

Hegel's Critique of Romantic Irony

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The thought of Early German or ironic Romanticism represents, for Hegel, a tendency that is radically opposed to his own philosophical system, to Science, as he calls it¹. In fact, Hegel considers ironic Romanticism to be fundamentally anti-philosophical, and his reaction to it tells us as much about his way of conceiving of philosophy as the question, “how does Plato consider Sophistry?” may tell us about Platonism. My aim here is to sketch out the main lines of Hegel's critique of Romantic irony and to show how his comprehension of it involves an attempt to conceptualize the three main protagonists, Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis and Schleiermacher, in terms of his own systematic thought. Hopefully, I will also be able to convey some idea of how the strangeness of the Romantic object necessarily renders its systematic incorporation moot.

The strength of Hegel's conceptualization does not mean that he takes seriously or attempts to fully understand his Romanticism's theoretical and artistic productions. In fact, he is deeply unfaithful in his dismissive attitude to what we now take as the rich philosophical oeuvre of each Romantic thinker. Rather, Hegel's critical target is first and foremost the personalities that Friedrich Schlegel², Novalis and Schleiermacher incarnate and, above all, express. This does not mean that Hegel's critique is, in the usual sense, *ad hominem*, as if we could separate the thinker from his life. Indeed, we can say that Hegel takes the Romantic tenet most seriously: there is no distance between the creative genius and what he creates. On one hand, the actual life of the creative genius should be “configured” artistically; reciprocally, his production is an immediate expression of that life³. Similarly, from the Scientific (systematic, Hegelian) point of

view⁴, the Romantic thinker can do no better than pronounce his own individual personality. Further, the choice of these three crucial participants in the *Athenäum* review is not arbitrary. As “conceptualized” by Hegel, they come to represent three fundamental, critical moments of ironic expression.

If Hegel cares about the three principal protagonists of Romantic Irony it is not because he finds their individual lives particularly interesting. In fact, as individual and therefore *natural* lives they have little philosophical import. Rather, the three Romantic figures are significant because they represent forms of contemporary subjectivity that are especially pernicious to what Hegel conceives of as Science and the world in which it exists. In other words, although Hegel’s critique of irony is unfaithful to Romantic theory, as principally articulated by Schlegel in the *Athenäum* review (1798-1800), Hegel still may be justified in seeing it as a threat to his own idea of philosophical Science and its world.

I feel that what makes Hegel’s critique of Romantic irony so strong has never been fully grasped, i.e. by understanding this critique solely in terms of “bad” particular subjectivity, as Otto Pöggeler does in his 1956 thesis on the subject⁵, we have neglected to consider how, for Hegel, subjectivity is only meaningful with regard to the objective world that it posits and finds itself in. Hegel’s profound insight, which underlies his entire critique of Romantic irony, is that ironic selfhood posits a world that excludes any possibility of objective truth, in order to then flee or reject this world, either through pleasure, through inner feeling or through death. Such a world is posited through the ironic verb, through its form of discourse. If Hegel’s critique is highly polemical, it is because the objectivity posited by the discourse of Romantic irony comes about at the expense of an entirely different objectivity, one that forms the actual content of

Hegelian Science, guarantying its meaning and truth. The pronouncements of ironic subjectivity do not admit such a world⁶.

My book on Hegel's critique of the Early German Romantics ends rather tragically, with the idea that the philosopher, at Berlin, near the premature end of his life, at the height of his philosophical career, felt something deeply unphilosophical and thus un-Hegelian to be surfacing in his contemporary world, something deeply inimical to the world implied by Science. After all, his most polemical writings on ironic Romanticism are penned there, more than two decades after the *Athenäum's* demise, Novalis's death and Schlegel's conversion to Catholicism. I hypothesize that what Hegel sees on the near horizon, and reacts strongly against, is the rise of the post-modern world, a fundamentally ironical world made flesh through the persistent presence of his Berlin rival, Schleiermacher⁷.

While I am certainly not judging that the Hegelian world of Science is "better" than the post-modern one that he is criticizing, I do claim that Hegel was well aware of their difference and the stakes that it implies in terms of the essential relationship between selfhood and worldhood. I have not changed my mind about this. However, rather than simply seeing Hegel's polemical stand against irony as a stubbornly reiterated opposition to a thoroughly alien and inevitable Other, which his thought could never overcome, I now better understand his strategy. Hegel's critique of Romantic irony consists of fully adopting the critical pretensions of Schlegel's judgments⁸ as the moment of dialectical negativity that is essential to the development of his own narrative of absolute Spirit. After briefly reviewing Hegel's conceptual take on irony, through his characterizations of Schlegel, Novalis and Schleiermacher, I will return summarily to the question of critical negativity.

