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BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL'S CONCEPT OF ROMANTIC IRONY IN *FRAGMENTS* AND IN *LUCINDE*

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Abstract

The concept of romantic irony developed by Friedrich Schlegel is one of the most powerful and productive elements of the Jena Romanticism, which, to this day, stirs interest among the researchers of the German culture of the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. In thus-oriented studies, however, most scholars emphasize the *Fragments* published by the philosopher in the years 1797–1800, while relegating *Lucinde*—Schlegel's controversial novel written in 1799—to the margins of their reflection.

Although underappreciated by the academia, *Lucinde*, in its fundamental assumptions, was supposed to be an exercise in both the theory and the practice of irony. Bearing this in mind, in the present article I attempt to reconstruct Schlegel's groundbreaking concept by taking into account both these sources. In the analysis, I focus on the notions of *dissimulation*, *dialectics*, and *reflection*: three descriptive categories, which ultimately account for the innovative character of Schlegelian vision of irony.

Keywords: romantic irony, dissimulation, dialectics, reflection.

Med filozofijo in literaturo. Pojem romantične ironije v *Fragmentih* in v *Lucinde* Friedricha Schlegla

Povzetek

170 Pojem romantične ironije, kakor ga je razgrnil Friedrich Schlegel, je eden izmed najvplivnejših in najproduktivnejših elementov jenske romantike, ki vse do dandanašnji zbuja zanimanje raziskovalcev nemške kulture na prelomu 18. in 19. stoletja. Znotraj tovrstnih študij večina strokovnjakov poudarja *Fragmente*, ki jih je filozof objavljaj med letoma 1797 in 1800, medtem ko Schleglov kontroverzni roman *Lucinde* iz leta 1799 potiskajo na obrobje svojih refleksij. Čeprav akademska sfera *Lucinde* ne ceni dovolj, naj bi roman, po svojih temeljnih predpostavkah, predstavljal vajo tako v teoriji kakor v praksi ironije. Glede na to skušam v pričujočem članku Schleglov prelomni pojem rekonstruirati tako, da upoštevam oba navedena vira. Znotraj analize se osredotočam na ideje *pretvarjanja*, *dialektike* in *refleksije*: gre za tri deskriptivne kategorije, ki navsezadnje utemeljujejo inovativni značaj schleglovskega videnja ironije.

Ključne besede: romantična ironija, pretvarjanje, dialektika, refleksija.

Introduction

Beyond doubt, one of the most original achievements of early Romantic philosophy is the concept of irony, as it was formulated by Friedrich Schlegel in the *Fragments* published in the years 1797–1800, initially in the *Lyceum der schönen Künste* edited by Johann Reichardt, and then in the *Athenaeum*. The latter journal, which the writer founded together with his brother August Wilhelm in 1798, attracted the leading figures of the so-called Jena circle, including Novalis (Georg Philipp von Hardenberg) or Friedrich Schleiermacher. The novelty of Schlegel's concept of irony consisted in his departure from the traditional approach to the phenomenon in question—which would inscribe it in the scope of rhetoric—in favor of granting irony a philosophical dimension. Although in doing so the German author seems to be returning to the ancient lineage of irony (dating back to Socrates and his philosophical activity), the inspiration for his innovative revision of the concept of irony should in fact be sought in the philosophy of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, in whose lectures Schlegel participated when he arrived in Jena in 1796, and of whose views expressed in the *Science of Knowledge* he quickly became an ardent enthusiast. It is the influence of Fichtean thought on the fundamentals of the young author's standpoint that led to his groundbreaking revision of the sense of the notion of irony, which, for Schlegel, is not “in the first instance, a literary device or trope; it is a general, transcendently mandated property of a work or a philosophical position” (Rush 2006, 180). The perspective of transcendental philosophy allowed him to set his own concept apart from the notion prevailingly adopted in rhetorical interpretations to date. It also constituted the basis for his delineation of the concept's altogether new variant: “with him irony became open, dialectical, paradoxical, or ‘Romantic’” (Muecke 1970, 23). As a consequence, the irony we call “Romantic” today (in contrast with its ancient prototype), propelled the emergence of a brand-new form of expression. Just as the features of Socratic irony surface in Plato's dialogues, so does Schlegelian irony's *Romantic* character materialize most fully in novels, the “Socratic dialogues of our time” (Schlegel 1971b, 145). Hence, “wherever philosophy appears in oral or written dialogues—and is not simply confined into rigid systems—there irony should be asked for and provided”

