadth and intelligence of the work already extant on the nature of irony, I shall forgo even the attempt to address those issues here in any but the most cursory manner. Most standard definitions of irony identify three different kinds, each one of them motivated by a different form of opposition between the literal meaning of the said, and the figural sense of the unsaid. Verbal irony is the result of a statement in which the meaning of the words used is the opposite of their sense. Irony of situation occurs when a character acts in opposition to expectation. Dramatic irony (the only form of irony that is exclusively literary) arises when the audience perceives something that a character in the literature does not know; dramatic irony is, then, the opposition of the limited meaning of the situation as it is understood by the character, and the full sense of that situation as it is apprehended by the audience. The extra-linguistic capacity upon which all three of these ‘types’ depend is apparent in even the simplest form of irony, the sarcastic remark. If I were to say ‘that sounds like fun’, in such a manner as to make it clear that it does not, the literal meaning of my sentence is replaced by its ‘real’, extra-linguistic
sense. Furthermore, with my sarcasm I am not just indicating my reluctance to undertake the proposed adventure (hang gliding would be a good example), but I am also indicating a certain amount of disdain for the proposition, and perhaps even for the person making it. The promise of irony is, therefore, that it enacts a moment of extra-linguistic communication in which the limitations of the literal — and even the *aporia* occasioned by the opposition of sense and meaning — is (apparently) overcome.

Irony thus enacts a relation between truth and falsehood. While the literal meaning of my statement is false, I am excused from the accusation of lying insofar as the true sense of my utterance is understood. If it is not, the failure to communicate truth is not the result of my false utterance, but of the auditor's inability to understand what I am saying, or of my inability to mark the irony clearly enough. By saying one thing while meaning another, it would appear that irony is a form of the lie; but with the appeal that irony makes to a figural meaning that is in excess of its literal falsehood, it avoids (or even transcends) the accusation of lying. In a sense, irony — in its suspension of falsehood during a clearly untrue statement — suspends or resolves the ethical tensions of the moment. The true sense of my utterance not only transcends its false meaning, but adds to that meaning extra-linguistically. Irony, then, even in the everyday form of the sarcastic quip, appeals to a realm in which the true sense of the utterance transcends its false and limited meaning.

This aspect of irony gains special significance in post/colonial texts. For irony to 'work', that is, for the reader to apprehend its true sense, the reader must apprehend its false or limited meaning. I may say that I like hang-gliding, but if I do so in a context that makes it clear that I do not, the true sense of this statement is revealed: not by the utterance itself, which conveys a false or limited meaning, but by an act of reference to the local and particular circumstances that surround and inform the utterance in such a way as to mark its falsity and point the way toward its true sense. In this respect, then, irony enacts a relation not only between truth and falsehood but also between local and global, insofar as it brings into contact an extra-linguistic sense that surpasses or exceeds the utterance, and a meaning (or set of discontinuous meanings) that can be understood only within the particular context of the utterance. Above, I spoke of irony's promise as both potential and compact, and it is in this interdependent relation of local meaning and global sense that I think this promise is fulfilled. There is within every ironic utterance the potential for the successful communication of a true sense despite false or limited meaning. Irony is thus the composite of a moment of global representation, as the true sense is apprehended despite the falsity of the meaning, and local reference, insofar as that global representation depends upon reference to the local circumstances of the utterance. The contact enacted by irony between global sense and local meaning is what has made it such a rich, and problematic, form of address for post/colonial critics and theorists.²
William New's *Among Worlds* (1975) is among the first works to address the relation between irony and post/coloniality and it remains one of the most comprehensive. New approaches irony as symptomatic of 'the dualities that abound in Commonwealth literatures', and argues that irony is a dominant method whereby post/colonial authors are able to 'express concretely this sense of incomplete options', which he argues characterises the condition of post/coloniality (1–2). New maintains this stance throughout, consistently arguing that the ironies in the texts that he examines are the literary manifestations of a pre-existing condition of 'duality' endemic to and characteristic of post/coloniality. He does not attempt to reduce the rich multiplicity of these texts to any single version or theory of irony; on the contrary, New explicitly states that 'thematic and technical likenesses must not be allowed to obscure each writer’s private viewpoint. Though dualities abound in the ironist’s world, the stances he may take range from parody and innuendo through sarcasm and self-disparagement to absurdity and nihilism' (3). Despite this important acknowledgement that there is no specific kind or manner of post/colonial irony, New does go on to explain that 'at its best the ironic stance provokes serious deliberation into the problems that led to the dualities in the first place' (3). For New, then, the many different uses and forms that irony takes on in post/colonial writing spring from the same source and lead to the same end. That is, ironies in post/colonial texts symptomatically reflect and provoke inquiry into the specific 'duality' of the 'split loyalties and unresolvable tensions' (2) of the post/colonial condition.