The forms of irony that Hegel attributes to Schlegel and Novalis are related to two unilateral moments: two moments of thought itself that are unmediated and unreconciled and, as such, fall under the sign of the understanding (*Verstand*)⁹. The individualities of Schlegel and Novalis represent fundamental instantiations of irony from the point of view of the self. However, these forms are only truly ironical, as I noted above, to the extent that they signify a certain relation to the world. Indeed the form of irony expressed by the individual selfhood of Schlegel supposes a completely empirical grasp of objectivity, where the world is reduced to a bad infinity of subjectively determinable, finite singularities, to be mastered and consumed. On the other hand, the ironical form expressed by the intuitive selfhood of Novalis supposes the disappearance of all objectivity, i.e. a pure skepticism where the sole subjective content is that which is derived from inner feelings. Hegel thinks of these two instances in terms of barbarity (a concept derived, as we will see, from Schiller's *Letters on the Esthetic Education of Man*), fittingly, one might say, because the expression of their unilateral fixation is injurious to the "civilized" i.e. spiritual totality that is realized in the logos of Science. However, it is important to note that the apparently radical distinction between the expressions of empirical knowledge and intuitive feeling are, in fact, based on their deep complicity, stemming from their fundamental adherence to the logic of the understanding. Indeed, as Kant had showed, the representations of the *Verstand* are ambiguously related to both the transcendental imaginings of the internal forms of time and space, as well as to the exterior content of the categories¹⁰. For Hegel, the unmediated unilaterality of each of these two aspects of the understanding makes them inherently unstable and oscillatory, causing one to readily collapse into the other. Thus, in Hegel (and in the history of philosophy) empiricism is always haunted by skepticism, which, in turn, seeks salvation by positing the axiomatic truth of empirical experience¹¹.

Thus, while the individual figures of Schlegel and Novalis are presented as two distinct, archetypal expressions of Romantic irony, as two unilateral moments, each fixated in its barbarous relation to true (Scientific) objectivity, their underlying complicity is presupposed and actually “lived” in their symphilosophical collaboration and friendship¹². It is only through the apparent duality of the positions that Schlegel and Novalis express that we are able to understand Hegel’s argument concerning Schleiermacher, whose theology of feeling is, for Hegel, the personification of the underlying complicity between two barbaric attitudes toward true objectivity. In this sense, the figure of Schleiermacher will show itself to be fully actual, in that he embodies, according to Hegel, the basic tendencies of the contemporary (post-modern?) world. Let us now look closer at how Hegel presents the ironical personalities that he finds expressed in Schlegel and Novalis and their barbarous relation to Truth.

Vanity is the foremost personality trait that Hegel associates with Fr. Schlegel, the “father” of the Jena Romantic movement, the main theoretician of irony, and, importantly for Hegel, the author of the scandalous novel, *Lucinde*. Vanity appears through the terms *eitel*, *Eitelkeit* and *Vereitelung* that appear regularly when Schlegel is discussed¹³. As in English, that which is vain displays a narcissistic presumption, a kind of mirroring effect, and a certain empty futility with regard to action carried out in the world. In Schlegelian irony, according to Hegel, the two meanings are linked. More precisely, ironic selfhood never gets beyond the model of the self-reflective *Ich bin Ich*, the I = I that Fichte uses to ground his *Doctrine of Science*, which Hegel adopts as the emblematic expression of irony, not because Fichte himself was responsible for its genesis but because the individual ironical subject fancies himself the embodiment of Fichte’s Absolute Self.

Thus, in Schlegel's literary and philosophical production, it is the individual "I" (*das Ich*) that posits all that is real and true. As well, the objectivity that the ironic self is confronted with is only the reflection of its own self, or, borrowing from the Kantian model also implicit in Hegel's take on ironic subjectivity, the ironical self is confronted with a world that is entirely made up of the phenomena that it has produced through its own subjective categories. Further, Kant has shown that the forms of the transcendental subject are essentially empty and hungry for phenomenal content, a hunger that Hegel associates with the fundamental negativity of thought itself. These theoretical underpinnings allow Hegel to conceive of Romantic irony, through Schlegel's vanity, as the action of subjective emptiness positing itself as a world, which is hence configured as determinable, empirical, consumable finitude. The truth of vanity is, of course, that the world the ironist faces is just as empty as the poseur who posited it.

Ironic selfhood is not conscious of the stuff of his own vanity but rather claims to be confronted with a substantial not-I or otherness; such bad faith reveals another fundamental characteristic of ironic vanity: hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is the self-told lie that allows the self to forget that the world before it is only the reflection of its own critical judgments (*Urteile*). The vain futility of irony consists in declaiming on an objectivity that is only a chimera posited by its own discourse. Such empty, self-reflecting discourse, as expressed in the ironic individual's judgments, are sophistical, which is why, in Hegel's references to Schlegel, hypocrisy often appears along with *Sophisterei*¹⁴. The inter-related ironic attributes of sophistry, hypocrisy and consumption allow Hegel to associate Schlegel, largely through the literary actuality of *Lucinde*, with sexual seduction¹⁵.

