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MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 53, Number 3, Fall 2007, pp. 460-477 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/mfs.2007.0065

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THE UNRELIABLE RIPLEY: IRONY AND SATIRE IN ROBERT MCLIAM WILSON'S *RIPLEY BOGLE*

Elke D'hoker

In 1989 the young writer Robert McLiam Wilson surprised the literary world in London, Dublin, and Belfast with a highly original first novel: *Ripley Bogle*. The novel was praised as "one of the most precocious debuts of any modern writer" (Smyth 132) and won the Rooney Prize (1989), the Irish Book Award (1990) and the prestigious Betty Trask Prize (1990). Together with fellow writers Colin Bateman and Glenn Patterson, Wilson was hailed as one of the promising new voices in Northern Irish fiction.¹ Keen to place this new writer and interpret his novel, reviewers and critics compared *Ripley Bogle* with Martin Amis's *The Rachel Papers* (1973), J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).² They detected references to Dickens, Beckett, and Flann O'Brien and read the novel as a parody of the *Bildungsroman* and the "growing-up in exile romance" (Jackson 229).

Moreover, given Robert McLiam Wilson's personal background as a Catholic Northern Irish writer, born in the troubled working-class area of West Belfast, *Ripley Bogle* was also read in the context of the conflict dividing Northern Ireland and scanned for concrete traces of the author's ideological stance. Yet *Ripley Bogle*'s comic, ironical, and highly idiosyncratic fictional memoir cannot easily be contained within any one fictional or aesthetic model, nor can it simply be reduced to a specific political message or meaning. The novel's pe-

cular combination of narrative unreliability, self-conscious narration, and a complex layering of irony and satire successfully eludes any straightforward interpretation and continuously frustrates the reader. Drawing on new theoretical approaches to narrative unreliability by critics such as Ansgar Nünning, James Phelan, and Dorrit Cohn, this article proposes to dissect the different levels of irony in the text and to discuss their effect on the political and ethical content of the novel as a whole.

Robert aka Ripley?

Ripley Bogle is the account of four days in the life of the eponymous hero-narrator, just before he turns twenty-one. Ripley is living on the streets in London and elaborates in great detail on the bodily effects of hunger, cold, pain, and a craving for cigarettes. He gives an equally detailed description of the streets and hide-outs of his city and relates his meetings with tramps and other people. In between, he also narrates his poor childhood and difficult youth in Belfast and his brief period of fame as a student in Cambridge. In the final chapter, Ripley gives his narrative a surprising twist when he corrects a number of lies he told the reader. The overall tone of Ripley's narrative is comic, arrogant, and highly satiric as he sets out to ridicule almost all things and people he encounters. In particular, his dismissive statements about the Northern Irish situation have arrested attention in the existing, mainly political, readings of the novel. In a perceptive reading, Gerry Smyth argues that the novel "constitutes . . . a scathing attack on the calcified and disabling discourses of identity foisted onto young people by their forebears, living and dead" (132). Indeed, Ripley Bogle leaves the reader in no doubt as to what he thinks of the Irish and their Irishness: "What is it about Ireland that the Irish love so? What makes them guff on so endlessly about their country? Is it the pain and the poverty, the death and danger? Is it the spite, hatred, treachery, stupidity, vice, inhumanity or the comfortless despair? Whatever it is, we can see that the Irish have a lot to be grateful for" (*Ripley* 190). He denounces "all that Gaelic, nationalist, Celtic superiority bollockspeak" that his friend Maurice falls for and records clashes with "sectarian villains" from both sides of the conflict (101, 47). Ripley rejects the different political explanations of the violence in Northern Ireland. He locates politics "in the realms of theory—polite, debatable and not actually hazardous to life" and sets it apart from "the practical side of things, the fatal side of things" (102). The men who shot Maurice are, therefore, not "really terrorists", "They weren't political, idealistic. They were crooks, thugs—they were just bad boys" (304).