In ""Circling the Downspout of Empire"" (1989) Linda Hutcheon both echoes and refines New's argument when she argues that

as a double-talking, forked-tongued mode of address, irony becomes a popular rhetorical strategy for working within existing discourses and contesting them at the same time. Its inherent semantic and structural doubleness also makes it a most convenient trope for the paradoxical dualities of ... post-colonial doubled identity and history. And indeed irony ... has become a powerful subversive tool in the re-thinking and re-addressing of history by ... post-colonial artists. (171)

Despite this move toward irony as a strategic response by post/colonial authors against the conditions within which they must write, Hutcheon retains New's formulation of irony as symptomatic of the post/colonial condition: 'irony is a trope of doubleness. And doubleness is what characterises ... the twofold vision of the post-colonial .... Doubleness and difference are established by colonialism by its paradoxical move to enforce cultural sameness ...while at the same time, producing differentiations and discriminations' (176). Like New, Hutcheon characterises irony as the literary manifestation of a literal state that has been imposed upon the writer by imperial history.

For both New and Hutcheon, irony is an effective means through which to express the conditions of post/coloniality insofar as it embodies the nature of those conditions. Hutcheon is quick to acknowledge the limitations that this...
view places on irony within postcolonial texts: ‘Irony is ... a way of resisting and yet acknowledging the power of the dominant. It may not go the next step — to suggest something new — but it certainly makes that step possible. Often combined with some sort of self-reflexivity, irony allows a text to work within the constraints of the dominant while placing those constraints as constraints in the foreground and thus undermining their power’ (177). The only effective means of contesting ‘the dominant’ that irony would seem to lend the ironist is the ability to highlight the nature of that domination. There is, according to Hutcheon, neither liberation from nor replacement of that domination with ‘something new’ but merely a suggestion of how that ‘something new’ might be possible.

Hutcheon’s stance echoes the argument of Homi Bhabha in ‘Representation and the Colonial Text’ (1984) insofar as he argues that irony is a mode of the imperialising power, and thus insufficient to the task of countering the oppressive and possessive gaze of the European critic. Stating that ‘behind the realist irony [stands] a European philosophical tradition of ethical realism’ (115), Bhabha concludes that the irony of postcolonial texts exists only within the eye of the imperial-beholder. In his analysis of V.S. Naipaul’s A House for Mr. Biswas, Bhabha claims that ‘[t]o demonstrate thematically how House resists its appropriation into the Great Tradition of literary Realism would not be difficult. It would be possible to see ... its mode of address as the “uncanny” rather than irony’ (115). According to Bhabha, irony is not a strategic tool of the postcolonial writer, but an alien form of mimesis that is imposed upon postcolonial texts by the imperial reader. This imposition, however, is neither stable nor lasting. Bhabha argues that the irony which the Western critic ‘finds’ in postcolonial texts is symptomatic of the central and indeed defining irony of the European critic’s own critical practice:

Writing as the filling of a gap ... linear time consciousness as the effect of the sequential practice of writing; teleology and unity, progression and coherence as convention-bound, formal productions — all these notions give writing a materiality, a productive position.... There are intimations here of the construction of the unity of the sign (as opposed to its primordial ‘givenness’), and the resulting stability of the signified which, paradoxically, suggests the possibility of its arbitrariness, that is, the irony of its repression of discontinuity and difference in the construction of ‘sense’, those modes of meaning that we call realism and historicism. (96–97; emphasis added)

In this view of the relation between irony and the postcolonial, the irony that the European reader/critic imposes upon postcolonial texts is symptomatic of the difference and discontinuity that always/already exists within the imperial culture. In effect, the attempt to ironise postcolonial texts rebounds upon the European critic. According to Bhabha, the attribution of irony to postcolonial texts reveals how the critic’s own practice is irretirably ironic insofar as it depends upon a false sense of unity that has been constructed to ‘repress’ the discontinuous and different meanings which undercut that practice.

