

The Self-Othering of Literature and Philosophy in German Romanticism

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“The German Romantics had to destroy the same bastions we do. Logocentrism and idealism, theology, all supports of the repressive society.” Kathy Acker¹

Over the last decade it has often been noted that there has been a genuine revival of interest in German Romanticism. A number of scholars in the fields of both philosophy and German studies have published monographs, which argue strongly for the contemporary relevance of debates to which the German Romantics bore witness in an exemplary manner. In a certain sense, this is not at all new. As far back as the 1970's, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy had argued—as they presented works by Friedrich and A.W. Schlegel, Schelling and Novalis for the first time in French—that Jena Romanticism “*fait époque*” opened the epoch to which we still belong. For them, it was quite simply false to refer to Jena Romanticism as “a period, school, a style, or a conception—that would belong first and simply to a certain *past*.”² Fascinated by what they interpreted to be an “intense and brilliant *moment of writing (intense et fulgurant moment d'écriture)*”, they could only use the names Early German or Jena Romanticism with a certain irony, as if it designated a movement that was simply delimitable and containable.³

¹ Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 12.

² Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Literary Absolute*, trans. Philip Barnard & Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 1 (Translation slightly modified).

³ *ibid.*, 7. See also Susan Bernstein „Re-re-re-reading Jena” *MLN*, Vol. 110, No. 4, Comparative Literature Issue (Sep., 1995), 834-855.

More recently, however, a new generation of interpreters has arisen who have retitled the field of research: Philosophical Romanticism. Beginning in Germany with the publication of Manfred Frank's lectures *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik* in 1987, since the 1990s this has become a strong current within the Anglophone context.⁴ Even while these scholars still debate what the term 'Romantic' means and what is the proper genealogy of its emergence (notably with regard to its contemporary, German Idealism), there is the shared endeavor on the part of almost all of them to establish German Romanticism "as a distinctive movement within the history of philosophy."⁵ On this basis, it becomes possible then to speak of "the Romantic project" and the Romantics' conceptions of such things as truth and knowledge, beauty and reality. Moreover, it also then becomes possible to teach and successfully apply for research funding in the field of Philosophical Romanticism within philosophy departments in the Anglophone world.

While one may learn a great deal from the work of those who take part in this endeavor (notably, among others, Frederick Beiser, Karl Ameriks, Dalia Nassar and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, Andrew Bowie), I would like to suggest that if one restricts oneself to this approach a more radical and thought provoking dimension of what is called Early German Romanticism is thereby lost. In this regard, it is not without significance that it is only very recently that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's *L'absolu Littéraire: théorie de la littérature du Romanticisme Allemand* has appeared for the

⁴ See notably Dalia Nassar's Introduction to *The Relevance of Romanticism*, ed. Dalia Nassar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-8. There she provides ample evidence of the current revival of interest in Romanticism within the Anglophone context, while underlining that it is "specifically philosophical, motivated by philosophical questions" (p. 2). See also Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, "The Revival of Frühromantik in the Anglophone World," *Philosophy Today* (Spring 2005): 96-117. and more recently Peter Thielke, "Recent Work on Early German Idealism 1781-1801", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 51, 2, April 2013, 149-192.

⁵ *ibid.*, 3.

first time in German translation.⁶ *L'Absolu Litteraire* is not acknowledged in any of the works, which form the constellation research (*Konstellationsforschung*) undertaken by Manfred Frank. Moreover, its central thesis about German Romanticism is all but ignored by the other interpreters mentioned above, even though it has been seminal for generations of scholars who work in literature departments in the Anglophone world.⁷ Though never explicitly stated in these terms, one might be tempted to suggest that there has been an effort on the part of those working within Philosophical Romanticism to free Romanticism from 'literary', i.e., poststructuralist, and especially deconstructive approaches, which they believe would have sought to undermine not just the authority of a certain kind of philosophy, but philosophical authority itself. As I hope will become clearer in what follows, I would like to suggest that these interpreters are not simply wrong.