The vanity of ironic selfhood might seem harmless, and indeed if its judgments remained private, Science would not have to take them into account. But ironic vanity cannot keep quiet,

cannot help publicizing itself, publishing its critical fragments, its ideas, its half-finished novels, mediocre plays etc. The ironic individual frequents literary salons, spouts witty epigrams and, worse yet, actually gives university courses! This is how vanity, as *Eitelkeit*, becomes *Vereitelung*, the definitive term that Hegel uses to qualify Romantic irony as such: Irony, he writes, (in the review of K. W. F. Solger's works) "is the *Vereitelung* of all that is truly objective."¹⁶ We might translate *Vereitelung* in several ways: rendering futile, evacuating, depreciating... I have chosen the neologism "vanitization", because it retains all these meanings while conserving the radical narcissism of individual self-positing, self-reflection. The important thing to stress is that what vanitization targets, what ironic, critical pronouncements actually empty out is what Hegel calls, "all that is truly objective." What is truly objective, in its most spiritual articulation, is precisely what is incorporated as the content of Science. I want to briefly discuss what Hegel means by true objectivity (or objective truth) so that we may grasp how ironic judgments (pronouncements) can be seen as harmful to it.

I have argued elsewhere that within the context of Hegel's Science, what is truly objective is essentially discursive¹⁷. In other words, Hegel means his science to be objectively true not because it accurately reflects a true "being" that is "out there", not because it reflects true thought that is "in here" but because Scientific language is the effective, actual middle term between being and thought.

The objectivity of Science, in the systematic articulation of its logos, is derived from the objectivity of its contents. These are also discursive in nature. They are the objective discourses of the sciences of nature, of the state and its history, psychology, anthropology, law, and the histories of art, religion and philosophy. The contents of Science are neither arbitrary nor subjective. In fact, Science is nothing more than the comprehensive grasp of its discursive

contents, understood as the dynamic unity of being and thought. This is why, if we read the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* carefully, we notice that the material dealt with is always textual in nature: reflections on right or law refer to contracts, written law, constitutions; art refers to the works themselves and to its written history; religion refers to dogma and the texts of theology; history refers to historiography; philosophy deals with the fundamental texts of its history; even Hegel's supposedly ethereal *Logic* refers to metaphysical texts, from Heraclitus, Aristotle, Leibniz et al, and demonstrates the instantiation of the transcendental Kantian categories into being. The *Encyclopedia*, as the written articulation of the system of Science derives its objectivity from that of its objectively true contents.

The objectivity of Scientific discourse has a strongly performative aspect, guaranteed by its actual objectivity. As actual, the language of Science must effectively participate in the world. In Hegel, I believe that this performative aspect is meant to be carried out by the pedagogical destiny of Science, through the fact that the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* was conceived as a systematic philosophical teaching manual. Further, to the extent that philosophy is considered, in Berlin around 1820, as the ultimate expression of the State university, which is itself considered as the formative corporation of the State, we see how the teaching of the *Encyclopedia* is involved in the political realization of Spirit (a.k.a. human freedom)¹⁸.

Given the discursive nature of Hegelian scientific objectivity, it should therefore not be surprising that the threat posed by Romantic irony, though the corrosive action of *Vereitelung*, must also be construed discursively. In fact, in irony, we are dealing with the action of judgment, in the etymological sense of "ur-teilen", i.e. an original or fundamental dividing. In irony, it is Schlegel's actual judgments that are the problem: his statements, affirmations,

declarations, aphorisms, fragments etc. that address the content of what constitutes the true objectivity of Science: spirit in the forms of religion, art, philosophy, politics, history etc.

The sophisticated aspect of ironic discourse and the threat it poses to Scientific logos may best be understood with reference to the role of the copula in the judgment form (*Urteil*) of the predicative proposition (*Satz*). Hegel's Scientific discourse involves the fulfilling of the copula whereby it becomes the particular (content-filled) moment of the syllogism (the most perfect – *Vollkommene* – form of the Concept)¹⁹. Conversely, he sees the vain discourse of ironic judgments as separating or joining grammatical (and psychical) subjects and predicates in a purely arbitrary fashion. Thus, in the *Sophisterei* of irony, the copula becomes a pure space of (subjective) reflection, as is the case with the “=” in Fichte's I = I. Since Schlegel, Novalis and Schleiermacher pronounce themselves through judgements on art, religion and philosophy, i.e. on the ultimate or absolute forms of (human) Spirit, there is much at stake for Hegel in his critique of Romantic irony.

In Hegelian dialectics, it is true that judgment has an ambiguous role: it constitutes the original division necessary for the encompassing movement of thought (a.k.a. the concept) toward mediation and reconciliation. However here, fixated in the selfhood of the individual ironist, judgement constitutes only a force of separation, dividing the holistic objectivity of Scientific language in two: thought versus being or, putting it another way, into signified and signifier. This is how, as Hegel writes, “judgment is a decidedly negative tendency against objectivity”, against “all that matters in religion and philosophy.”²⁰ The judging manner that Hegel ascribes to Schlegel's ironic expressions acts to tear apart the content-ful discourse of true objectivity, i.e. the discourses of politics, history, art, religion and philosophy, leaving a purely empirical, phenomenal reality. Such a reality has neither consistency nor substance. It is there,

for me, entirely made up of singular, finite, empirical things which are ultimately no more than thoroughly determinable linguistic signs. The world of finitude is there to be subjectively mastered or consumed. Thus in Hegel's references, Schlegel is often presented in terms of mastery and domination, of *Meisteschaft* and *Herrschaft*, along with a certain rapaciousness that Hegel expresses as a "will as power [*Willens als Macht*]"²¹, which, as I mentioned above, may be associated with sexual seduction.