(Schlegel 1971b, 148). Following this premise, the theory of irony formulated in the *Fragments* could only acquire its proper shape—and become manifest in its full complexity—in *Lucinde*, Schlegel's only semi-autobiographical novel, published in 1799 in the atmosphere of a moral scandal. Because the two perspectives (that of the *Fragments* and that of *Lucinde*) illuminate and complement each other, we will pose the thesis that the elements of the theory of Romantic irony that we can identify within the *Lyceum* and *Athenaeum* are reflected not only in the content of Schlegel's novel, but also in its plot solutions and in the manner of narration that he chose to adopt. Nevertheless, it should be noted that an attempt to reconstruct the theory of irony, even on the basis of both these sources, is problematic due to the fragmentary nature of Schlegel's writing, which characterizes not only his publications in the *Lyceum* and *Athenaeum* but also *Lucinde*. The novel itself remains a fragment, insofar as the book known to us today, in the never-realized intention of the German author, was supposed to be only the first of the four novels that were to make up his *opus magnum*. Taking this difficulty into account, in our analyses we will move within a space mapped out with reference to the three categories, which define the concept of Romantic irony: *dissimulation*, *dialectics*, and *reflection*. We will proceed from the description of the irony's external form (as inspired by the Socratic method) down to the exploration of its innermost dimension, as determined by the assumptions of Fichte's transcendental philosophy. In the light of the adopted thesis, we will study the functioning of dissimulation, dialectics, and reflection in the *Fragments*, where these categories appear for the first time, and shall then seek to find them in *Lucinde*. Such a procedure will allow us to reconstruct a more complete vision of Schlegel's theory of irony, and to place it in the perspective of his idea of the synthesis of art and philosophy.

Irony as dissimulation

Although today Schlegel is considered to be the author of the concept of Romantic irony, in his writings, published during his lifetime, he himself never used the term, apparently founding his critical position upon the basis of the common belief that “the central fact about the history of irony in Greek use is

its inseparability from Socrates' personality and influence" (Knox 1961, 3). In the light of Garnett Sedgewick's research on the history of the concept, Socratic irony is an intermediary form, bridging the first (pre-modern) stages of its development with its modern incarnations, "for on the one hand it brings us close to the earliest extant uses of the word in Greek, and on the other it is the matrix of all the ironies which the Romantics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries developed" (1948, 10). Formulating the most general definition of Socratic irony as "the only involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation" (Schlegel 1971b, 155), Schlegel alludes to the initial phase of the development of the ancient *eironeia*, which has its origins in the formula of an early Greek comedy, in which Eiron, representing the type of a hero aware of his weaknesses, but, at the same time, clever and cunning, who, having mastered the art of pretense to perfection, always prevails over the stupid and overly self-confident Alazon. The mode of action distinctive to the personae of the ancient Greek stage recurs in Plato's dialogues, in which Socrates, pretending ignorance, always plays the role of Eiron, exposing the misconceptions and prejudices shared by prominent Athenian Alazons. According to Aristotle, as Norman Knox demonstrates, the formula of the dialogue adopted from Greek comedy and then attributed to Socrates contains the distinction between two antagonistic strategies of dissimulation—"the one extreme of Alazony or boastful exaggeration, and the other of Eirony or self-depreciating concealment of one's possessions and powers" (1961, 4)—, both of which, despite different valuations, always stand in opposition to the truth. The difference between these strategies, however, is not exhausted in the space of ethical decisions alone; it also lies in the attitude of distance towards the world and with respect to oneself, which Schlegel's definition of irony emphasizes. Such an attitude, typical of Eiron—and later also Socrates—is as alien to Alazon as it is to the opponents of the Athenian sage, who populate Platonic dialogues. In its foundations, *eironeia* is therefore based on the awareness of the difference between truth and fiction, which is why "the basic feature of every irony is a contrast between a reality and an appearance" (Chevalier 1932, 42). This trait, perhaps, may reveal itself only in "the attitude of mind held by a philosophic observer when he abstracts himself from the contradictions of life and views them all impartially, himself perhaps included in the ironic vision"

(Sedgwick 1948, 13). Consequently, this means that irony is not a universal disposition of the human mind; rather, it is an aptitude characterizing a specific type of person. It is precisely within this conceptual frame that Schlegel locates his notion of irony, claiming that “it is equally impossible to feign it or divulge it. To a person who hasn’t got it, it will remain a riddle even after it is openly confessed.” (1971b, 155.) Linking the concept of irony to the subject’s attitude or to the disposition of the human mind, Schlegel seems to adopt the historical fact that “*eironeia*, as the Periclean Greeks conceived it, was not so much a mode of speech as a *general mode of behavior*” (Sedgwick 1948, 6).