Situated on the back cover of the French edition, signed by both Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, the central thesis of *The Literary Absolute* is stated as follows: "Romanticism is firstly a theory. And the *invention* of literature. It constitutes more precisely (*très exactement*) the inaugural moment of literature as the production of its own theory—and of theory that thinks itself as literature."⁸ This is actually a double thesis, articulated in two moments, in which the two central terms, literature and theory, cross into one another, making undecidable which of them has priority. In the

⁶ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Das Literarisch-Absolute: Texte und Theorie der Jenaer Frühromantik*, trans. Johannes Kleinbeck (Wien: Turia & Kant, 2015).

⁷ See Marc Redfield „Lucinde's Obscenity“ in *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Susan Bernstein „Re-re-re-reading Jena“ op. cit., and more recently Christoph Bode „Absolut Jena: A Second Look at Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's Representation of the Literary Theory of the Frühromantik“ in *Romanticism and Philosophy: Thinking With Literature*, Edited by Sophie Laniel-Musitelli and Thomas Constantinesco (New York and Oxford: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2015).

⁸ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy *The Literary Absolute* op. cit. p. xxii. This passage is translated in the Translators' "Note on the Text" in the English edition.

first moment, there is the affirmation that Jena Romanticism is *both* a theory *and* the invention of literature. It is not simply one or the other, which immediately puts the legitimacy of a specifically philosophical approach to Romanticism into question. The second moment reconfirms the first one, while adding a chiasmic fold. Jena Romanticism is the inaugural moment of *both* literature as the production of its own theory *and* theory that thinks itself as literature. Since Jena, it is not only that one is not without the other, but that one begins to transform into the other, to cross over, and to wear, as it were, the other's clothes – in order at once to fulfill itself and dissolve itself, following Walter Benjamin's reading of the double character of Novalis' concept of "*Vollendung*".⁹ As Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe argue:

[R]omanticism is neither mere "literature" (they invent the concept) nor simply a "theory of literature" (ancient and modern). Rather, it is *theory itself as literature* or, in other words, literature producing itself as it produces its own theory. The literary absolute is also, and perhaps above all, this absolute *literary operation*. In the end, Jena will be remembered as the place where it was claimed that the theory of the novel must itself be a novel.¹⁰

Once the idea of art is determined as the medium of infinite, unbounded, internally differentiating reflection, i.e., as the absolute, it becomes inseparable from the theory in which this reflection accomplishes itself and vice-versa. Critical here,

⁹ Walter Benjamin's doctoral dissertation on the concept of criticism in German Romanticism was an important inspiration for Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. "Criticism, so conceived, does not involve primarily the evaluation of a given work [...] but rather its fulfillment, or, as Novalis writes, its "*Vollendung*". This word, Benjamin emphasizes, must be read in its double sense, entailing, on the one hand, the completion or consummation of the work and, on the other, its consumption and dissolution in the discourse of criticism. This double aspect of romantic critical theory...allows Schlegel and Novalis to be considered the founders of modern criticism." Samuel Weber, "Criticism Underway: Walter Benjamin's *Romantic Concept of Criticism* in *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory*, ed. Kenneth R. Johnston et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 309. Despite the usefulness of Weber's fine study, he only focuses on one side of the critical transformation, where literature becomes theoretical, but not the other side, where theory becomes literature. One can venture to ask oneself why.

¹⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Literary Absolute* op. cit., 12.

according to Benjamin's reading, upon which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy rely, is the Romantic unbounding of reflection from the Fichtean opposition of a self-positing 'I' and a counter-posed 'not I' or other, or in other words, from the premise of a constitutive subject, which would ground thought and provide it with a self-certain basis. "Romantic thinking", writes Benjamin, "dissolves (*hebt...auf*) being and positing into reflection." Henceforth, "reflection expands without limit or check, and the thinking given form in reflection turns into formless thinking which directs itself upon the absolute."¹¹ The mirror of theory and the mirror of literature reflect one another in a *mise-en-abyme*; and in this reflection affirm themselves henceforth only as indefinitely other to themselves. If I might venture to translate this historical opening into a quasi-Heideggerian register, since Jena, literature and theory belong to the same (*das Selbe*), which is not the identical. By understanding the infinite absolute as "the medium of reflection", Romanticism necessarily travels in both directions, and is in fact not simply double, but multiple, plural—as the signatories who bore and continue to bear witness to it—under ever new names—letting resonate beyond literature and theory, or as neither literature nor theory, the dangerous perhaps of a third or fourth genre or gender.