The vanity of Romantic irony, at its deepest level, consists in positing oneself through one's own predicative judgments as "all things", in order to then exert mastery over this world. Again, it is only hypocrisy (to oneself) that prevents the ironic subject from recognizing the essential link between his self-ish vanity and the vanity of his world. The truth of this futile self-reflection, where hypocrisy is no longer able to stave off vanity's essential emptiness, is pure nothingness, the void positing the void, the mutual swallowing up of both the self and its world. This is how Hegel grasps the individuality and the ironic expression of Novalis: as the terminal manifestation of Schlegelienne ironic vanity. The essential nobility of Novalis's beautiful soul takes place in the dissolution of hypocrisy, leaving only the truth of its emptiness. Indeed, in dying of consumption, Novalis, according to Hegel's conceptual diagnosis, simply self-consumed. The vanity of all objectivity collapses into self-consuming subjectivity. Novalis thus appears as the truth of ironic vanity, the actual demonstration of its terminal outcome, where, once again, there is no separation between the Romantic artist and his discourse.

In presenting Novalis as a noble soul fleeing the world, Hegel is obviously not concerned with the "real" living individuality of Novalis, e.g. with his impressive work as an administrator of the Silesian salt mines. As was the case with Schlegel, the individuality of Novalis is only significant through the "dying echo"²² of his discourse, particularly as expressed in his *Hymns to*

the Night, where the hymn entitled “Yearning for Death” (*Sehnsucht nach dem Tode*) might be understood, on Hegel’s reading, as a *Schwindsucht* (consumption - tuberculosis) *nach dem Tode*. The actual disease and premature death of Novalis, his individuality, is thus expressed in his writing. The noble retreat from the “real” world that is found there is an expression of the refusal to take part in the hypocritical and indeed rapaciously bourgeois vanitization we saw in Schlegel²³. In his retreat from the world, Novalis falls into a state of self-destructive negativity, a pathological mental state that Hegel refers to as *Gemüt* (inner soul) in the Subjective Spirit section of the *Encyclopedia*, a state that cannot help but declare itself physiologically²⁴. In his pathological mental condition of *Gemüt*, Novalis, having renounced the outside world, cannot help but draw exclusively, on the inner “pit” (*Schacht*) of his soul²⁵, i.e. on what we call today the unconscious mind, for the content of his selfhood. This self-consumption produce fantasies, visions and feelings: the stuff of madness, where, in the state of *Gemüt*, it is the pit of the unconscious soul that determines the conscious mind, for example, when, in his *Hymns*, Novalis recounts how, spending the night lying on Sophie’s grave, he sees her rise before him as Christ. Such images are symptomatic of the terminal nature of the beautiful soul.

Schlegel and Novalis form two unilateral positions that are fundamental to Hegel’s idea of Romantic irony whose complicity, as I mentioned above, stems from their common root in the bi-polar oppositions of the understanding (*Verstand*). On one hand, in Schlegel, we have an expression of hypocritical, masterful vanity, whose judgments tear apart the objectively true content of philosophical science, leaving a decimated, empirical reality. On the other hand, we have Novalis, who represents a position of terminal skepticism, refusing all objectivity, taking refuge in its own inner feelings, intuitions fantasies, as a form of self-consumption. In spite of their complicity and the fact that the skeptical position is the “truth” of sophisticated vanity, these

two positions, in their fixity, are as distinct as the two magnetic poles. In fact, it is their very unilaterality that is essential to Hegel's overall grasp of romantic irony, and its dangers, which, I believe, Hegel comprehends in terms of barbarity.

Throughout his work, Hegel uses the term "Barbar" (or *Barbarei*) to describe each of the two unilateral positions we find incarnated in Schlegel and Novalis: either the exclusive usage of outward-turned understanding *or* the exclusive reliance on inner intuition. As I wrote above, Hegel is likely inspired here by Schiller's *Letters on the Esthetic Education of Man*, where we find the idea of savage barbarity applied to the opposed human tendencies of reasoning and sensibility (*Formtrieb* and *Sinntrieb*) in their exclusive use. As such, each aspect represents a way for humanity to be in contradiction with itself, i.e. in opposition to a vision of organic wholeness. Both Schiller and Hegel share the project of reconciling the fundamental contradiction of the late German Enlightenment, the dilemma between faith and reason as played out in the Pantheism quarrel between Mendelssohn and Jacobi. In fact, I believe we can see the entire Hegelian enterprise as the attempt to reconcile these two poles, variously described as faith and reason; understanding and intuition; knowing and believing etc. Romantic irony is so devastating precisely because it represents the recalcitrant and perverse refusal at any attempt at reconciliation. The term "Barbarei (barbarity)", in both Schiller and Hegel, consequently evokes its contrary: the beautiful unity as represented by the Ancient polis, under siege by those bent on tearing it to pieces²⁶. Similarly, Romantic irony stands opposed to the beautiful unity of Science. Continuing the analogy, we may note another fundamental point: for both Schiller and Hegel, barbarity is not something external or foreign; it is only the exclusive expression of one of the two moments which, in play together, must constitute the *life* of the beautiful whole, vitalized through the *Spieltrieb* (play-instinct) in Schiller and the *Begriff* (concept) in Hegel.