If young Ripley first wants to opt for compromise—calling himself "Ripley Irish British Bogle" (16)—he soon comes to believe that escape is his only option: "I disclaimed blame and didn't want to know. I began to memorise the ferry timetables for Holyhead, Stranraer and Liverpool. It was somebody else's crime and thus somebody else's problem. My answer would be my exit" (101). Yet exile in England proves to be no solution either. In Cambridge he finds himself among a set of conservative and soulless snobs, who are desperately searching for the kind of authentic identity Ripley has presumably left behind. Consequently, Ripley plays up the very low-class, Catholic Irishness that he rejected in Belfast: "Thus I, deserter of that snakeless shambles, endeavoured to improve that Gaelic effect. I began to affect something of the air of a Celtic working-class hero . . . though I was bloody glad I was doing it in Cambridge rather than in Belfast" (204). Despite the original promise of a hybrid identity, Ripley satirically rejects both the Irish and the English, fashioning himself as the superior outsider to both. Or as Smyth has it: "So, cultural hybridity, rather than offering Bogle a positive and enabling set of options, actually robs him of any power other than that of indicting both sides and adopting a spurious position above (or rather, below) and beyond the real world. He has sampled both, in Belfast, Cambridge and London, has intimate knowledge of both, and disdains both" (133). While it is true that cultural hybridity is not realized as a positive force in the novel, the crucial question is whether Ripley's "spurious position" of the superior critic and disdainful satirist is also Wilson's own or, put differently, whether the novel as a whole commends or condemns Ripley's answer to the conflict in Northern Ireland. While Smyth remains vague about the implied author's stance, Dobbins tends to conflate the politics of Wilson and Ripley and regard the narrator as a fictionalized alter ego of the author (339). This reading seems supported by the obvious similarities in background and experience between author and narrator, which Wilson himself frequently drew attention to.

Like his protagonist, Robert McLiam Wilson was born in Catholic West Belfast, was an early and avid reader and endured a brief spell of homelessness following family objections to a Protestant girlfriend. He went to Cambridge and played up his Irishness, adding the Gaelic transcription 'McLiam' (son of William or Wilson) to his name, but had to leave again without a degree, going on to a variety of menial jobs. In an early interview with Jonathan Coe, Wilson even suggested that Ripley's tramp life in London was based on true experiences, something he denied later on.³ Finally, Wilson's own statements about the Northern Irish conflict are often very like Ripley's cynical arguments. Consider his explanation for not joining the IRA: "the

vain, egotistic, or confident are much less likely to be seduced. And a sense of humour helps. I'm not earnest enough" (Crewe 18), or the following ironic self-presentation in his essay "Sticks and Stones: The Irish Identity": "Like most citizens of Belfast, my identity is the subject of some dispute. Some say I'm British, some say I'm Irish, some even say that there's no way I'm five eleven and that I'm five foot ten at best. In many ways I'm not permitted to contribute to this debate. If the controversy is ever satisfactorily concluded, I will be whatever the majority of people tell me I am" (135).

In short, the similarities in tone, background, and opinions make a reading of *Ripley Bogle* as a semi-autobiographical novel and of its narrator as an, admittedly exaggerated, alter ego of the author highly tempting—so tempting, in fact, that one forgets that by the end of the novel Ripley is revealed as a narrator of questionable reliability and trustworthiness. Indeed, in the final chapter Ripley owns up to a number of lies—"three little porkies" (316)—which place the preceding narrative in a totally different light. First, Ripley turns out to have betrayed his best friend Maurice to a rival Republican faction. Second, he admits to having made his girlfriend Deirdre pregnant, subsequently aborting the five-month-old fetus with a paintbrush. And third, his romantic affair with the English Laura at Cambridge appears to have been a complete fabrication. While most commentators briefly mention Ripley's unreliability as a narrator, they fail to consider the effects of this narrative set-up on the thematic content of the novel. Still, one cannot but wonder why Wilson—if he agrees with Ripley's attacks—has styled his narrator as unreliable. What I will try to investigate in what follows, therefore, is whether and how Ripley's unreliability affects the political critique of the novel as a whole.

Narrative Unreliability

For most critics the unreliability of the first-person narrator of *Ripley Bogle* begins and ends with the lies he tells in the course of his narrative but ultimately owns up to. But Jennifer Jeffers, in her interesting study *The Irish Novel at the End of the Twentieth Century*, takes the matter more seriously. Her suspicion raised by Ripley's "three little porkies," Jeffers looks for lies earlier in the text as well. She finds these in Ripley's contradictory claims about his father and in his impossibly heartless response to the death of Maurice and the death of his unborn child. Taking her clue from Ripley's confession about his Perry-like dreams of health, youth, and fitness, she suggests that "all of Bogle's narrative is fictional," the deluded fantasy of

a tramp (137). Jeffers argues that Ripley's lies render it "impossible to make stable meaning from the text":

Interpreting *Ripley Bogle* from the point of view that all of Bogle's stories are "lies" based on his denials, omissions, and reworked versions is equally plausible, if not more plausible, than believing his life story as he presents it, even in the second, altered version. In the end, Bogle's story about Perry could be as fictional as the other "three little porkies"; the only difference is that he never admits that the Perry story is fabricated. (139)

Yet in dismissing the whole of Bogle's story as a fabrication, Jeffers effectively ends the possibility of a significant interpretation of the novel and renders the diagnosis of Bogle's unreliability completely irrelevant. As David Lodge perceptively states in his definition of narrative unreliability: "Even a character-narrator cannot be a hundred per cent unreliable. If everything he or she says is palpably false, that only tells us what we know already, namely that a novel is a work of fiction. There must be some possibility of discriminating between truth and falsehood within the imagined world of the novel, as there is in the real world, for the story to engage our interest" (154).