To support this suggestion, I refer in the first instance to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's discussion of "the romantic genre" in the chapter entitled "The poem: a Nameless Art".¹² What was thought and *in a certain way* practiced—or at least marked—as the fragment, the letter, the dialogue and above all, the novel, was not only an assembling and mixing of genres (*gattieren*, they remind us in German means

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism" in *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 128-129.

¹² Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute* op. cit. 81-100.

“to mix”), but also a beyond of genre, of literature itself, what they call a “world”, an *organon*. “Romantic poetry”, says the famous *Atheneum* Fragment 116:

is not destined merely to unite all the separate genres of poetry and to put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It wants to and should sometimes mix and sometimes fuse poetry and prose, geniality and criticism, the poetry of art (*Kunstpoesie*) and the poetry of nature (*Naturpoesie*); make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical...It embraces everything from the greatest systems of art...to the sigh, the Kiss that the poeticizing child breathes forth in song. It alone can become, like the epic, a mirror of the whole circumambient world (*der ganzen umgebenden Welt*), an image of the age....and on the wings of poetic reflection, can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power; can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors.¹³

Given that Friedrich Schlegel and the early Romantics did not believe in any simple opposition or immunization of Romantic poetry and the “circumambient world” and “lived” experience; there would have to have been, as a necessary corollary of literature theory mixation—mixation at the level of the body, sexuality and gender. The Romantic in me ‘knows’ this, and/or passionately believes it, even before he or she looks for re-confirmation in the archives. In “On Philosophy: To Dorothea” (1799), Friedrich Schlegel posits an androgynous ideal, where the different but complementary lacks inherent in *both* men *and* women supplement one another. Men should cultivate their poetic sensibilities and capacities, which at the outset are inferior to those of women, while women must study philosophy in order to raise themselves above the “*Weltmeer*” of material, domestic concerns, in which they are otherwise in danger of drowning.

“Only soft masculinity (*sanfte Männlichkeit*); only independent femininity (*selbständige Weiblichkeit*) are the right, the true and the beautiful.”¹⁴

¹³ Cited in *ibid.* 91-92.

¹⁴ Friedrich Schlegel, *Theorie der Weiblichkeit*, ed. Winfried Menninghaus (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1983) 92.

In the chapter of *Lucinde* (1798) entitled “Dithyrambic Fantasy about the Most Beautiful Situation”, the narrator, Julius, imagines the sweet play of role reversal where he and Lucinde compete to see who can most effectively imitate the other, whether:

“you succeed better in imitating the protective intensity of the man (*Schonende Heftigkeit des Mannes*) or I in imitating the attractive yielding of woman (*anziehende Hingebung des Weibes*). But do you know that this game has charms for me that are quite different from its own? Moreover, it is not merely a matter of the pleasures of exhaustion or the presentiments of revenge. I see here a wonderful allegory, rich in sense and full of meaning (*eine wunderbare, sinnreich bedeutende Allegorie*)—of the perfection of the masculine and feminine to complete, whole humanity (*auf die Vollendung des Männlichen und Weiblichen zur vollen ganzen Menschheit*). There is a lot in this, but what lies within it, certainly will not stand up as quickly as I, when I succumb to you. (*Es liegt viel darin, und was darin liegt, steht gewiss nicht so schnell auf wie ich, wenn ich Dir unterliege.*)”¹⁵

Here the crudely ironic or self-ironic *Witz*, as an interruption, cuts down the loftiness of the mythical ideal of a perfect and whole humanity. It does so, by setting up a contest between, on the one hand, the supposed semantic potency of the allegory and, on the other hand, the supposed physical potency of his sexual desire. As a *Wortspiel*, a pun, the *Witz* plays on two senses of the word *liegen* in German: *liegen*—as that in which “lies” a richness of meaning and sense, and physically lying in a horizontal position. The allegorical meaning and richness of androgynous mirror play will not stand up very quickly, not as quickly as his penis will—or is imagined to—when he succumbs to Lucinde.¹⁶

¹⁵ Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971) 49.