While Schlegel and Novalis each represents a privileged expression of barbarous, ironical one-sidedness, Schleiermacher embodies a sort of monstrous hybrid of the two tendencies, one where the theologian of feeling, Hegel's colleague and rival at the University of Berlin, figures as a contemporary manifestation of irony itself²⁷. Briefly put, Hegel's Schleiermacher incarnates the contemporary actuality of Romantic irony.

The scandalous, indeed dangerous nature of Schleiermacher's ironic actuality is perhaps best understood with regard to his "hermeneutical" approach to Church Doctrine – which, already in 1799, in his *Speeches on Religion*, Schleiermacher desacralizes as the "mausoleum of religion". This is important, since, as I explained above, written doctrine represents the objective content of revealed religion, and thus forms an essential content of Science and the world in which the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* makes sense. Schleiermacher's hermeneutical approach (Hegel does not use the term), consists in making judgments of the understanding (cf. the critical judging of Schlegel) that break down the words of sacred text, leaving, on the one hand, pure linguistic signifiers, ready for subjective mastery or interpretation, and, on the other, pure essence, what has been evacuated from the texts and sent "beyond". Such transcendent essence or truth is what Schleiermacher refers to as the "Universe", in place of "God". The difference between the terms is not significant since both are empty signifiers whose content, as "beyond," can only be approached through feeling. Thus, "a feeling of the universe" is what, for Schleiermacher constitutes religion.

Consequently, we can find in Schleiermacher's approach to religion the expression of the two barbarous unilateral tendencies that we discovered in Schlegel and Novalis: a hypertrophied judging *Verstand* and a skepticism regarding the presence of objective truth, leading to the promotion of subjective, inner feeling as the only way to experience (transcendent) Truth. At

Berlin, Hegel still associates Schleiermacher with the Romantic circle that he was a part of 20-odd years earlier. In fact, Hegel is only concerned with the theologian of feeling because he finds his written works, to the extent that he knows them, to be deeply ironical. In other words, their discourse is inimical to Hegelian logos. The fact that Hegel finds such an expression of irony to be fully contemporary, that it constitutes an important trend within the state university (of Berlin), that it has many followers, most of whom are actively opposed to the Hegelian system, leads him to see his rival's ironical expression as symptomatic of a contemporary malaise. This condition is presented by Hegel in terms of the three "absolute presuppositions of our culture and time²⁸": all we can know are finite, individual things (through our senses), i.e. empiricism; we can know nothing of the Truth in itself (i.e. scepticism); finally, only through feeling do we have access to this essential Truth beyond. Elsewhere, I have shown how these features of ironic actuality may be used to describe our own postmodern condition²⁹. Referring to François Lyotard's canonical work, *La condition postmoderne*, I endeavored to relate the unreconciled barbarities of empiricism, skepticism and feeling with postmodern social tendencies outlined in that work. The point was to show how Hegel's critique of irony can be understood as a critique of postmodernity, which Hegel perceived on the horizon of his own modern world, a world where his own "grand récit [great narrative]" could still take place³⁰. I will not reiterate the details of this analysis, here. Instead, I would like to show how Hegel does not simply accept the new ironical world as inevitable. Rather, as is usually the case in Hegel, that which simply presents itself in an immediate fashion, to be Scientifically relevant, must always be mediated, determined and overcome through the agency of thought. In this way, thought liberates itself (and we liberate ourselves) from (natural) immediacy. The challenge

regarding Romantic irony is that in it Hegel encounters a discourse that refuses his own notion of logos and consequently, refuses the liberation that thought proposes.

I believe that Hegel seeks to overcome and incorporate (*aufheben*) the discourse of Romantic irony into his systematic logos by taking seriously its critical enterprise. Rather than countering or ignoring the judging tendency of Schlegel's pronouncements, Hegel turns them back on themselves or, more clearly, on the fixated, binary, barbaric logic of the understanding that they stem from. The strategy consists of harnessing the pure negativity (as personified by Novalis) of the judgment form (personified by Schlegel) into the dialectical unfolding of the syllogistic (systematic) narrative of Science, whereby Romantic irony becomes a historically determined "moment". In thus making critical negativity a *past* expression, the Hegelian narrative strategy not only seeks to divest irony of its threatening contemporary character but also to harness its negativity into the movement of the Concept³¹. Briefly, irony, as criticism, becomes a crucial chapter in the unfolding of Hegel's story. I want to briefly highlight several settings where we see this strategy in action, specifically, within the "Spiritual" (human) contexts of history, art and religion.