174 In the Socratic dialogue of modern times that *Lucinde* was meant to be, dissimulation—as the basic, most general term defining irony—first manifests itself at the foundation of the relationship between the title of Schlegel’s novel and its content. The fact that a woman’s name features prominently in the novel’s title notwithstanding, *Lucinde* is, above all, a narrative about Julius, who undoubtedly stands out as its main, if not the only, protagonist. The story of his love for Lucinde, which is the central literary theme of the book, turns out to be but an excuse to portray the process of Julius’s personality formation in the light of his fantasies, desires, and ideals. The novel, thereby, deceives the readers with its title, “pretending” to offer them an account of the fortunes of the central character’s beloved. We find direct confirmation of this intuition in the dialogue “Yearning and Peace,” in which Lucinde addresses her beloved thus: “I am not, my Julius, the sanctified person you describe [...]. You are that person. When the turmoil has died down and nothing mean or common distracts your noble soul, then you see reflected in me—in me who am forever yours—the marvelous flower of your imagination.” (Schlegel 1971c, 126.) Thus, in Schlegel’s novel, the ironic dissimulation takes on a meaning somewhat different from that typical of Greek comedy or characterizing the dialogues featuring Socrates. The asymmetric relationship between the protagonists, presenting Lucinde as a product of Julius’s imagination, with the latter transferring his own personality, desires, and goals onto her character, can no longer be reduced to the clash of Alazon’s audacity with Eiron’s cleverness, or to the confrontation of Socrates’s knowledge with the ignorance of his opponents. Rather, it is an expression of the character’s Fichtean self-knowledge, who, in the image of his beloved, sees—and knows—only himself. Peter Firchow

emphasizes this aspect of the relationship between the two characters referring to the etymology of Lucinde's name. Deriving from the word *lux* (Latin for light), the name of Julius's love allows the scholar to put forth the thesis that Lucinde "is Julius's illumination" (Firchow 1971, 24). We may interpret this statement in a twofold fashion: on the one hand, Lucinde "illuminates" the figure of Julius, rendering his own image fuller and more perfect; on the other hand, the luminous name may also be read as symbolizing the male protagonist's inner "enlightenment," experienced under the influence of his love for a woman. Yet, however we approach her, Lucinde admittedly performs a particular function in relation to Julius's character, serving as his female *alter ego*. Consequently, as noted by Søren Kierkegaard, the relationship between Julius and Lucinde is devoid of content and lacks its own history, which is evidenced by the very fact that "their diversions can be only the same *en deux* as Julius thought were the best to use in his solitude" (1989, 300). Likewise, it is not difficult to notice that in the last sections of the book the person of Lucinde—the priestess of the "the holy fire of divine voluptuousness," "the best symbol of the Godhead," or even "the Holy Virgin of the Immaculate Conception" (Schlegel 1971c, 58, 61, 110)—ceases to command Julius's attention. Seen in such a perspective, Lucinde is no more than a phantom figure, whose ostensible nature Schlegel ironically confronts with the fictional "actuality" of Julius's life, at the same time emphasizing her role in the latter's vast effort to know himself.

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The contrast of reality and appearance inherent in every irony is revealed in yet another essential aspect of *Lucinde*, which is the novel's partially autobiographical character. It leaves little doubt that the plot of the novel echoes Schlegel's romance with the wife of the Berlin banker Simon Weit, Dorothea, who became Lucinde's prototype. Although she was several years older than the writer himself, their encounter in Henriette Herz's salon in 1797 ignited mutual love at first sight, which ultimately led to the demise of the Weit marriage. Soon thereafter, Dorothea married Friedrich, at whose side she remained until his death in 1829. Inspired by these events, and replete with recognizable allusions to some of the most personal and intimate aspects of the couple's relations, *Lucinde*, inevitably, caused a scandal among the Berlin intellectuals. We can therefore say that Julius, wearing the camouflage of the title character of *Lucinde*, is himself a mask worn by Schlegel—his literary *alter*

176 *ego*. The introduction of an autobiographical thread to the plot of the novel may thus be understood as an exercise of a modern strategy of *dissimulation*, which consists in *simulating* oneself in a literary work. In this context, irony understood in this way plays an important role, because, as Włodzimierz Szturc rightly notes, it is specifically thanks to irony that it becomes possible to “transform a biography into a work of art and to reflect on it” (1992, 70). Nevertheless, *Lucinde* resonates not only with Friedrich’s youthful personal experiences, but also with his literary practice, offering insights into his biography as an author. In his initial letter to Lucinde, Julius, who (as we later learn in the chapter on “Apprenticeship for Manhood”) is an artist painter, describes himself as “an educated lover and writer” (Schlegel 1971c, 45), which formula, rather than his own person, matches Schlegel’s. This is but one of the many examples of the author “leaning out” of the pages of the novel and emphasizing his constant presence, which testifies to Schlegel’s experimentation with the ancient concept of the *persona*, from which, as has been shown, the original notion of irony derives. As Firchow points out, “Schlegel traced the technique of the *persona* to what he believed were its origins in ancient Greek comedy, specifically to the device of the ‘*parabasis*,’ that is, a speech in the name of the poet delivered to the audience in the middle of the play” (1971, 29). In *Lucinde*, the *parabasis* technique is manifest in the *direct* relationship between the protagonist (narrator) and the novel’s author (on whose behalf the former speaks); at the same time, however, it defines the *indirect* relationship between the author and his readers.