¹⁶ On the Romantic understanding of *Witz*, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute* op. cit., 52f. : “Witz is basically qualified as a unification of heterogeneous elements; that is, both a substitute for true conception...and as a double of judgment...It is as if *Witz* constituted the other name and the other “concept” of knowledge, or rather the name and the concept of knowledge that is other.”

If one reads this passage closely, one notices that there are in fact two contests, which are embedded in one another: a love contest, where Julius and Lucinde exchange roles and mirror one another; and an ironic contest, where Julius' desire to read and, one presumes, sublimate this mirror play as an allegory stands up against his carnal desire to succumb to her. Androgynous mirror play or lovingly competitive role reversal is here contiguous with a changing of sexual positions in a fabulous space where fantasy, paradigmatically intermixes with reality—one mutually stimulating and quickening the other. Ironically, he stands up more quickly by momentarily relinquishing the privilege of being on top, by *in a certain way* becoming woman.¹⁷

It should be noted that the role women played in Early Romanticism was in several regards singular and significant. Like the essay “On Philosophy” published in the *Athenäum*, the novel *Lucinde* can—and even must—be read as a love letter addressed to Dorothea. Published anonymously by her husband two years after the first volume of *Lucinde*, Dorothea Schlegel's equally unfinished novel *Florentin* can be read as a response. It contains an episode where one of the female protagonists Julianne (whose name resonates with a character in *Lucinde*) cross-dresses as a hunter with her two male friends.¹⁸

Romantic irony, especially in the work of Friedrich Schlegel, reconfigures the classical oppositions between man and woman, I and ‘not I’, self and other,

¹⁷ Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (New York: Continuum, 2004). For Deleuze and Guattari, becoming-woman is the key to all becomings: “It is perhaps the special situation of women in relation to the man-standard that accounts for the fact that becomings, being minoritarian, always pass through a becoming-woman” (321). For what Deleuze and Guattari's thought owes to the German Romantics, see John Sellars, “The Point of View of the Cosmos: Deleuze, Romanticism, Stoicism”, *PLI* 8 (1999), 1-24.

¹⁸ Dorothea Mendelssohn Veit Schlegel *Florentin (A Novel)* (Lewiston, NY: Edward Mellon Press, 1988).

philosophy and literature, and, as we shall see, seriousness and play, in such a manner that these terms *no longer simply appear as oppositional*. More profoundly, however, as an effect of Romantic irony one can no longer be certain if any of these terms reliably designate what they seem to. There is a liberation of energy, what Walter Benjamin called “an overflowing fullness of life”¹⁹, which threatens to put into question the very possibility of stabilizing meaning or action. For what remains of this essay, I will explore further what happens with irony in the work of Friedrich Schlegel and what are the consequences for both German studies and philosophy.

In an essay on Schlegel entitled “The Concept of Irony” the literary critic Paul de Man made the provocative claim that:

[T]he whole discipline of *Germanistik* has developed for the single reason of dodging Friedrich Schlegel, of getting around the challenge that Schlegel and that *Lucinde* offer to the whole notion of academic discipline which would deal with German literature – seriously.²⁰

Despite appearances, in this passage Paul de Man is not seeking to make argument for the dismissal of *Germanistik*, i.e., the serious academic study of German literature. He is suggesting rather that there is something in Schlegel’s work, and especially in the novel *Lucinde*, which is inassimilable for *Germanistik* as it is currently constituted, i.e., as a discipline whose basic premises would be protected from irony. And by extension also, from pornography. He is also suggesting, I think, that something very important might be lost in the culturally enforced exigency always to submit the frivolity and playfulness of literature to the non-ironic seriousness of academic discipline. Moreover, what is said here about frivolity and playfulness of literature

¹⁹ W. Benjamin „The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism” op. cit.,163.

²⁰ Paul de Man „The Concept of Irony” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 168.

must also be said of philosophy inasmuch as the German Romantics did not simply distinguish the two.