The point of using an unreliable narrator is not to have the whole story dismissed as false, but rather to draw attention to the narrator and the way in which he or she tells, distorts, or conceals his or her tale. It is therefore important to consider unreliability in the novel as a fictional construct with a particular purpose, rather than—as Jeffers tends to do—as a fact in the real world. A detailed analysis of Bogle's unreliability in this vein would allow, rather than preclude, a meaningful interpretation of the text.

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* Wayne Booth introduced the concept of unreliability to account for the ironic distance in certain literary texts between the actions and values of the narrator and "the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms)" (158–59). In those texts, he argues, "the speaker himself is the butt of the ironic point. The author and reader are secretly in collusion, behind the speaker's back, agreeing upon the standard by which he is found wanting" (304). Booth's definition has been further refined and extended by several critics, including Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Seymour Chatman, Kathleen Wall, and Dorrit Cohn. Each has tried to classify types of unreliability so as to distinguish between the so-called naïve narrator, whose representations are faulty but whose morals are sound, and the mad or perverted narrator whose moral judgments of people or actions are heavily flawed.⁴

More recently, however, Booth's definition has come under severe attack from several literary theorists who criticize its reliance on

the rather vague concept of the implied author. Chief among them is Ansgar Nünning, who has argued that the "anthropomorphized phantom" of the implied author "hardly provides a reliable basis for determining a narrator's unreliability" ("Unreliable" 53–54). Instead he interprets unreliable narration in the context of frame theory and argues that "[t]he construction of an unreliable narrator can be seen as an interpretative strategy by which the reader naturalizes textual inconsistencies that might otherwise remain unassimilable" ("Unreliable" 69). In order to clarify this interpretative strategy, Nünning has drawn up an extensive and highly useful list of textual signs and contextual information, such as general world-knowledge, literary models, insights in psychology, and accepted moral values, which guide the reader in his or her interpretation.

Yet Nünning somewhat exaggerates his difference with Booth, since the norms of the implied author are of course also arrived at through an interpretation of textual data. Moreover, as James Phelan has accurately observed, "the interpretive move to read an inconsistency as a sign of unreliability rests on the assumption that someone designed the inconsistency as a signal of unreliability" (48). Or as Dorrit Cohn puts it, narrative unreliability "suggests the reader's sense that the *author* intends his or her work to be understood differently from the way the narrator understands it: in a way that can only be discovered by reading the work against the grain of the narrator's discourse, providing it with a meaning that, though not explicitly spelled out, is silently signaled to the reader behind the narrator's back" (307). In his interesting study *Living to Tell about It*, Phelan manages to combine Booth's emphasis on authorial intention and Nünning's emphasis on the reader in a single approach arguing that the interpretation of unreliability (as a form of "rhetorical reading") involves a "feedback loop among implied author's agency, textual phenomena and reader response" (38). Phelan also draws on Peter J. Rabinowitz's concept of authorial audience (as "the hypothetical ideal audience" for which the author designs the work (126)⁵, to suggest that narrative unreliability "require[s] the authorial audience to infer an understanding of the narration different from that offered by the narrator" (49–50). Alternatively, one could harmonize both approaches by defining unreliability as the distance between the norms and knowledge of the narrator and those of the whole text, as shaped by the implied author and meant to be recognized by the authorial audience or implied reader.

This notion of distance also points to the one thing all approaches have in common, namely their interpretation of unreliability as a form of structural or dramatic irony. Booth has called the unreliable narrator "the butt of the ironic point" (304) and Nünning has

argued, "unreliable narration can be explained in terms of dramatic irony because it involves a contrast between a narrator's view of the fictional world and the contrary state of affairs which the reader can grasp" ("Unreliable" 58). Important in this respect is that the narrator remains unaware of the contrary or additional meaning his or her narrative implicitly conveys. Or, as Bruno Zerweck puts it, "the *unintentional* self-incrimination of the personalized narrator is a necessary condition for unreliability" (156, *italics mine*). Hence, the crucial question to be addressed in this essay is whether the highly self-conscious and satirical narrator of *Ripley Bogle* is also made into the object of irony himself.