Irony and dialectics

In one of the fragments published in the *Lyceum*, Schlegel emphasizes that it is not rhetoric, but “philosophy [that] is the real homeland of irony” (1971b, 148). Thus, he distinguishes irony conceived as a philosophical category from a particular mode of speaking, which, “compared to the sublime urbanity of the Socratic muse [is] like the pomp of the most splendid oration set over against the noble style of an ancient tragedy” (ibid.). In this same fragment, the German author defines irony as “logical beauty” (ibid.). The claim that irony is logical beauty should be considered in the light of Schlegel’s postulate

of the Romantic synthesis of art and philosophy, according to which “poetry and philosophy should be made one” (1971b, 157). Ernst Behler points out that the technical counterpart of “logical beauty” is the term “dialectics,” which applies to “a particular philosophical type of argumentation practiced by Socrates and developed as a form of art by Plato” (1993, 147). In that case, the notion of “logical beauty” defines the specific “art of thinking,” in which the contradiction of two thoughts is a *sine qua non* condition for the constant progress of reflection. Nevertheless, we must take into account that the sources of the dialectical interpretation of irony have no solid historical justification. As evidenced by Knox’s findings, “neither Socrates nor his friends ever used the word in a serious way to describe the Socratic method, and [...] the idealizations of Socratic dialectic which modern writers have embodied in ‘Socratic irony’ were never attached to the word irony in classical Greek and Latin” (1961, 3). The dialectical interpretation of Romantic irony seems to have a different genesis in Schlegel that is revealed in one of the later fragments published in *Athenaeum*, in which irony is construed as “an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts” (1971a, 176). In fact, as follows, Schlegel does not take his concept of the art of thinking over from Socrates or Plato, but looks at their idea of dialectics through the lens of modernity, investing into it something that, in essence, it does not contain. The assumption that irony consists in a dialectical movement that finds its realization in a constant transition from the thesis to the antithesis, which flux in itself makes the synthesis possible, comes from the *Science of Knowledge*. In this work, Fichte describes a logical form of thinking, within which “the antithesis is impossible without synthesis, for otherwise the posited would be abolished by the antithesis, so that the latter would be no antithesis, but itself a thesis” (1970, 186). The dialectic pattern reflects the opposition of “I” and “non-I” central to Fichtean idealism, and then—through Schelling’s metaphysics that introduces the concept of the Absolute transcending the opposition of self and nature—it comes to reverberate in the thought of Hegel, who adapts the Romantic notion of dialectics as the foundation of his system. Each of these landmarks on the map of the development of the idealistic German thought abides by same fundamental principle, according to which “the philosophical system is itself conceived as an immanently propelled and

ever evolving process of oppositions, reconciliations, and renewed oppositions” (Abrams 1971, 173). And although, clearly, Schlegel does not build a coherent philosophical system, the theory of Romantic irony as dialectic inscribes itself into the tradition of German idealism, insofar as, on the one hand, it draws inspiration from it (Fichte), and, on the other hand, it becomes a stimulus for its further development (Hegel).

178 Dialectically understood, however, Romantic irony is not reducible to the “logical beauty” alone: it is also expressed in continuous fluctuation “between self-creation and self-destruction” (Schlegel 1971a, 167), which defines the essence of every creative process, and corresponds, at the same time, to the fundamental structure of the “art of thinking.” Schlegel introduces this terminology in one of the early fragments published in the *Lyceum*, which emphasizes the category of self-restriction defined as a “result of self-creation and self-destruction” (1971b, 145). In an act of self-restriction, the creator adopts a perspective of an external observer, and is therefore able to rise above the conditions of his own creative process, which constantly oscillates between the creation and destruction of its own products. However, Schlegel’s concern is not about a particular object born as a result of an artist’s activity, but about a conscious act of will focused on shaping one’s own existence. This, in his view, is the loftiest achievement an authentic artist may attain and, at the same time, the fundament upon which all other external results of his or her artistic activity rest. In this way, to use Frederick Beiser’s phrasing, “the ironist creates forever anew because he always puts forward a new perspective, a richer concept, a clearer formulation; but he also destroys himself because he is forever critical of his own efforts” (2002, 448). In turn, Szturc describes this constant exchange of self-creation for self-destruction as “artistic dialectics” (1992, 70), indirectly pointing to the correspondence between the process of thinking and creative activity, characterizing the Romantic concept of irony. The relation between these two polar extremes corresponds to what Schlegel calls “the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts.” Both types of exchange are undoubtedly paradoxical, which in itself emphasizes one of the distinctive traits of Romantic irony: after all, according to Schlegel, irony is also “the form of paradox” (1971b, 149). The notion of paradox itself is closely related to the category of logical beauty, as the very etymology of