The issue of criticism is explicitly raised in the introduction to Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, where he discusses different levels of historiography (Original, Reflective, Critical and Philosophical). Here, it is tempting to see Hegel's presentation of what he calls "Critical History" ("kritische Geschichte"), as just another polemical jab at Schlegel for his promotion of ironic criticism³². Indeed, some of the language that Hegel uses in describing Critical History, which produces "unhistorical monstrosities of pure imagination" and "subjective fancies – fancies which are held to be more excellent, the bolder they are..." takes up

expressions he uses elsewhere to qualify Schlegel's ironic judgments, making it probable that his writings on history are Hegel's target here.³³

Given Hegel's apparently polemical stance against expressions of Critical History and its "subjective fancies", we might wonder how this type of history can nonetheless be part of the systematic process described in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, where different levels of historical knowledge lead to Reason and Science. This problem has been largely avoided by misunderstanding the different forms of historiography that are discussed in this famous text, as a "variety" of "methods" that may be arbitrarily and erroneously chosen for the writing of history, thus making it easy to simply reject Critical History as a bad choice. In doing so, however, we miss its essential place within the holistic progression of the forms discussed, where it is meant to overcome the confines of Reflective History.³⁴ As such, Critical History becomes a necessary stage in the progression to Philosophical History, and Science.

In the *Philosophy of History*, "Critical History" should be embraced as a type of "commentary"³⁵ negativity intervening toward the end of Reflective History, breaking down its dogmatic "text book" or standardized version of past events, one which would preclude our move to the conceptual grasp of historiography within Philosophical Science, where, ultimately, we may grasp it as the movement of (our) freedom³⁶. Outside the systematic narrative, however, the critical historian's judgments are stuck producing self-centred arbitrary accounts, i.e. those "unhistorical monstrosities of pure imagination" and the "subjective fancies" that are characteristic of irony³⁷.

The dialectical agency of criticism can also be found in Hegel's introductory *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art*, where it is represented through the efforts of Schlegel, along with his

brother August, both of whom are initially lauded for introducing a new sense of freedom into German art scholarship, and for their critical openness to other cultures (e.g. Indian)³⁸. In this text, the Schlegels' new critical theories of art are seen in a surprisingly positive light. Through them, the old "rules and theories have been violently thrown aside" in a way that involves "a clever polemic against the traditional views". Most importantly, the thrust of such recent art criticism participates in a broader philosophical project by making possible a "deeper way" of grasping (speculatively) the truth of artistic beauty. In the aesthetic context, we see how recent criticism's breaking down of an ossified, theoretical understanding of art has led to the scientific (i.e. systematic) philosophy of art, in the same way that Critical History, as we saw, ushered in *philosophical* history by overcoming the static structures of reflective historiography. This positive assessment of the Schlegels' critical writings on art stands in stark juxtaposition to one of Hegel's most incendiary polemical texts against Friedrich Schlegel's irony, just a few pages further on, in these same introductory lectures, where we find iterated the principal attributes that Hegel discovers in the ironic individual and the vanity of his critical judgements: domination, seduction, hypocrisy and sophistry.³⁹

Outside the systematic (Hegelian) comprehension of it, Friedrich Schlegel's brand of irony represents a recalcitrant obstruction to the movement of Science itself, a fixation in the logic of understanding (*Ver-stand*) and a reluctance to embrace the fluid contradictions of Scientific thought. The contemporary actuality of this blockage is persistently personified for Hegel by his Berlin rival, the theologian Schleiermacher, whose spectre haunts the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* just as the figure of Schlegel haunts the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art*⁴⁰. However, even in Hegel's recurring condemnation of Schleiermacher's ironic theology there is an underlying ambiguity. On one hand, Schleiermacher represents the worst excesses of

subjectivist theology, the belief that what is essential in religion is how *I feel* about God, at the expense of the objective truth of Revelation, as initially (and linguistically) instantiated in sacred doctrine. On the other hand, as we discover in Hegel's preface to Hinrichs' work on religion, Schleiermacher's theology can be seen as flowing from the Enlightenment thought's campaign of liberation against the strict positivity of religion and the literal acceptance of dogmatic truth⁴¹. The ambiguity is well evidenced at the end of the Revealed Religion chapter of the *Encyclopedia's of Philosophical Sciences' Philosophy of Spirit*, where the ultimate Scientific destiny of religion, i.e. its passage to *philosophy* of religion, is prefaced by a substantial remark on the dangers of subjective (Romantic) irony!⁴² While the remark reaffirms, in a religious context, Hegel's fundamental critique of irony as the "vanitization" (*Vereitelung*) of all that matters, and a dangerous blockage on the road to philosophy (of religion), he also celebrates this form of religious criticism as an expression of free thought, and thus the "infinite characteristic" of the Absolute (God) itself.

In determining Romantic irony as a dialectical moment of critical negativity, Hegel accords it pride of place in the progression of the Scientific narrative; as criticism it participates in the necessary overcoming of those ossified structures of the understanding which are recalcitrant to a type of reasoning that embraces contradiction as fundamental to the elaboration of Truth. The very thing that renders Romantic irony particularly threatening to Science, i.e. the fact that its pronouncements address the highest forms of human Spirit, is also precisely what renders its *dialectical* role crucial to the realization of those same forms within the systematic pretensions of the *Encyclopedic* project. Nonetheless, the strength and persistence of Hegel's attacks on Romantic irony remind us of how deeply problematic its incorporation is, how the structure of its discourse rips apart the discursive fabric that seeks to enfold it.