De Man's reading of *Lucinde* focuses on a small chapter in the middle of the book with the seemingly innocent title "*Eine Reflexion*", where what reads like a philosophical argument using language which can be identified as that of Fichte is also—"well, how should I put it?—a reflection on the very physical questions involved in sexual intercourse."²¹ Although he does not use the word, it is clear that for de Man *Lucinde* is pornography, or rather what Avital Ronell has called, pornosophy.²² There is a double code, which is not just a double code, because it brings together two codes, which are radically incompatible with one another, i.e., philosophy and "something which we do not generally consider worthy of philosophical discourse"²³. De Man adds:

These two codes...interrupt, they disrupt each other in such a fundamental way that this very possibility of disruption represents a threat to all assumptions one has about what a text should be.²⁴

One cannot say if *Lucinde* is a serious philosophical novel or just a frivolous joke. It is rigorously impossible to say exactly what it is or what it is trying to do or if the specter of a pornographic reading is simply intentional or not. For this reason, de Man believes Schlegel's *Lucinde* has provoked such violent condemnations from major philosophical figures such as Hegel and Kierkegaard. If this little fragmentary novel had not touched on something important, these figures would not have felt the

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Avital Ronell invents the neologism " pornosophy" in relation to Paul de Man's reading of Schlegel's *Lucinde* with reference also the work of Georges Bataille and the Marquis de Sade. See Avital Ronell, "Introduction: the Stealth Pulse of Philosophy" in Anne Dufourmantelle, *Blind Date: Sex and Philosophy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), xvi.

²³ Paul de Man „The Concept of Irony" in *Aesthetic Ideology* op. cit. 168-69.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 169.

need to engage with it as ferociously as they did: “Hegel and Kierkegaard, that's not *n'importe qui*.”²⁵ Even those literary critics such as Walter Benjamin, Lukács, Peter Szondi, who have sought to defend Schlegel by arguing that he is not really frivolous, that he is truly a serious writer, have missed, de Man suggests, the essential point.²⁶

De Man is aware, of course, that irony can be interpreted as an aesthetic practice or an artistic device. Moreover, it can also be understood in terms of the dialectic of the self as a reflective structure, in which the self looks at itself as another from a certain distance. The chapter in question entitled “*Eine Reflexion*” indeed has to do with reflexive patterns of consciousness. However, de Man dismisses such approaches as defusing the basic threat that irony poses. For de Man, what is at stake in irony, particularly as deployed by Friedrich Schlegel, is an essential and structural possibility of interruption *of all narrative (be it philosophical or literary) at any time*. As such, it cannot be reduced to a moment in the dialectic of self or simply to a particular aesthetic practice or artistic device.

To justify this position de Man refers, as he must, to Schlegel's theorization of irony. It is worth noting that if Schlegel had not also *theorized* his ironic writing practice, if he had just written *Lucinde*, it would not be possible to attribute to him the singular importance that de Man does. Critical for De Man's argument is Schlegel's definition of irony in rhetorical terms as a “permanent parabasis”: (“*Die Ironie ist eine permanente Parekbase.—*”²⁷). *Parabasis* is the interruption of a discourse by a shift in

²⁵ Paul de Man „The Concept of Irony” in *Aesthetic Ideology* op. cit. 168. De Man cites Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vortlesungen über die Ästhetik I*, Theorie Werkausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), vol. 13, 97-98; and Søren Kierkegaard, *Über den Begriff der Ironie: mit ständiger Rücksicht auf Sokrates*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), 292.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 168

²⁷ Friedrich Schlegel, "Zur Philosophie" (1797), Fragment 668, in *Philosophische Lehrjahre I (1796-1806)*, ed. Ernst Behler, in *Kritische Ausgabe* (Paderborn-Vienna- Munich: Verlag Ferdinand

the rhetorical register. The example Schlegel gives is of the *buffo*, a term from *commedia dell'arte*, which refers to the destruction of narrative illusion, the *aparté*, the aside to the audience during a play by means of which the fiction is broken.²⁸ Inasmuch as Schlegel defines irony as a *permanent* parabasis, it has an unlimited incidence. With this definition he makes the claim that irony can interrupt a narrative or a conversation violently and uncontrollably at any or all points. This is what happens, for example, in the chapter from *Lucinde* cited above, where the philosophical argument is interrupted when all of a sudden it seems to correspond to something completely different, which at first would seem to have nothing to do with it and that, moreover, would question its authority. This ironic questioning of philosophical authority—authority, which is grounded in the belief in the self-presentation of an appropriable meaning and the build up of accreditable content—has ethico-political consequences that Schlegel himself recognized and underlined. He wrote once: “Even a friendly conversation which cannot at any given moment be broken off voluntarily with complete arbitrariness (*aus unbedingter Willkür*) has something coercive about it (*hat etwas Illiberales*).”²⁹ On this basis one would have to re-think the self-evidence of all the conventional discursive structures and mores, which sustain academic work and teaching, such as lectures, conference papers, examinations and so on, which suppress voluntary and arbitrary interruption.