the concept, traditionally falling within the scope of logic and denoting an internally contradictory theorem, suggests. It is precisely such a contradiction that is the source of logical beauty, which is realized in the constant flux of values from the thesis to the antithesis. Furthermore, “if every creative process consists in the interplay between the *distance from creation* and one’s *awareness of creation*—even though it is used to tear down what has been built—then creativity is a paradox” (Szturc 1992, 70; my emphasis). Thus, resorting to the concept of the paradox, in his theory of irony Schlegel equates two types of human activity, construing thinking as a form of creativity and defining creation as a fully conscious thought, determined by a strictly delineated project of shaping one’s own existence.

Dialectics as the basic manifestation of Romantic irony occupies an extremely important place in Schlegel’s only novel, establishing the project of the synthesis of art and philosophy in the optics of the idea of life. Life, as aptly defined by Meyer H. Abrams, is “the generator of the controlling categories of Romantic thought,” and, simultaneously, “the premise and paradigm for what is most innovative and distinctive in Romantic thinkers” (1971, 431). In *Lucinde*, Schlegel resorts to this analogy first to describe the process of thinking, in which the exchange of the thesis for the antithesis, known from the *Fragments*, is replaced by the dialectic of distancing oneself from that which is near and approaching that which is far away: “every idea and whatever else is formed within us seems perfect in itself, as unique and indivisible as a person. One idea supplants the other and what just now seemed near and immediate soon vanishes again into obscurity.” (1971c, 48.) By equating the *idea* (the result of thinking) to a *person* (the product of life), the German author points to the unity of these two processes, in which “the metaphorical translation into the categories and norms of intellection of the attributes of a growing thing” (Abrams 1971, 432), typical of Romantic philosophy, manifests itself clearly. In turn, the idea of the analogy of life and art appears in the chapter “Allegory of Impudence,” which assumes the form of a scene from a comedy, thus alluding to the ancient Greek sources of Romantic irony. In the chapter, Schlegel introduces four young men—begotten by Fantasy and Wit—serving as allegories of the respective novels, of which *Lucinde* was supposed to be composed. Fantasy’s symptomatic words—“destruction and creation; one and

all; and so may the eternal spirit hover forever over the eternal stream of time and life, and observe each bold wave before it ebbs away” (1971c, 57)—allow us to argue that in Schlegel’s view every instance of human creativity has its origins in the dynamism of life, which in itself is understood as a metaphysical process. In its course, individual forms eternally emerge and disappear, which fluctuation corresponds directly to, and manifests itself in, the dialectical structure of irony as the exchange of self-creation for self-destruction, described already in the *Fragments*. In *Lucinde*, this view is documented in the section titled “Two Letters.” The subject of the first of Julius’s letters to Lucinde is an encomium on the creative power of life. Exhilarated by the news that he will soon be a father, the protagonist finds himself eager to reflect on the universal meaning of the affirmation of the eternal cycle of becoming: “In the endless succession of new forms, creative time weaves the wreath of eternity, and the man who is touched by the joy of fruitfulness and health is blessed.” (Schlegel 1971c, 107.) The second letter, however, addressing a destructive power of life, concerns the news about Lucinde’s serious illness. Sensing that the disease may pose a mortal threat to his beloved, Julius comes to recognize the fact that “every single atom of eternal time can contain a world of joy but can also reveal a bottomless pit of sorrows and horror” (Schlegel 1971c, 115). Ultimately, therefore, to an extent much greater than the *Fragments*, *Lucinde* allows us to notice that the project of the synthesis revealed in the notion of irony comprises not two, but three essential components: art, philosophy, and life. For this reason, as Rush notes, Schlegel not only “expands his early credo that all poetry must be philosophical to include its converse: that all philosophy must be poetic” (2006, 181), but also adopts and develops an organic perspective of understanding both these elements. Within such a vision, all authentic art must begin with the artistry of a creative life, while true philosophy cannot be reduced to mere multiplications of fossilized and abstract systems of theorems: it must consist in the living, and thus constantly developing, progressively more and more in-depth reflection on the meaning and course of one’s own existence.