¹ This is the theme of my book, *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel Against Ironic Romanticism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), where the principle points addressed in the present article are more fully developed.

² In this article, I will refer to Friedrich simply as “Schlegel”. I will use August Schlegel’s full name.

³ *Werke in 20 Bänden [Werke]* 13, Edited by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970) p. 94. The text from Hegel’s Introduction to his Lectures on the Philosophy of Art is one of the central references to Schlegel and Romantic Irony.

⁴ When I capitalize “Science” I mean Hegel’s systematic *Wissenschaft*, as expressed in his *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*.

⁵ Otto Pöggeler, *Hegels Kritik der Romantik*, (thesis), 1956. A reworked version was published in 1999, by Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München.

⁶ I have written quite a lot about the linguistic objectivity upon which the logos of Hegelian Science is founded⁶. The objective truth of Science is not so much threatened by opposing ideas (which, of course, the dialectic takes in its stride) but rather by a different form of discourse, one which Romantic irony expresses.

⁷ See the chapter on “On Schleiermacher and Postmodernity” in my *Real Words* (pp. 104-16), originally published in *Clio* 32, 4 (Summer 2003) pp. 455-72. See also my article, “How the Dreaming Soul Became the Feeling Soul, Between the 1827 and 1830 Editions of Hegel’s Philosophy of subjective Spirit,” in David S. Stern (ed.), *Essays on Hegel’s Philosophy of subjective Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013) pp. 37-54, where I examine the persistence of Hegel’s animus against Schleiermacher, at Berlin.

⁸ See, for example *Athenäum* fragment 281, where Schlegel writes: “Fichte’s *Doctrine of Science* is a philosophy on the material furnished by Kantian philosophy [...] It might very well be that [Fichte] is a Kant raised to the second power and that the *Doctrine of Science* is a lot more critical than it appears to be [...] and besides, one can never be too critical.” P. Firchow, translation and introduction, *Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde and the Fragments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971).

⁹ This is why the Culture chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, with its unreconciled oppositions, can be seen as embodying the Enlightenment’s attachment to understanding as opposed to (Kantian, Hegelian) Reason (*Vernunft*). It is not surprising that in Culture we find language similar to that Hegel uses when discussing Schlegel’s irony – e.g. M526 on vanity.

¹⁰ For a detailed examination of Hegel’s view of the understanding’s essential ambiguity as the source of the Enlightenment’s conflict between faith and reason, see my article, “How Reinhold Helped Hegel Understand the German Enlightenment and Grasp The Pantheism Controversy”, in DiGiovanni (ed.) *Karl Leonhard Reinhold And the Enlightenment* (New York: Springer, 2010).

¹¹ Consider, as examples, Gottlob Ernst Schutze’s facts of consciousness or Jacobi’s epistemological, axiomatic application of religious faith.

¹² Schlegel: “Man soll nicht mit allen symphilosophieren wollen, sondern nur mit denen die *à la hauteur* sind”. *Athenäum* fragment 264.

¹³ For example, in the addition to paragraph 140 of the *Philosophy of Right*, *Werke* 7, p.279; in

Hegel's Preface to Hinrichs work on religion, *Werke* 11, p. 61; in the introductory *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art*, *Werke* 13, p.96.

¹⁴ See again the addition to paragraph 140 of the *Philosophy of Right*.

¹⁵ See paragraph 164 of the *Philosophy of Right*.

¹⁶ *Werke* 11, p. 232-3. For a French translation of Hegel's review and an extensive commentary, see my *Hegel: Irony Romantique* (Paris: Vrin, 1997).

¹⁷ See note ... above.

¹⁸ Here, I might refer the reader to the chapter on Hegel and the State University, in my *Real Words* (pp. 71 – 84), originally published in the *Owl of Minerva*, 32, 1 (Fall 2000) pp. 5-19.

¹⁹ See the chapter on "Hegel's Ontological Grasp of Judgment" in my *Real Words*, pp. 18-28, originally published in *Dialogue* 45, 1 (Winter 2006) pp. 29 – 43.

²⁰ *Werke* 11, p. 233.

²¹ *Werke* 17, p. 181.

²² *Werke* 3, pp. 183-4.

²³ I explore the contrast between Novalis's nobility and Schlegel's essentially bourgeois character (on Hegel's reading) in my chapter on Novalis in *The Anti-Romantic*.

²⁴ On Novalis as Gemüt, *Werke* 13, p. 211. On Gemüt as a pathological state, *Werke* 10, pp. 126-7.

²⁵ *Werke* 10, p. 122.

²⁶ Hegel greatly admired Gibbon's *Fall of the Roman Empire*.

²⁷ I use "monstrous" in two senses of the word: because Schleiermacher represents an unreconciled duality, for example, as man and beast, and because he de-monstrates something: the actual presence of irony

²⁸ *Werke* 11, p.52.