Compulsive Monologist

A quick glance at the stylistic characteristics of Bogle's text already mark him out as a likely candidate to join the rogue gallery of unreliable narrators in English-language fiction. Like Barry Lyndon, Humbert Humbert, and John Self, Ripley Bogle is a "compulsive monologist": the majority of his utterances are "speaker-oriented expressions beginning with the favourite word 'I'" (Nünning "But why" 97). Similarly, "an accumulation of direct addresses to the reader" can be noted as well as "conscious attempts to direct the reader's sympathy" (Olson 98). Many of Ripley's rhetorical strategies are directed toward securing the reader's approval, something he himself admits at the end of his tale: "I really wanted you to like me" (318). Finally, Bogle's narrative abounds in lexical and syntactic expressions of subjectivity that "indicate a high degree of emotional involvement and provide clues to an unreliable narrator's problematic value scheme" (Nünning "But why" 97). Think of the hyperboles, the exclamation marks, the swear words, and the short, interrupted sentences.

The textual inconsistencies in the story form a second set of signals of unreliability. According to Nünning, "Two of the most prominent of these are internal contradictions within the narrator's discourse and discrepancies between his or her utterances and actions" ("But why" 96). Additionally, contrary evidence or interpretations provided by other characters can incriminate the narrator. Apart from Ripley's "three little porkies," several other contradictions are hidden in the text as well. Jeffers has already drawn attention to the inconsistencies surrounding Ripley's father. On the one hand, Ripley claims to be "part Welsh and part Irish" and goes on to blame much of his misfortunes on this unhappy mixture (8). On the other hand, he denies that Bobby Bogle—a "rancid Welsh fuckbag"—is his real father and tries to convince the reader that "many of [his] personal

problems stem from the fact that [he] never knew who [his] father was" (237). Talking about his childhood, similarly, Ripley alternates between the self-images of unasked-for popularity: ("Once again my raffish demeanour stood myself in good stead in the way of making new friends" [50]) and unjust unpopularity ("Once again I was startlingly unpopular" [48]).

Another contradiction exists between the way Ripley presents himself—"a good-looking tramp" (23), "Tall, strong, witheringly gorgeous and snake-deadly" (97), and "I'm cool, I'm chic. I'm urbane" (128)—and the reactions of other people as they pass him in the street. Ripley also typically mistakes the questioning stare of the girl in the food kitchen and the sniggering looks of the girls on the cricket field for signs of admiration and attraction: "The poor girl is obviously unaccustomed to finding down-and-outs attractive" (124). That Ripley rarely if ever allows other voices in his narrative is of course revealing. Only once does he indirectly quote criticism directed against himself, namely when Jenny tells him "what a no-hoper" he really is: "Apparently, I was paralysed by my cleverness and my nationality. She told me that I could no longer afford to go on living on the grace of people's tolerance. It would run out soon. I wasn't going to get away with it very much longer" (291). This is hardly the image Ripley himself has been propagating in his narrative.

Ripley's arrogant confidence in his own talents, genius, and charms contrasts sharply with his negative descriptions of other people. His dismissive depiction of the Irish, Welsh, and English in general has already been noted, but also his portrayals of individual acquaintances and family—with the possible exception of Perry and Maurice—are hardly flattering. Women get the worst deal in *Ripley Bogle*. Echoing Thackeray's Barry Lyndon, Ripley even claims that "women have generally crapped on me from as great a height as they could manage"—a statement effectively belied by his own behavior toward what he possessively calls "my women" (75). His mother, whom he accuses of being a prostitute, is introduced as follows: "Now all the Irish women I have ever known have been particularly hideous and you'll be glad to hear that my mother was no exception. A real old rolling fatbag" (8). Deirdre, he describes as a "monster," "cruel, selfish, blindly stubborn" (192) and poor Muire is "probably just a rancid, hard-eyed Irish tart like the rest of them now" (38). If all Irish women are denounced as "harridans" (209), English women are only slightly better off. They are "posh, gorgeous," and smart, but all the same only interesting to Ripley as good but interchangeable fucks (225). Starting with his mother, Ripley represents all women as whores, whose only care is to sleep with men in general and with Ripley in particular (38). Predictably, the one exception is "the icy

Laura," who continues to reject him and is rewarded with the role of virgin in his narrative, complete with a "halo of pale milky hair" (213). In short, Ripley's depictions of specific women and his spiteful diatribes against "birds," "chicks," and "bimbos" (290–91) are so negative and stereotypical that they cannot but mark him out as a morally unreliable narrator as well.