Despite their differences, for New, Hutcheon and Bhabha the promise of irony for postcolonial texts is realised insofar as it ‘disturbs’ — or highlights the inherent
disturbances between — different cultural meanings without offering any way past or beyond this moment of recognition. For each of them, irony is a cognitive dead end. It is my contention that the protean nature of the ironic utterance promises a mode of understanding for the post/colonial (con)text in which global sense and local meaning are related to one another within a provisional transcultural truth that exceeds the *aporia* or disruptive discontinuities of the post/colonial ‘condition’. However, just as there is no monolithic or singular way of ‘being’ post/colonial, so too is there no monolithic post/colonial form of irony. In order to preserve this recognition of multiplicity I have chosen to examine here two moments of irony from markedly different (con)texts. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* dramatises the conflict between Igbo and British as the clash of binary opposites. Derek Walcott’s ‘Ruins of a Great House’ dramatises the speaker’s difficult and dramatic confrontation with a history which he feels yokes together through violence and oppression these same two cultural ‘sides’. More importantly, these two moments allow me to explore the promise of irony within the post/colonial (con)text from the perspective of each of irony’s co-conspirators: the reader and the text. In *Things Fall Apart*, the extra-linguistic sense with which the different and oppositional meanings of the situation are overcome is the reader’s own. In ‘Ruins of a Great House’, this extra-linguistic sense is expressed by the speaker. Despite their different perspectives, then, these moments fully realise the promise of irony within and for the post/colonial (con)text insofar as they realise a mode of transcultural understanding in which global sense and local meaning are brought into a productive and equivalent relation.

Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* concludes with a moment in which the colonial divide would appear to be unbridgeable, as the District Commissioner turns his back on the hanged form of Okonkwo’s suicide and contemplates the title of the book that he will write: ‘The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger’ (148). This moment marks the violent and brutal eradication of the hope expressed elsewhere in the novel that reciprocity between coloniser and colonised might indeed be possible. Despite this lack of effective communication on the part of the characters, the novel does not lead only to *aporia* and the failure of understanding. While the narrative may very well end with a moment of painful stasis, its conclusion is, I would argue, quite different. The novel is itself poised upon a particularly painful irony as the meaning of its final moments is counterbalanced by the sense of the whole. In effect, the final stasis of the novel is overcome by the dramatic irony that allows the reader to resolve the conflict that entraps the characters, and even the Igbo Storyteller.

Nowhere is this dramatic irony more apparent than during the locusts’ descent upon Umuofia:

And then quite suddenly a shadow fell on the world, and the sun seemed hidden behind a thick cloud. Okonkwo looked up from his work and wondered if it was going to rain at such an unlikely time of the year. But almost immediately a shout of joy
broke out in all directions, and Umuofia, which had dozed in the noon-day haze, broke into life and activity.

‘Locusts are descending,’ was joyfully chanted everywhere, and men, women and children left their work or their play and ran into the open to see the unfamiliar sight. The locusts had not come for many, many years, and only the old people had seen them before.

At first, a fairly small swarm came. They were the harbingers sent to survey the land. And then appeared on the horizon a slowly-moving mass like a boundless sheet of black cloud drifting towards Umuofia. Soon it covered half the sky, and the solid mass was now broken by tiny eyes of light like shining star-dust. It was a tremendous sight, full of power and beauty.

Everyone was now about, talking excitedly and praying that the locusts should camp in Umuofia for the night. For although locusts had not visited Umuofia for many years, everybody knew by instinct that they were very good to eat. (39–40)

This passage disturbs the Westernised reader, as our expectations are at first supported by the prose, and then overturned by it. The foreboding and even apocalyptic language of the passage’s beginning (‘a shadow fell on the world, and the sun seemed hidden behind a thick cloud’), gives way within three paragraphs to a radically altered vision of the event (‘it was a tremendous sight, full of power and beauty’). This passage is ironic in the most direct sense insofar as its conclusion is directly opposite to what the reader is led to expect by its beginning. Beyond this relatively simple instance of situational irony, however, the passage enables a moment of dramatic irony in which the reader is able to apprehend the relation of the two ‘sides’ of the conflict between Igbo and British in a manner that exceeds the literal expression given that conflict in the text — in particular, as that conflict is presented as an oppositional binary in the novel’s final paragraph.