Now it is important to note that the irony theorized and practiced by Schlegel is not restricted to Early German Romanticism. Even if it has no parallel in German letters, it undoubtedly reaches into French thought of the mid to late twentieth century. Dictating what Schlegel writes from behind his back is, among others,

Schoningh, 1963), 18:85. See also Paul de Man „The Concept of Irony” in *Aesthetic Ideology* op. cit. 179.

²⁸ *ibid.* 178.

²⁹ *ibid.* 171.

Georges Bataille, who a century and a half later translates *Lucinde* as *Madame Edwarda*, *Athenaeum* as *Acéphale*, and “*Über die Unverständlichkeit*” as “*Conférences sur le non-savoir*”. In ways that mirror Schlegel, Bataille also invests himself heavily in a communitarian praxis of sexual and philosophical experimentation whose principle support is the writing of a journal. In this journal and elsewhere, high philosophy mixes with ecstatic sexual bodies in ways that also enrage the reigning philosopher king, Jean-Paul Sartre, whose reaction is as if pre-programmed from the late eighteenth century.³⁰ Why is this ‘Romantic’ writing/living practice so threatening? Why is this pleasure so taboo? It is not only that it takes itself seriously when it should not, but more essentially, as mentioned above, it renders undecidable what is serious and what is not – upsetting the very possibility of an order of priorities.

I would like to suggest that a thinking, writing and living practice which gives hospitality to this arbitrariness and undecidability is *perhaps* more serious, more powerful and more inclusive than one which would close itself off to it. In order to elaborate this hypothesis, I would like to turn, if only momentarily, to a close friend of George Bataille, Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot was Bataille’s contemporary and he wrote an important essay on Friedrich Schlegel and the *Athenaeum*, which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy recognized as the chief inspiration of their book, *The Literary Absolute*.³¹ For my purposes here, I will not discuss this essay but refer rather to an

³⁰ On Jean-Paul Sartre’s aggressive critique of the work of Georges Bataille, see Peter Tracey Connor, *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Avital Ronell, “The Rhetoric of Testing” in *Stupidity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2002) 95-164 and Jacques Derrida “From a Restricted Economy to a General Economy: an Hegelianism without Reserve” in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 251-278.

³¹ Maurice Blanchot, “The *Athenaeum*” in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 351-359. This essay was first published in 1964 in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*.

earlier work of Blanchot's entitled *The Space of Literature* (1955). This book is an investigation into the question of the historical existence of *something like* art and literature. Very close to the center of this investigation, Blanchot writes of the necessity for both the artwork and the artist at a certain moment to take "the risk of surrendering to the inessential". Under the Romantic sounding title of "Inspiration", Blanchot writes:

The risk of surrendering to the inessential is itself essential...Not to know of it makes life easier and tasks more feasible, but in ignorance it still lies concealed; forgetfulness is the very depth of its remembrance. And whoever senses it can no longer escape. Whoever has approached it, even if he has recognized in it the risk of the inessential, regards this approach as essential, sacrifices to it all truth, all the important concerns (*tout le sérieux*) to which he nonetheless feels attached.³²

Later in the book, he adds:

The more the world is affirmed as the future and the broad daylight of truth, where everything will have a value, bear meaning, where the whole will be achieved under the mastery of man and for his use, the more it seems that art must descend toward that point where nothing has meaning yet, the more it matters that art maintain the movement, the insecurity and the grief of that which escapes every grasp and all ends. The artist and the poet seem to have received this mission: to call us obstinately back to error, to turn us toward that space where everything we propose, everything we have acquired, everything we are, all that opens upon the earth and in the sky, returns to insignificance, and where what approaches is the nonserious and the nontrue, as if perhaps thence sprung the source of all authenticity.³³

One could say that what Paul de Man and Friedrich Schlegel describe in terms of the permanent parabasis of irony, Maurice Blanchot describes at an experiential level in terms of the task or 'mission' of the artist. The risk of the inessential interrupts what Woody Allen once called the artist's Catholicism, i.e., that which would allow an artist to believe they are in the thrall of an irresistible vocation, that what they are doing is fundamentally important and which will allow them finally to

³² Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) 169-170.