Throughout his narrative, even before coming clear about his three major lies, Ripley belatedly admits to a number of small lies and telling omissions. The rhetorical structure of these confessions is typically aimed at preserving the sympathy of the reader. A confession, which places Ripley in a bad or pitiful light, is followed by a second one, meant to restore his decency and, hence, the pity or sympathy of the reader. In this way, Ripley confesses to having "picked a half eaten hamburger out of a litter bin" only to add subsequently: "(N. B. I was so ashamed and disgusted that I almost immediately boked it all up and haven't tried it since)" (20). Later on, he admits to having gone to a church meal but only because he "couldn't work up the courage to go to a café, a shop or even a dirty old hot-dog stall" (122). "A terrible admission" on Sunday concerns his stealing Perry's money and is followed by "Another terrible admission" about throwing the money in the river (284, 285). All these contradicting confessions are of course not exactly conducive to a trustful relationship between reader and narrator. Still, because as a rule the narrator is considered "innocent, until proven guilty" (Wall 90), it is only when Ripley confesses his three major lies that the fictional bond between reader and narrator is shattered beyond repair. And even then, I would argue, it is not so much the lies themselves that incriminate the narrator, but rather the off-hand manner in which he dismisses both these lies and the tragic events that occurred.

Ripley's reaction to Maurice's terribly slow death, to start with, signals not so much normal guilt or sorrow but rather disgust and weariness. He notes how he is desperate for a cigarette and a pee, and sits on the deck for a while because he "didn't want to watch" (310). Similarly shocking is his casual account of the way he tried to dislodge Deirdre's five-month-old fetus with a paintbrush: "I told her I had managed to get my hands on a canula from a friend who worked in Casualty at the RVH. She hadn't looked to check so I was able to spare her feelings quite comfortably, the paintbrush business might have upset her. Girls are funny about the things they allow up there" (314). After the terrible abortion, he is again only interested in his own little needs: "Would you believe I even tried to roger her before she left? . . . She wouldn't let me, thank God. She wasn't in the mood, so to speak" (314). Next, Ripley comes clear about the "fictional Laura boff", which he—quite shockingly—calls "the spoof that

cost me the greatest loss of dignity" (318). Finally, he makes light of all his previous faults, by comparing them to his present failure to pay his respects to the dead Perry: "I feel bad about all of this, naturally, but the failure that troubles me most is my failure with Perry" (325). Even though he is in fact "failing him now," he doesn't really intend to do anything about it (325). In the end, he refuses to take responsibility for any of his crimes, by repeating an assertion he made in the beginning of his tale: "It's Ireland's fault, not mine" (326). Ripley's story has come full circle, but the narrator has not learned from the protagonist's mistakes and is ready to commit the same selfish sins all over again.⁶

We have seen how the style, the female stereotypes, and the conflicting self-portraits of Ripley's monologue render him highly suspect. Nonetheless, it is only at the end that he is revealed as truly unreliable, in a factual as well as in a moral sense. The aim of this surprise ending is not, as Jeffers has argued, to reveal Ripley's whole story as a fantastic invention but rather to clearly define Ripley as an unreliable narrator. If the reader is still wavering between sympathy and condemnation in the course of Ripley's comic and engaging tale, the ending tips the balance in favor of the latter. In this way, Wilson finally and radically distances himself from the narrator who might otherwise have come too close for comfort. In *Barry Lyndon* (1844) Thackeray belatedly added footnotes to the text to spell out the narrator's unreliability to the more naïve reader. Likewise, Wilson brings Ripley's unreliability to full pitch at the end of the novel so as to make sure that any confusion between author and narrator is no longer possible.

Of course, the narrative unreliability in *Ripley Bogle* serves a thematic purpose as well. For Ripley's epistemological and moral unreliability originates in his extreme narcissism, which forms the main target of the novel's critique.⁷ Ripley tells lies to gain sympathy from other people, including the reader, but his egotism often blinds him to the true state of affairs. Similarly, his vanity, arrogance, and selfishness are clearly to blame for his mistreatment of Maurice, Deirdre, Laura, and Perry as well as for his aggravating failure to take any of it seriously. In other words, while Ripley himself uses satirical irony as his main mode of expression, he is also made into the unwitting object of irony himself. Even though he sometimes registers an awareness of his own selfishness and arrogance, his narrative condemns him to a greater degree than he himself realizes.