Irony, or reflection

Defining Romantic irony in terms of dialectics, however, will not exhaust the essence of Schlegel's project, unless we juxtapose it with the perspective of its transcendental determinants and the notion of reflection, closely related to the latter. In fragment number 42, printed in the *Lyceum*, Schlegel calls irony "transcendental buffoonery" (1971b, 148), thus resorting to the term that first appears in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, in which it signifies "all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects" (Kant 2007, 59). Although Kant himself was aware of the groundbreaking nature of his position, he did recognize that its weakness lied in its failure to prove the existence of the common foundation of the receptive power of sensory cognition and the spontaneous activity of the intellect, the search for which basis determined the further development of transcendental philosophy—initially in the writings of Karl Leonhard Reinhold, and then in Fichte's *Science of Knowledge*. Reinhold saw this supreme principle (*Grundsatz*) in the power of representation (*Vorstellung*) as the primal faculty of human consciousness, which conditions all cognition. To Schlegel, however, it is not Reinhold, but only Fichte who is "a Kant raised to the second power," because it is in Fichte's philosophy that the assumption that "the theory of the determining ability and the system of determined affective impressions should be intimately united [...], like object and idea, in a pre-stabilized harmony" (1971a, 202), manifests itself in its entirety. While, according to Reinhold, the representation structure of consciousness is the primary fact and thus the starting point for transcendental reflection, Fichte goes one step further, proposing that, like any fact, it must be conditioned by action, or, in other words, by the original act of the human spirit, which "lies at the basis of all consciousness, and alone makes it possible" (Fichte 1970, 93). Thus, the sought-for supreme principle is based on the transcendental understanding of subjectivity itself, according to which subjectivity is pure action tantamount to the primary and absolute "I," establishing itself in opposition to the "non-I." It is out of this opposition that Schlegel fashioned the core of his concept of irony. In the phrase "transcendental buffoonery," the first term refers to "the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above

its own art, virtue, or genius” (Schlegel 1971b, 148). It is the innermost aspect of irony, revealing its essential attachment to the realm of the pure activity of the Fichtean “I,” which precedes and conditions any conscious action. The transcendental mood, communicating the insurmountable difference between the primary “I” and consciousness, “contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative” (ibid.), which, in human cognition, experience, and fantasy translates into the antagonism between thought and thing, spirit and nature, freedom and necessity, infinity and finitude, or, in other words, between that which is ideal and that which is real. As Zygmunt Łempicki notes, it is irony that “is the most powerful stylistic trope to express this split, and, at the same time, it is the disposition and mood that sets the tone of the epoch and becomes the subject of the philosophical debate” (1966, 416). If, according to Schlegel, “transcendental is precisely whatever relates to the joining or separating of the ideal and the real” (1971a, 164), then irony as transcendental buffoonery is tantamount to the interplay between the idea and the reality, the external manifestation of which is “the mimic style of an averagely gifted Italian *buffo*” (1971b, 148) that has inherited all the essential features of ancient Greek comedy.

The consideration of irony in terms of its transcendental determinants makes the concept of reflection its most fundamental element. The close relationship between irony and reflection in the vision of the author of *Lucinde* is emphasized by Novalis—his close friend and co-initiator of the Jena circle’s activity. According to the poet, “what Schlegel so sharply characterizes as irony is [...] nothing other—than the result, the character of true reflection—the true presence of the spirit” (Novalis 1997, 29). In terms of Fichtean philosophy, the transcendental “I” as pure activity of the human spirit does not belong to the sphere of empirical facts of consciousness, which means that it is not subject to direct cognition either; we reach it only indirectly, through reflection operating in two modes: “in the first instance, there is simple reflection upon the phenomenon—that of the observer; in the second, there is reflection upon this reflection—that of the philosopher upon the nature of the observation” (Fichte 1970, 151–2). Since the ultimate goal of the author of the *Science of Knowledge* is not to study the representation structure of consciousness, but to explore the basic activity of the human spirit, upon which the latter is founded,