This dramatic irony is evident in the statement that ‘everybody knew by instinct that [locusts] were very good to eat’. Throughout the novel there are moments in which the Igbo Storyteller’s view of events is directly at odds with the Westernised reader’s perceptions — but nowhere is the division between narrator/text and reader made so palpably clear, or so (apparently) unbridgeable. For the Storyteller, human ‘instinct’ dictates that ‘locusts are good to eat’; but the instincts of the (vast majority) of Westernised readers are entirely different, and not just because of the different cuisines. Western forms of mass agriculture are susceptible to locusts in a way that traditional Igbo cultivation is not; more significantly, there are also the Biblical associations of locusts with the wrath of God. The meaning of the passage, then, is to signal to the Westernised reader in as shocking a manner as possible that we do not fully understand the Igbo culture that we are encountering in the text. This act of recognition is a salutary and necessary component of the novel, for it removes those readers who have this apprehension from the perspective posited at the novel’s conclusion by the District Commissioner, who is absolutely certain that he knows — and is authorised to write down — all that is necessary about the ‘primitives’ under his control.
There is, however, a sense in the passage that is at odds with this meaning; a sense that is apparent (ironically) only to someone encountering the text from within that same Western perspective that the meaning of the passage disturbs. The swarm of locusts foreshadows the destruction of the Igbo by the British — a point that is later made quite clearly when the Oracle warns the people of Abame that the Europeans 'were locusts ... and that first man [on the bicycle] was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain. And so they killed him' (98). In the wake of this murder, the entire village of Abame is wiped out by British troops. When regarded in this manner, the passage reverses itself once more and the locusts change back from being 'a tremendous sight, full of power and beauty' and recover the far more foreboding implications of the passage's beginning, 'a shadow fell on the world, and the sun seemed hidden behind a thick cloud'. This passage is ironic, then, insofar as its meaning signals the insuperable divide between the narrator/text and the Westernised reader ('locusts are good'), while its full sense is revealed only to that same reader (locusts are not good). The result of this passage is a moment of excruciating dramatic irony as the Westernised reader is put into the position of knowing or perceiving more than the characters, and even the storyteller. The Westernised reader is thus immediately constituted as a part of the same imperial 'us' that encompasses the District Commissioner (who 'knows better' than the 'natives'), but whose (illiberal) cultural chauvinism the reader rejects. I would like to suggest, however, that this moment need not be an uneasy aporia in which different cultural meanings are irreconcilably opposed ('locusts are good' versus 'locusts are bad'). Rather, this moment holds the promise of a global sense within which the different local meanings lead not to the sterility of binary opposition but to a new understanding of the relation between Igbo and British cultures. The reader's ironic apprehension of the claim that 'locusts are good to eat' resolves the apparently irresolvable aporia of the cognitive conflict between Okonkwo and the District Commissioner.

I said at the beginning that irony appeals to a realm in which the true sense of the utterance transcends its false and limited meaning. I went on to argue that irony is the composite of a moment of global representation, as the true sense is apprehended despite the falsity of the meaning, and local reference, insofar as that global representation depends upon reference to the local circumstances of the utterance. With this in mind, we can say that the ironic promise of Achebe's novel is realised only in and through the dramatic irony of the reader's recovery or (re)construction of a true sense of the text (that European and Igbo are both necessary to understand the text) that surpasses its false and limited meaning (that European and Igbo are insuperably divided from one another). This true sense is not, however, to be understood as truth-as-object — as a singular or totalising form of truth that concludes or resolves the ambiguities of the text. The promise realised within the ironic statement that 'locusts are good to eat' is a provisional form of truth, insofar as the reader's ironic apprehension of that moment does not
resolve the conflict between different intercultural truths, but enacts a relation between those truths. The statement ‘locusts are good to eat’ is neither a falsehood to be overcome with truth (as the District Commissioner would claim of that ‘primitive’ belief), nor a truth that rebuts the falsity of its contrary (as Okonkwo would argue). It is a stage upon which these truths are brought into contact and relation with one another.