Satire and Violence

Once we have established that Ripley's unreliability as a narrator makes him the butt of irony himself, the question remains whether and to what extent this affects Ripley's own satirical purpose in his narrative. What remains of the criticisms of the Irish and the English once the narrator is revealed as unreliable? Or, put differently, what is the effect of Ripley's sterile selfishness on his scathing remarks about the rigid ideologies in Northern Ireland? First, the narrative unreliability in *Ripley Bogle* neither cancels nor inverts Ripley's criticism. After all, his male narcissism does not disqualify him as a judge of the political or social situation in any country. It is not as if he is a psychopath as in John Fowles's *The Collector*; a naïf as in Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*; or even a virulent supporter of one or other faction as in James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. In sum, Ripley's political critique continues to stand. What is rendered suspect, however, is the way in which he tries to position himself outside, or even above, the nations and nationalities he rejects. In other words, the novel undermines Ripley's self-serving, sterile, and ultimately impossible position as an absolute outsider, a superior critic of just about all persons and groups he encounters. The Irish, the Welsh, and the English; the Catholics and the Protestants; the terrorists and the intellectuals; the tramps and the college students; the virgins and the whores; the philanthropists, the egoists and the philistines—all are made to suffer Ripley's satirical attacks. If the text does not immediately invalidate these attacks, it does ironically undermine Ripley's god-like position, by showing how he is himself implicated in his critiques. We have seen before how the picture Ripley presents of the Irish is far from flattering. On the one hand, this serves to undermine the nostalgic and clichéd versions of Irishness disseminated by "Americans and professors of Literature" (190). Yet the negative picture that Ripley creates in this manner turns out to be just as stereotypical. What is more, if he berates the Irish for being a violent lot, awash with self-pity and with a "bewildering capacity for talking shite", he unwittingly condemns himself as the most typical Irishman of all (101, 191). In a similar way, Ripley's dismissive depiction of the English backfires, since observations such as "Touched with no other love, selfishness and sterile egotism abounded" or "They feared human, interior congress" apply to himself as well (202).

Yet there is one thing in the novel that escapes from the grip of Ripley's satire and that is the violence in Northern Ireland. More accurately perhaps, violence proves too strong for Ripley's ridicule, and his shockingly dismissive judgments only make the horror and

gratuitousness of sectarian violence stand out more clearly. Consider the following examples of Ripley's unconventional commentary on the injury of Muire: "She's no record-breaking matriarch, for sure" (38); on the first violent death he witnessed: "He should have stayed where he was, the jerk" (110); on the tarring of a girl and the murder of his father—"my old arsehole papa, that wicked Welsh wanker looked as if he was going to make a stand on behalf of the now sizzling Mary" (112); and on the shooting of two schoolboys: "Dontcha just love that?! The bastards actually made sure. They fucking checked! The perfect, cyclical cruelty of that moment of hope and sanguine prayer. . . . Clever bastards, you have to admit" (191). Clearly intended to shock the reader, Ripley's cynical comments form a stark contrast with his realistic and detailed descriptions of the most violent acts. Yet far from diminishing the horror, they only serve to enforce it. In this way, the novel—rather than Ripley himself—formulates a very strong indictment of the violence on both sides of the Northern Irish conflict.

In one revealing passage, however, murder and violence are criticized directly by the narrator, who urges the reader to:

Think about killing someone. Go on. Some Guy. Some poor sorry sod. . . . Think about his life, his mom and dad. Think about his children. Think about all the boffing he's done, the breasts he's kissed, the thighs he's creased all that kind of thing. . . . Think about his bad jokes and embarrassments. Think about his baby talk and teeth, his flask and sandwiches, his snapshots, his overdraft, his furniture, his handwriting, his bald patch, his favourite meals, his cigarettes, his football team, his dirty socks, his face and his span of years. Think about him. Think about his life. Think about killing him. Think about that. What's worth that, eh? Who needs that? (192)

This passage stands out from the rest of the novel. Its seriousness is at odds with Ripley's normal stylistic mixture of pedantry, sarcasm, and cynicism and its intent is betrayed by Ripley's own violent behavior later on in his story. In all, this passage is so unlike Ripley that one is tempted to attribute it directly to the author. The ironical structure of narrative unreliability breaks down at this point and a serious and straightforward moral message is offered to the reader. One could therefore argue that the novel fails here: the complex levels of irony clash and come to a halt. The voice of the author briefly takes over from that of the narrator. Yet it is also possible to read this passage as yet another ironic and unwitting indictment of Ripley himself. Not simply because he literally fails to act on his maxim

when he seriously injures a fellow-tramp in Hyde Park, but because his selfish inability to really think about other people constitutes his own primary moral failing.