the truly transcendental power is the second mode of reflection. It is in this mode that the primal activity of the absolute "I" is revealed, like in the mirror, in the facts of consciousness. The meaning that Fichte bestows on the concept of reflection thus flows from the etymology of the term, which "in both Greek and Latin philosophy [...] has optic connotations, in that it refers to the action by mirroring surfaces of throwing back light, and in particular a mirror's exhibition or reproduction of objects in the form of images" (Gasché 1997, 16). It is precisely this mode of reflection's "mirroring" action that Schlegel adapts in his concept of transcendental poetry, which he defines as "simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry" (1971a, 195), paralleling the idea of the *Science of Knowledge* as "always simultaneously philosophy and philosophy of philosophy" (1971a, 202). It is into the concept of transcendental poetry that Romantic irony is centrally inscribed as its fundamental means of expression. Their genetic link is evidenced by the fact that irony as "buffoonery" about ideas and reality reflects the essential structure of transcendental poetry, the essence of which "lies in the relation between ideal and real," and which finds its expression in "the artistic reflection and beautiful self-mirroring" (1971a, 195). In another fragment published in the *Athenaeum*, Schlegel defines this genre of literary art as "Romantic poetry" and as "progressive, universal poetry," which "can [...] hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer, [...] on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors" (1971a, 175). Like Fichte, in his meditation on reflection, Schlegel uses an optical metaphor that compares it to the process of the multiplication of an image observed in mirrors set opposite each other. The adjective "poetic" he attributes to "reflection," however, proves that the German author does not apply his metaphor only to the sphere of cognition, but understands it in a much broader sense, inscribing it into his project of the synthesis of art and philosophy. Thus, if, for Fichte, thinking, at its source, is an action, for Schlegel, this action signifies the primal type of activity, canceling out the difference between the act of thinking and the creative act. This allows us to conclude that it is specifically reflection that determines the dialectical structure of irony as logical beauty that binds art and philosophy together. Rising above the conditioning of all art, and thus energizing the interplay between the ideal

and the real, like a looking glass, it mirrors the primordial creative activity. Hence, inevitably, it is a poetic reflection or, in other words, as Ernst Behler emphasizes, it “is virtually identical with that self-reflective style of poetry that became accentuated during early German Romanticism” (1993, 141).

In accordance with the assumptions of Schlegel’s theory, the transcendental sources of irony, which we can reconstruct from the *Fragments*, were to be fully expounded only in the genre of the novel. As John William Scholl emphasizes, “it is not necessary to prove the reflective character of *Lucinde*” (1906, 150), which is clearly evidenced by the fact that among its first readers was Fichte—one of the few advocates for Schlegel’s book—who considered it a work of genius: a work worthy of a thorough reading, to which one should return many a time. The transcendental dimension of irony surfaces already at the level of *Lucinde*’s literary form, and is clearly recognizable in the narrative devices used by the author. In this context, George Pattison aptly describes the novel, addressing it as “kaleidoscopic work,” in which the “text is an apparent chaos of narrative, letters, dialogue, myth and fantasy” (2004, 117). It is worth 184 noting, however, that in Pattison’s interpretation the “chaos” in question is only “apparent.” In fact, the form of Schlegel’s novel is a derivative of a fully conscious intention of the author, aimed at showing the insurmountable opposition between the ideal reality and the actual world, and “the variety of literary genres which he employs is thus intended to illuminate this ideal reality from a number of different perspectives, whilst preventing us from confusing it with any of the forms in which and through which it is mediated” (*ibid.*). The juxtaposition of Pattison’s interpretation with the transcendental view of irony as manifest in the interplay between the ideal and the real (expounded in the *Fragments*), suggests that it is possible to consider the very form of *Lucinde* as a direct outcome of the implementation of the Romantic irony’s central principle within a literary work. Another important formal aspect of Schlegel’s novel allowing one to recognize its thoroughly ironic character is its self-reflexive distance; *Lucinde*, as is now clear, does not only tell the main character’s story playing out in the liminal space between the actual world and his fantasies, but is also an account of its own creation. It is already in the first chapter that we meet Julius as he attempts to describe the story of his love and his relationship with Lucinde—and the motif of self-reflexivity

recurs throughout subsequent sections of the book. The themes relating to the planning of the narrative, to the process of its creation, to consultations and questions about the shape of individual passages, as well as to the conjectures concerning the novel's future fate and the reactions of its potential readers, reappear on numerous occasions throughout the text. All these self-reflexive elements support Firchow's statement that "*Lucinde* is a novel which is very much aware of itself, so much so in fact that at times it makes criticisms of itself and its structure" (1971, 28). Undoubtedly, it would be difficult to overlook the analogy between the scholar's observation and the category of the "reflection on reflection" coined in *Science of Knowledge*, which Schlegel later adapted while developing his own concept of irony: in Fichte, the category refers to intentionally and critically self-oriented thinking; in *Lucinde*—similarly—the "reflection on reflection" assumes the form of "writing about writing," which transfers the transcendental activity of thinking into the space of literary practice, which thus acquires a philosophical dimension.