³³ *ibid.*, 247.

achieve some sort of immortality.³⁴ For an artist, artwork or critic to be worthy of the name, the ironic disruption of what is (believed to be) serious and true must take place. For it is only on this condition Blanchot believes that a work goes beyond what assures it. This ironic ‘going beyond’, step not beyond, this surrendering to the risk of the inessential, for Blanchot, as for Schlegel and de Man, is essentially linked to erotic desire and seduction. He writes:

[T]hat forbidden movement is precisely what Orpheus must accomplish in order to carry the work beyond what assures it. It is what he cannot accomplish except by forgetting the work, seduced by a desire that comes to him from the night, and that is linked to night as to its origin... Something more important than the work, more bereft of importance than the work, announces and affirms itself. The work is everything to Orpheus except that desired look where it is lost. Thus it is only in that look that the work can surpass itself, be united with its origin and consecrated in impossibility.³⁵

As the passages above illustrate, in the life and self-understanding of an artist or non-artist (Blanchot does not simply oppose them), there are double, contradictory, even multiple dimensions of irony and incomprehensibility. Schlegel underlines this aspect in his famous essay “On Incomprehensibility” (1800) (*Über die Unverständlichkeit*), when at last he comes to speak of the irony of irony:

But what we want this irony of irony (*Ironie der Ironie*) to mean in the first place is something that is created in more than one way. For example, if one speaks of irony without using it, as I have just done; if one speaks of irony ironically without in the process becoming aware of having fallen into a far more noticeable irony; if one can’t disentangle oneself from irony any more, as seems to be happening in this essay on incomprehensibility... irony runs wild and can no longer be controlled.³⁶

The running wild of irony, its promiscuousness and rampant procreativity, includes and even presupposes for Schlegel its very exhaustion: “it gets tiresome if we are always confronted with it”.³⁷ The literary critic Winfried Menninghaus draws

³⁴ See *A Companion to Woody Allen* ed. Peter J. Bailey and Sam B. Girgus (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013).

³⁵ *ibid.*, 174.

³⁶ Friedrich Schlegel *Lucinde and the Fragments* op. cit. 267.

³⁷ *ibid.*

attention to the fact that in *Atheneum* Fragment 124 Schlegel calls for the license to represent “disgusting sensual or intellectual impotence (*“ekelhafte sinnliche oder geistige Impotenz”*). This, according to Menninghaus, “delimits nothing less than the entire pre-romantic system of aesthetics”, from Baumgarten to Kant, including Lessing, Mendelssohn and Herder, for who disgust (*Ekel*) marked the sole and unique sensation which cannot be transformed into an object of aesthetic pleasure.³⁸ The courage and probity to take sexual and creative impotence seriously, to recognize in these experiences something of perhaps essential artistic value, pre-figures or postmarks Mallarmé and Blanchot.³⁹ That irony disseminates itself, is perhaps dissemination itself, undermines any hope that one could ever simply be immune to it. Just below the passage cited above, in an atmosphere reminiscent of Kafka’s burrow, Schlegel writes:

And even if it should happen that everything were to be peaceful for a long period of time, one would still not be able to put any faith in this seeming calm. Irony is something one simply cannot play games with. It can have incredibly long lasting after effects.”⁴⁰

Postscript

When an earlier draft of this essay was delivered as a paper to the Department of German at New York University in 2006, I was asked by Ulrich Baer if there were not something in Friedrich Schlegel’s thinking and deployment of irony, as it is interpreted by Paul de Man, that is truly frightening and from which we actually should try to protect ourselves. I think this is a thought-provoking question, which perhaps gets to the heart of what I have attempted to argue in this essay. For this reason, I cite it here as a postscript.