In a mixed review of *Ripley Bogle* for the *London Review of Books*, Zachary Leader notes that "No one else [apart from the narrator] gets much of a look-in, and those who do—parents briefly, a school friend, first loves, a mentor—are perfunctorily, instrumentally rendered: they matter because of the way Ripley reacts to them" (15). Yet this apparent failure can again be construed as a crucial indictment of Ripley's prevailing egoism. He is simply not interested in depicting people other than as the butt of his ridicule, affections, or criticism. In the words of the passage just quoted, Ripley himself totally fails to seriously consider the life of anyone beside himself. This is ironically demonstrated in the pronominal shifts in Ripley's narrative. Ripley's standard first-person narration is interrupted in the last chapter of part I, which is centered on the narratee—"you"—whom Ripley takes on a guided tour of a tramp's London. Yet the "you" he constructs for about twenty pages gradually comes to coincide with the "I" of the narrator himself. Even though he takes care to speak in general, "you're a pretty tough kid/bloke/girl" (68), it quickly becomes clear that the narratee thus addressed is a male intellectual, in his twenties, who is also in other respects fully like Ripley himself. If the "you" thus turns out to be an "I", the same holds true for the "he" that figures briefly in first chapter of part II and for the "we" in Ripley's occasional generalizations as well. "We wogs" (111), "we tramps" (123), or "we Irish" (190) turn out to be but extrapolations of the narrator himself and hence fail to detract from Ripley's supreme solipsism. "All stories are love stories" reads the first line of Wilson's third novel, *Eureka Street* (1). But in *Ripley Bogle* the only love is self-love.

Double Irony

Robert McLiam Wilson has not made it easy for the reader, nor for himself, when he chose to deliver a satirical attack on contemporary politics in Ireland and Britain by means of an unreliable narrator.⁸ For while unreliability and irony do form a natural pair—given the ironic distance between what the author means and what the narrator says—Wilson has complicated matters by making the narrator of *Ripley Bogle* both subject and object of irony. Unlike the unreliable narrators in such classics as *Castle Rackrent*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, or *Barry Lyndon*, Ripley Bogle is an extremely self-conscious narrator who uses satirical irony and sarcasm for his

own purposes as well. In reflecting on the effects of this double ironical structure, it is important to consider the difference between Ripley's satirical irony and the more ambiguous irony of the author.

In her enlightening study of irony, Claire Colebrook draws a distinction between two forms of irony that are contained within Socrates's use of the concept and that exist side by side in contemporary critical discourse. Stable, verbal, or rhetorical irony is limited to specific contexts and leads to a predetermined truth. Unstable, extended, or ambiguous irony—also called Romantic or postmodern irony—disrupts meaning and is aware of the distance between language and life. It is clearly the first kind of irony that is enlisted by the satirist in his attempt to expose specific follies and vices of human nature.

Together with ridicule and parody, this kind of satirical irony forms the main mode of Ripley's narrative. "Oh, satire is a bastard!" Ripley self-consciously remarks with particular glee halfway through the novel (147). And the author himself echoes this in an interview: "Satire is good fun. Satire is irresponsible in that you can criticise without having to suggest alternatives. To suggest alternatives would be absurd, pompous and messianic" (Mills 75). Yet even if satire does not offer any positive alternatives, it is traditionally indicative of a certain moral righteousness. "The satirist", as J. A. Cuddon defines him, "is a kind of self-appointed guardian of standards, ideals and truth; of moral as well as aesthetic values. He is a man (women satirists are *very* rare) who takes it on himself to correct, censure and ridicule the follies and vices of society and thus to bring contempt and derision upon aberrations from a desirable and civilized norm" (599). In doing so, the satirist inevitably places himself above the vices that he censures. "Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own", Jonathan Swift has famously argued (qtd. in Cuddon 598). And this shortsightedness also characterizes the satirist, who typically fails to realize his own guilty inclusion in the human follies he ridicules. This applies to the satire in *Ripley Bogle* as well. Ripley castigates the violence in Northern Ireland but remains blind to the violence of his own voice.

Precisely this blindness is exposed ironically—but not satirically—through the narrative device of unreliable narration. Indeed, the structural irony used to undermine Ripley's narrative is more subtle, self-reflexive, and destabilizing than the satirical irony Ripley himself uses so liberally. The novel does not simply launch a scathing attack on Ripley's narcissism, arrogance, or violence, but also draws attention to the ironic distance between words and actions in Ripley's narrative itself. In this way, the irony operates through the text itself and Ripley's faults are subtly shown rather than explicitly stated. As

a result, the irony is far more ambiguous and runs the risk—as other critical readings have demonstrated—of being misunderstood by the reader. In other words, the narrative unreliability does not lead to a predetermined and certain truth but subtly questions the surface meaning of the text itself.

Precisely because it does not seek to defend any predetermined truth or certainty, this form of irony does not claim to speak from a position of moral superiority, nor does it pretend to be free of the follies and vices it attacks. Therefore, by using irony rather than satire to undermine the claims of the narrator, Wilson refuses to occupy the satirist's stance of superior critic and moral judge. Instead, as we have seen, his relation to his narrator is far more ambivalent. While he takes pains to point out the difference between Ripley and himself, he is also aware of the similarities and perhaps even of his own narcissistic violence in imagining a narrator who is so like himself. Finally, this ambiguity is mirrored in the reader's ambivalent response to the narrator. If Ripley would have become the butt of authorial satire, our rejection of this hypocritical and arrogant narrator would be complete. As it is, our reaction is subtler and more divided, as we are torn between identification and condemnation and thus made aware of our own guilty position as a superior judge or dismissive critic.