As Hutcheon argues in *Irony’s Edge*, ‘irony is a relational strategy in the sense that it operates not only between meanings (said, unsaid) but between people (ironists, interpreters, targets). Ironic meaning comes into being as the consequence of a relationship, a dynamic, performative bringing together of different meaning-makers, but also of different meanings’ (58). As we have seen with *Things Fall Apart*, the ‘dynamic, performative bringing together’ enacted by irony within post/colonial texts entails a relation not just between different individual ‘meaning-makers’ but between different cultural perspectives. I have argued that the promise of irony is that it enacts a moment of extra-linguistic communication in which the limitations of the literal — and even the *aporia* occasioned by the opposition of sense and meaning — is (apparently) overcome. If this is so, then the promise of irony in post/colonial texts would be that it enacts a moment of extra-linguistic communication in which the differences between cultures is (apparently) overcome. It is precisely at this point where my analysis is sundered (perhaps irretrievably) from those of New, Hutcheon and Bhabha, each of whom characterises irony as disruptive with little or no reference to its potential for creating something new. For it is precisely this that I believe is happening in *Things Fall Apart* insofar as the dramatic ironies of the narrative allow the reader to move past (or through) the disturbing and disruptive clash of Igbo and British to a transcultural truth within which the two sides of this bipolar historical conflict meet and interact. In Achebe’s novel, the promise of irony is realised insofar as it allows for a sense of transcultural truth that exists in the relation irony enacts between or amongst the discontinuous meanings of different cultural truths. This transcultural truth is neither homogenous nor stable, for it exists upon the protean stage and word of the ironic utterance. The provisionality of this truth does not necessarily condemn it to directionless or relativistic play, nor to inconclusive *aporia*. In fact, the speaker in Derek Walcott’s ‘Ruins of a Great House’ seizes upon this very provisionality as the basis of a new transcultural truth that surpasses or overcomes the discontinuities and *aporia* of cultural difference which threaten to overwhelm him.

In ‘Ruins of a Great House’, the speaker addresses the ironic nature of his own poetic voice and persona(e), as the poem dramatically represents the speaker’s struggle to understand the complicated relation of master and slave. As a West Indian, the speaker of this poem does not have the option to retreat into any illusory form of cultural singularity — as do the characters of Achebe’s novel who can identify themselves as or with Igbo or England. As the descendant of
both 'sides' of the historical conflict between Africa (slave) and Europe (master), he must instead confront the ironic nature of the relation that exists between these two cultures which have together created his identity. In this sense, the speaker of 'Ruins' must realise the same promise of irony as was achieved by the reader of Things Fall Apart. For the first part of the poem, the speaker attempts to work through the relation of master and slave on a consciously intellectual level, but eventually the ironies overcome him:

A green lawn, broken by low walls of stone.
Dipped to the rivulet, and pacing, I thought next  
Of men like Hawkins, Walter Raleigh, Drake. 
Ancestral murderers and poets, more perplexed
In memory now by every ulcerous crime. (20)

The ironies of this moment produce a complicated series of relations and realisations that spread outward to the rest of the poem; energies that simultaneously disturb and reconfigure the speaker's understanding of himself in such a way that the intent to resolve the opposition of meaning and sense merges with an acceptance of this opposition. In this manner, the speaker realises the promise of his ironic identity.

The ironic opposition of meaning and sense that motivates this poem is most apparent — and is at its most disturbing — in the verbal irony enacted by the speaker's recognition of his 'ancestral murderers and poets'. As the speaker himself realises, this is a moment of profound 'perplexity' as the line's fluid, almost protean meaning simultaneously confronts and confounds the sense that the speaker finds in it. The Renaissance figures he imagines are 'ancestral murderers' in at least two senses: first, as part of the enslaving culture that brought Africans to the Caribbean, they are the murderers of the speaker's ancestors; second, they are murderers who are ancestral to the speaker, who in this poem is confronting the disturbing fact that he is, as Walcott puts it in 'A Far Cry From Africa', 'poisoned with the blood of both, / ...divided to the vein' (18). The line is rendered even more ironic by the fact that it is to these 'murderers' that the speaker owes his very voice, inasmuch as they were also the 'poets' whose lyrics have produced the poetic form that he depends upon now in his attempt to reject their legacy. They are thus, ironically, both his 'ancestral poets' and his 'ancestral murderers' at one and the same time. The ironies of this moment come to dominate the poem as the speaker is able to conclude (or terminate) the complexities of this line only by, ironically, silencing his own voice and giving the conclusion of his poem over to one of his 'ancestral murderers and poets', in the form of John Donne's 'Meditation XVII' from his Devotions:

Ablaze with rage I thought. 
Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake. 
But still the coal passion fought 
That Albion too was once
A colony like ours, ‘part of the continent, piece of the main’,
Nook-shotten, rook o’erblown, deranged
By foaming channels and the vain expense
Of bitter faction.

All in compassion ends
So differently from what the heart arranged:
‘as well as if a manor of thy friend’s…’ (20–21)

It is thus by sublimating his own colonial voice to the oppressive European
‘Master’ culture that the speaker, ironically, learns the lesson of ‘compassion’ that
resolves his poem. At the same time, his deferral to Donne is perhaps an allusion
to another figure that ironises this deferral. The principal character of Wilson
Harris’s Palace of the Peacock (1960) is also named Donne, and his journey into
the heartland of Guyana dramatises the brutality of European conquest of the
Caribbean. The speaker’s ‘turn’ to Donne is thus doubly ironic insofar as even
as he seems to be sublimating his own voice to that of the master, he is doing so,
perhaps, through an appeal to a figure who has himself been ironically rewritten
already by the Caribbean’s most prolific, imaginative and formidable novelist.6

This ironic conclusion is, apparently, the only way that the speaker can
effectively lay to rest the difficult and divided imagery that marks this poem.
On the one hand, he attempts to fane the ‘blaze of rage’ that he feels in response
to the idea of a slave ‘rotting in this manorial lake’. On the other, is the ‘coal
of compassion’ that seems, ironically, to extinguish the fire of rage rather than
fuel it. The ‘blaze of rage’ with which the speaker first attempts to conclude the
poem is highly reminiscent of the conclusion to Things Fall Apart insofar as it
leads toward a moment in which the reader is suspended within the same manner
of static opposition between coloniser and colonised embodied by the District
Commissioner’s book. The ‘blaze of rage’ that the speaker wishes to feel is
sustained only by the opposition of the brutalised ‘slave’ and the ‘manorial lake’
that seeks to hide him or her. As in Things Fall Apart, this opposition is overcome
by the dramatic irony initiated by the idea of the slave as ‘rotting’. To this point
in the poem, what has been ‘rotting’ is not the slave, but the Manor (‘the manorial
lake’). In the first verse paragraph, we are presented with a number of images of
rot and decay, all of them grouped around the manor:

Stones only, the disjecta membra of this Great House,
Whose moth-like girls are mixed with candelust,
Remain to file the lizard’s dragonish claws.
The mouths of the gate cherubs shriek with stain;
Axle and coach wheel silted under the muck
Of cattle droppings. (19)

The irony of the speaker’s ‘blaze of rage’ is that it is the opposite of how
he began his poem. At the beginning, his ‘compassion’ seems almost wholly
reserved for the manor and for those who dwelt within it. The ‘girls’, who are
presented as having been ‘moth-like’, present to his imagination no threat or evil,
and are the ones who — like the rotting slave at the end — are now ‘mixed with candledust’. The ruins of the Great House are themselves under continual threat from the ‘lizard’s dragonish claws’. As with the locusts in Things Fall Apart, the Biblical allusions do not distance the speaker from the manor, but close the distance with a sympathetic response. The loss of the manor is, in some sense (and quite ironically), regarded as an Edenic fall, in which the forces of evil have taken over, ‘staining’ the angelic guardians of this realm (the ‘gate cherubs’). By the end of this opening verse paragraph, the rot that has overtaken the manor becomes, possibly, a source of hope and redemptive fertility as the landscape is buried beneath ‘cattle droppings’. The meaning that the speaker strives to give his experience at the conclusion of the poem by firing within himself a ‘blaze of rage’ is at odds with the very sympathetic meaning of his opening stance.