²⁹ See Chapter 9, "On Schleiermacher and Postmodernity" in my *Real Words* or "Hegel on Schleiermacher and Postmodernity", *Clio* 32, 4 (Summer 2003) pp. 457-72.

³⁰ In his chapter "La délégitimation", Lyotard evokes precisely the overarching skepticism that Hegel expresses as the first universal presupposition of his times, "nothing is true". Lyotard presents this generalized skepticism as the end of the "great narratives" of progress and science, particularly as these are embodied in Hegel's systematic philosophy. This breakdown ushers in a type of postmodern knowledge that echoes the second of Hegel's universal presuppositions "of the times": we can only know finite things. Lyotard expresses this knowledge of the finite as an "éclatement", a dispersal into a multitude of empirical sub-sciences, a particularization or "parceling" of scientific domains according to their finite objects. Of course, the third absolute presupposition of our times, according to Hegel, is the predominance of feeling. The only account of postmodernity I have found that refers to something like this is Charles Taylor's reference to our contemporary yearning for authenticity as an inward-directed search for truth. Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979) pp. 63-68. Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi Press, 1991) and *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³¹ Hegel's Concept is the movement of thought, which, on an Absolute level, is expressed by the (Neoplatonic) Idea's coming out of itself into natural otherness, mediating that Other and then taking the experience back into itself, enriched and actualized. The most perfect form of the concept is the syllogism, which moves from the universal, through the particular, to a (universal) Singular. In my article, "Comets and Moons: The For-Another in Hegel's Philosophy of Nature", I show how "cometary negativity" intervenes within the moment of particularity in

order to dissolve the hard “lunar” recalcitrance of *Verstand*. I believe that we can understand the “critical” moment that Hegel ascribes to irony as just such an example of cometary negativity.

Owl of Minerva 45, 1-2 (2013-14) pp. 1-11.

³² The contemporary taste for criticism is a constant theme in Schlegel’s *Lyceum* and *Athenaeum Fragments*. For example *Athenaeum* fragment 116, where he defines romantic poetry as combining, among other things, “genius and criticism”. See also, for examples, *Athenaeum* fragments 221 and 281. Peter Firchow, *Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde and the Fragments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971).

³³ *Werke* 12, pp. 18-19. G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, the Humanities Press, 1953), p.9. The text also stresses the contemporary nature of Critical History as “pre-eminently the mode of treating history, now current in Germany”. Terms such as “höher Kritik” as well as forms of “Eitelkeit”, “Kühnheit” and “Vortrefflichkeit”, all found in this passage on critical historiography, are typical of Hegel’s references to Fr. Schlegel. For example, in Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art*, *Werke* 13, pp. 94-5 or in his review of K.W.F. Solger’s work, *Werke* 11, pp.233-234. In the present passage on critical historiography, Hegel refers to critical philology and history of literature, exactly the same areas he discusses (critically!), with reference to Schlegel, in the review of Solger’s work. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel seems to be referring to Fr. Schlegel’s early philological writings and his later work *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* (1808), although he may also be referring to any number of the *Athenäum* fragments that deal critically with the writing of history. For example, Fragment 80: “The historian is a prophet turned toward the past”. Hegel is probably not referring to Fr. Schlegel’s *Philosophy of History*, taken from his lectures in Vienna, published in 1828, which Hegel hadn’t read when he pronounced his introductory lectures on the philosophy of history (1822 and 1828). See the chapter “Presenting the Past: Hegel’s Epistemological Historiography” in my *Real Words*, pp. 58-70.

³⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, the edition uses the subtitle “Methods of Writing History”. Another popular translation, G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History, Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, from the Hoffmeister edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) uses the subtitle “Varieties of Historical Writing”. On Hegel’s systematic historiography, see Jeffrey Reid, *Real Words: Language and System in Hegel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press) pp. 58-70.

³⁵ See my article “Comets and Moons...”, cited above, in note 31.

³⁶ Of course, this does not mean reflective history is dispensed with. It supplies the necessary content of historical science. However, we must not end here. Reflective histories “facts” and unilateral judgements must be rendered speculative through systematic criticism.

³⁷ *Werke* 12, pp. 18-19. *Reason in History*, p.9.

³⁸ *Werke* 13, p.92.

³⁹ *Werke* 13, p. 93-5.

⁴⁰ The recurring Hegelian critical attacks on contemporary theology, accused of having evacuated religious dogma of all essential (sacred) meaning, are aimed principally at his Berlin rival Schleiermacher, both for his early work in the *Speeches on Religion*, as well as to his later “hermeneutical” lectures, although Schleiermacher’s main work on the subject (*Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 1838) was not published until after Hegel’s death.

⁴¹ *Werke* 11, p. 48.

⁴² §571 *Zusatz*. “Irony, which can make every objective reality nought and vain, is itself emptiness and vanity...and with the assertion that it stands at the very summit of religion and philosophy, falls back rather into the vanity of willfulness.” *Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace (Boumann *Zusätze* translated by A.V. Miller), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003 [1971]), p.301. This text on irony reprises the key expression that Hegel aims at Schlegel, i.e. the subjective process of “vanitisation” (*Vereitelung*) discussed above.