In conclusion, the specific effects of this peculiar mixture of satire and irony in the novel can be summarized as follows. First, while the novel's satirical energy is context-dependent and specifically directed against the political situation in Ireland and Britain, its arresting deployment of the dynamics of irony widens this critical scope to a more general reflection on human violence and egotism. Second, the ironical structure of the novel complicates Ripley's glib and comforting critique of senseless violence and ideological bigotry and shows the other side of the coin as well: the danger of individualism and the necessary complicity of every outsider position. Third, the overall effect of this combination of irony and satire in the novel is to leave the reader unsettled. Since the ironical structure of the novel questions rather than cancels the satirical attacks, the reader is at a loss to find a single or straightforward meaning. In this way, the novel frustrates every attempt to pin down the exact intent of the novel's ideological critique and deprives the reader of the comforts of righteousness, which typically contribute to over-all literary gratification. Yet precisely by refusing to offer a facile analysis or an idealistic alternative for the conflict in Northern Ireland, the novel forces us to think for ourselves and to critically scrutinize our own position.

Finally, the complex layering of irony and satire marks the text out as a consciously constructed literary artifact. Since the consum-

mate artistry of Ripley's narrative remains undiminished by the authorial irony, it can be counted as one of the only straightforward—and positive—statements of the novel. Although Ripley repeatedly mocks the literary traditions he refers to—from *Bildungsroman* and *wanderer*-novel, through detective-story, love-across-the-barricade romance, and literature of exile—the novel performing this mockery simultaneously pays its respects to all these (and many more) styles, genres, and influences. In urging its reader to return to Joyce and Dickens, Beckett and Orwell, Sterne and Thackeray, Maturin and Trollope, Martin Amis and Flann O'Brien, *Ripley Bogle* reproduces in art the very cultural hybridity its unreliable narrator seeks to deny even as his voice relies on it for its own existence.

Notes

1. In an influential article, Eve Patten called these writers the "prodigal novelists" of Northern Ireland because of their personal and imaginative interaction with the rest of the United Kingdom (1).
2. See for instance reviews by Peter Reading and Zachary Leader. Christina Hunt Mahony draws attention to Wilson's debts to Joyce, both to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and to *Ulysses*.
3. In a 1999 interview with Richard Mills, Wilson calls "a considerable portion" of *Ripley Bogle* autobiographical, but adds "things were hugely altered for fictional purposes, like the London Homelessness. In actual fact, I was homeless in Belfast" (73).
4. Although the terminology and classifications developed to deal with this basic distinction varies, it seems easiest to talk about epistemological unreliability in the first case and about moral unreliability in the second (see Nünning "Unreliable" 56).
5. In his ground-breaking article "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences", Rabinowitz himself argues that the matter of narrative unreliability hinges on the different interpretations of any given text by the narrative audience ("the imaginary audience for which the narrator is writing" (127)) and the ideal narrative audience ("the audience for which the narrator wishes he were writing" (134)). While the ideal narrative audience simply accepts everything the unreliable narrator is saying, the narrative audience can detect contradictions or despise the narrator for his or her amoral judgments. The authorial audience, finally, interprets these contradictions in the context of the ironic structure or the moral message of the text itself. However, since Rabinowitz's approach tends to simply shift the problems of unreliability to another terminological context and since his concept of ideal narrative audience has not been taken over by other critics, I will refrain from using his approach in this essay.

6. In *Eureka Street*, Wilson's next novel, Ripley makes a cameo appearance. He is back in Belfast, still a beggar, but earning some money by doing interviews in French for foreign television crews. From the protagonist's horrified reaction at his sorry state, it becomes clear that Ripley functions as a negative example in the novel. He has ceased to matter and all but ceased to exist: "He looked dreadful. . . he was as faded and grimy as an old photograph, white face and bloodless lips. I felt a sudden shock of grief, as though someone had died" (346).
7. In an interview shortly after the publication of *Ripley Bogle*, Wilson told Jonathan Coe, "It's about egoism" (1). Gregory Dobbins argues how Wilson returns to "the theme of male narcissism and its negative consequences" in *Manfred's Pain* (339).
8. In *Eureka Street* by comparison, the use of a reliable first-person narrator and an omniscient third-person narrator makes the political message of the novel and the ideological stance of the author much more clear. Richard Kirkland argues in this respect that *Eureka Street* offers the possibility of a "bourgeois redemption", while *Ripley Bogle* delivers but a "fierce critique of Northern Irish society" (215).

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