The provisional sense of the relation between past and present that the speaker here achieves redresses what New thought was a gap within West Indian literature. In a discussion of George Lamming and V.S. Naipaul, New argues that

order is ... an irony in any community embarrassed by its past, for the people in it are constantly alienating themselves from the experiences they share. Their grasp on the present is preserved by the satiric displacement of the past, but their identity is subsequently diminished. A different kind of satire, attracted to the human beings whose foibles were being exposed, would embrace the past rather than distance it, but it would at the same time announce a different apprehension of the human predicament.

In his apprehension of the complicated relation of past and present, master and slave, the speaker of this poem is able to construct just such an ironic vision in which the past is ‘embraced’ rather than distanced. In this manner, Walcott’s poem establishes the same mode of understanding the relation between coloniser and colonised achieved by the reader of Achebe’s novel, insofar as the speaker moves beyond the relatively simple binary opposition of master and slave that confounds the beginning of the poem. This new understanding is realised when at the poem’s conclusion the speaker’s ‘blaze of rage’ is confronted and quelled by ‘the coal of his compassion’. The fuel with which he keeps alight this ‘coal’ is the idea that ‘Albion too was once / A colony like ours’. The ironies of this stance are many and profound. First and foremost, is the ironic nature of the utterance. The speaker is here attempting to construct for himself a space of resolution and retreat in his own landscape while predicating that retreat upon a valuation of the imperial power that has scarred and wounded that landscape. What is more, this ironic stance is initiated by the affirmation that England was ‘a colony like ours’. There are within this statement two closely allied ironies that the speaker seems to be accepting. The first irony is historical, insofar as the speaker’s claim that England was ‘a colony like ours’ is patently untrue. The ‘colonisation’ of England by Rome was of an altogether different nature than was the colonisation of the West Indies by England. The speaker himself seems to recognise this in his lament for the ‘vain expense / Of bitter faction’. The scars and wounds that
he perceives upon the history of England are, apparently, self-inflicted in civil war and the internally enacted violence of ‘bitter faction’ rather than the legacies of imperial control. The speaker also seems to accept and pass over without comment the irony of the fact that a nation that was itself a colony should become a brutalising coloniser. The final irony of the speaker’s stance, then, is that he is able to find ‘compassion’ for the imperial brutalisers of his own history by transferring onto them the violence that they have enacted on others. The fact that he may see that violence as having been self-inflicted only adds irony to irony. Thanks to this ironic understanding of his circumstance — and of himself — he is able to move past the ironic opposition of meaning (‘England and the West Indies are the same’) and sense (‘no, they’re not’) to his final moment of compassion. Of course, as I have already argued above, this final stance is also ironic insofar as he depends upon the voice and words of his ‘ancestral murderer and poet’ to resolve his conflict for him. By this point, however, the irony of this reaction is overlooked — or transcended — by the speaker’s ironic mode of understanding the relation between coloniser and colonised.