³⁸ Winfried Menninghaus, “„Disgusting Impotence” and Romanticism.” *European Romantic Review* 10.2 (1999): 202-213.

³⁹ M. Blanchot, “Inspiration, lack of inspiration” in *The Space of Literature* op. cit. 177f.

⁴⁰ Friedrich Schlegel *Lucinde and the Fragments* op. cit. 267

To respond, I would begin by recalling that in the second edition of “*Rede über die Mythologie*” Schlegel put forward the disturbing thesis that “the authentic language”, what he called *die reele Sprache*, is “error, madness, and simpleminded stupidity.”⁴¹ Paul de Man interprets this thesis as follows:

The authentic language is the language of madness, the language of error, and the language of stupidity...It is such because this authentic language is a mere semiotic entity, open to the radical arbitrariness of any sign system and as such capable of circulation, but which as such is profoundly unreliable.⁴²

Now if Schlegel is right to define ‘the authentic language’ in such terms, then indeed the professor might be right: there probably is a deep necessity to contain and control it in order to safeguard the possibility of narrative coherence and intelligibility. Not to mention philosophical authority. On the other hand, however, for the same reason if ‘the authentic language’ really is madness, error and simpleminded stupidity, then any attempt to contain and control it *will always be in some measure insufficient*.

Therefore—and this is my answer to Ulrich Baer’s question and in a sense the thesis of this essay—there must be another approach, another response, one that does not simply try to contain, control and master incomprehensibility (*Unverständlichkeit*). In response to those in Schlegel’s time who criticized his writings in the *Athenaeum* by claiming that they were incomprehensible, Schlegel asked memorably:

But is incomprehensibility, then, something so evil and objectionable?—It seems to me that the welfare of families and of nations is grounded in it; ... Yes, even the most precious possession of mankind, inner satisfaction, is suspended, as we all know, on some such point. It must remain in the dark if the entire edifice is to remain erect and stable; it would lose its stability at once if this power were to be dissolved by means of

⁴¹ Friedrich Schlegel *Kritische Ausgabe* 2:311-22; 318-19; See also Friedrich Schlegel, “Talk on Mythology” in *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc, (University Park and London: Penn State University Press, 1968) 81-88 & 86. See also Paul de Man, „The Concept of Irony” in *Aesthetic Ideology* op. cit. 180.

⁴² Paul de Man „The Concept of Irony” in *Aesthetic Ideology* op. cit. 181

understanding. Truly, you would be quite horrified if your request were answered, and the world would all of a sudden become, in all seriousness, comprehensible. Is not this entire infinite world built out of incomprehensibility, out of chaos, by means of understanding? (*Und ist sie selbst diese unendliche Welt, nicht durch den Verstand aus der Unverständlichkeit oder dem Chaos gebildet?*)⁴³

One might trace a lineage of attempts to formulate different approaches to what Schlegel called ‘the authentic language’ (*die reele Sprache*) from the Early German Romantics to Stéphane Mallarmé, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Paul de Man, all the way to Avital Ronell, the ironic title of whose book, *Stupidity*, takes the risk of addressing the reader from a place where it is undecided if stupidity is the book’s *theme*, i.e., the topic it will address in a scholarly and therefore presumably intelligent fashion, or if the content of the book is stupidity pure and simple. “Stupidity is everywhere,” she writes.⁴⁴ If Schlegel is right, if the authentic language is “error, madness and simpleminded stupidity”, then it may be necessary *in a certain way* to give in to it. When I say “in a certain way”, I wish to suggest in an informed, educated, reflective, *gebildete*, dare I say, ‘enlightened’ way. Schlegel once said that *Bildung*, (self-)reflection, (self-)formation, (self-) cultivation, was the only thing that protects us from fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*).⁴⁵ As much of the recent scholarship in the field has argued, the thinking of Early German Romantics can no longer be considered to be simply the opposite of that of the Enlightenment.

⁴³ Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments* op. cit. 268 (translation modified).

⁴⁴ Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* op. cit. 37.

⁴⁵ “*Bildung ist das Einzige, was gegen Schwärmerei sicher*” Beilage II, 13. Friedrich Schlegel *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, Band 18, 518.

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