Irony, as the trope par excellence of misdirection, ambivalence and doubleness generates a fluid kind of truth that puts into motion opposing or contradictory terms or positions that cannot be reconciled, but which in their (ironic) mobility can be conjoined and mutually experienced. The reader of Things Fall Apart is able, through the apprehension of dramatic irony, to realise a truth of the imperial encounter that escapes or exceeds the actors caught up within it: that the situation it explores is not one that can be apprehended from within the static polarities of binary opposition. Just as locusts are neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’ to eat, neither side of the cultural conflict is in the right, and both have something to offer to our understanding of their mutual clash. This global sense of the text, however, subsists only insofar as the reader is willing and able to perceive and understand the local and particular circumstances and point of view of the Igbo Storyteller. The transcultural truth achieved by the reader is therefore mobilised by and within the process that relates the reader’s own perceptions and understanding to the text’s differing and different truths. While it is the reader who must realise the promise of irony in Things Fall Apart, in ‘Ruins’ it is irony’s other co-conspirator, the speaker, who realises this promise when he is able to conclude his poem in compassion by neither rejecting outright, nor accepting unquestioningly, his ‘ancestral murderers and poets’. This conciliatory gesture is maintained by the ironic conclusion of the poem in which the speaker finds his own voice only in and through the voice of the tradition that his poem began in rebellion against. Both works bring to fruition the promise of irony for post/colonial texts by becoming the stage or ground upon which a global sense of the historical relation between coloniser and colonised (‘As well as if a manor of thy friends...’) is brought into a reciprocal and equivalent relation with the local meanings of that history (‘some slave is rotting in this manorial lake’).
These texts realise the promise of irony insofar as they each construct a sense of the relation between cultures that not only surpasses the discontinuity of different cultural meanings, but which actively adds to that meaning extra-linguistically. This sense is, however, always/already provisional, insofar as it is maintained by the extra-linguistic (inexpressible) sense that irony both aspires to and depends upon. It is this always/already provisional sense of truth that I have in mind when I speak of the promise of irony in and for postcolonial texts, for there is no uniquely postcolonial form of irony any more than there is an identifiable and singular 'condition' of postcoloniality. The ironic utterance holds within it the promise of a mode of truth in which global sense exists in an equal and reciprocal relationship with local meaning. At the same time, this relation is maintained upon the strength of the promise that binds the reader to the text, and the text to the reader; it is the promise made in and by every reading act — that this act is not meaningless.

NOTES

1 I use this form (post/colonial) of this most contentious term in order to sidestep the difficult (and never-ending) question of the hyphen. Whether the writers I will be examining are post-colonial or postcolonial is, for the purposes of this study at least, secondary to their status as ironists.

2 Interestingly, there have been very few works of sustained criticism on irony and the postcolonial. In fact, the three works that I examine in this study are the most substantive yet produced. There are literally hundreds of papers and books in which the role of irony is considered in specific postcolonial texts, but by and large these works do not address the specific function or nature of irony as it is realised in a postcolonial text.

3 A few pages before this moment we hear of the conversations between Mr. Brown — the more 'moderate' missionary — and Akunna, in which each was able to learn of the others' beliefs, but significantly in which neither 'succeeded in converting the other' (126).

4 The novel's one and only legitimately 'in between' character, Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, is radically incapable of enacting any form of fruitful or lasting understanding between the cultural forces represented by the District Commissioner and Okonkwo. Nwoye's own rebellion against his father is neither articulate, nor productive of a new or comprehensive understanding:

It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul... He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled. (104)

5 For example, when Okonkwo beats his second wife for not preparing his meal the Storyteller explains that Okonkwo 'was provoked to justifiable anger' and condemns him only for beating his wife during the Week of Peace (21); the Storyteller also does not condemn the murder of Ikemefuna, the practice of leaving twins to die in the Evil Forest or the brutally callous treatment of Okonkwo's dying father.
Donne is not the only ‘ancestral poet’ whose voice we hear in these concluding lines. The description of England as ‘nook-shotten’ is found in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* as the French Constable openly wonders at the value of the English given that the climate of ‘Albion’ is ‘foggy, raw, and dull’ (3.5.14). The ironies of this potential echo are compelling when we consider that in Shakespeare’s play the Constable utters these lines for ironic effect insofar as the English are destined to conquer France — as they did the Caribbean. The speaker of Walcott’s poem, then, is able to adopt the voice of an outsider, of one who contests the conquest of the English, only through a reference to that most canonical of all English authors, and only through the mask of a character who mistakenly believes he can defeat the English.

This passage thus opens yet another ironic allusion insofar as the reference to England as Albion — the Roman name for their English province — hearkens back to the beginning of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, in which Marlow compares the Roman conquest of England to British imperialism. The irony of this reference stems from the fact that Marlow condemns Roman imperialism as ‘robbery with violence’ (65) in order to celebrate British imperialism by comparison. The speaker’s alluded sympathy with this point of view thus (ironically) aligns him with Marlow’s pro-imperial sentiments even as the speaker is attempting to align his own experience with the coloniser’s in terms of their mutual status as colonised victims of imperial aggression.

The very practice and purpose of empire is ironised in this poem, insofar as the plantation that it presents was used to grow limes, which were required by British sailors to avoid scurvy. The imperial plantation was thus dedicated to growing a crop that was required to fight a disease that was itself caused by imperialism.

WORKS CITED