The concept of irony as "transcendental buffoonery," cannot, obviously, be reduced to the form of *Lucinde* alone, as it also defines its essential content. The whole novel follows the principle of the infinite interplay of the ideal and the real, represented in the novel by the contrast of male and female elements. Schlegel introduces this motif in two interrelated chapters: "A Dithyrambic Fantasy on the Loveliest Situation in the World" and "A Character Sketch of Little Wilhelmine." The first one offers a description of an erotic game, in which the lovers swap their roles, imitating each other and then comparing the effects of such an exchange—whose essence is to resolve the issue of "whether [Lucinde is] better at imitating the protective intensity of the man, or [Julius] the appealing devotion of the woman" (Schlegel 1971c, 49). Schlegel, identifying femininity with passivity (nature), and masculinity with activity (spirit, reflection), thus resorts to the Fichtean pair of concepts establishing an internal relationship at the heart of the central opposition fundamental to the *Science of Knowledge*, within which "all activity in the self [I] determines a passivity in the not-self [non-I] (allows us to infer such a passivity) and *vice versa*" (Fichte 1970, 142). This dynamics also happens to correspond to the rules of the love game played by Julius and Lucinde. The scene outlined in "A Dithyrambic Fantasy" is, in fact, an apt illustration of the transcendental

principle, upon which Romantic irony operates. By that principle, the exchange between the ideal and the real, reified, as Schlegel describes it, in the process of their combination and separation, indicates the ephemeral nature of the relationship between the two elements. In this perspective, the irony presents itself as a “response which consciousness of the relativity of each relationship and fixation receives” (Frank 2004, 181). Its transcendental nature is also determined by distance that excludes the possibility of a direct union of the lovers in the sexual act: while playing the game, their attention focuses on observing each other, in order to determine who of them is better suited for the role of the other. As such, the act does not bear any signs of authenticity; rather, it corresponds to the Fichtean reflection, in the lens of which “this sweet game still has quite other attractions [...] than its own” (Schlegel 1971c, 49). Schlegel, however, goes one step further, because, as Julius reports in the last sentences of “A Dithyrambic Fantasy,” it is not Lucinde, but the little Wilhelmine mentioned in the memoir, who is “a lady whom he loves most dearly” (1971c, 50). Wilhelmine—a care-free girl, playfully swinging her legs, singing songs, or reciting her favorite poems, who “has a great deal of the buffoon in her and a great feeling for buffoonery” (1971c, 51)—is, in fact, a personification of Romantic irony. The close affinity between the chapters “A Dithyrambic Fantasy” and “A Character Sketch of Little Wilhelmine” was undoubtedly one of those elements of the novel that its first readers found most scandalizing; even though Julius’s recollection concerns playing with a little girl, in their general structure these games are based on the very principles determining the intimate role play with his lover, portrayed earlier in the novel. Nevertheless, there is one fundamental difference, which, contrary to appearances, does not chiefly lie in the elimination of the erotic context, dominating the scene described in “A Dithyrambic Fantasy,” but in the amplification of the process of mutual imitation: “If I imitate her gestures, she immediately copies my imitations of her, and in this way we’ve invented for ourselves a language of mimicry and communicate with each other by means of the hieroglyphics of the theater.” (Ibid.) Rather than play adopted roles, unlike Lucinde and her lover do in their own relationship, Julius and Wilhelmine intensify the very process of the exchange between the real and the ideal, thus emphasizing its infinite character. In fact, Julius’s and Wilhelmine’s imitation games resemble

the phenomenon of *mise-en-abyme*—the multiplication of an image in the mirrors set opposite each other, typical of poetic reflection, which, in its essence, is tantamount to irony.

Schlegel returns to the motif of the interplay of both opposing elements again in the chapter titled “A Reflection,” in which the female passivity symbolizes the *undefined*, while the male activity represents all that is *defined* and *defining*. This may be inferred from Schlegel’s stylistic choices, because the German author ironically uses ambiguous terminology, applying both to sexuality and to the activity of the human mind, to which the former is “simplest and most universal antithesis” (1971c, 120). The dynamic opposition of the *defined* and the *undefined*, which, “with eternally immutable symmetry [...] strive in opposite directions toward the infinite and away from it,” corresponds to the conflict between *the unconditioned* and *the conditioned*, finding its expression in irony. The first of these elements represents nature, which is subject to the transcendental process of idealization, since, as in *Lucinde*, “the colorful ideal of witty sensuality blossoms forth out of a striving toward the absolute” (*ibid.*). The second is an attribute of the mental activity of man. This, in turn, according to the Fichtean principle of reflection, “is continually defining [the mind] anew for himself, for that is precisely his whole destiny, to be defined and to define” (Schlegel 1971c, 119), striving to grasp that which is unconditioned and eluding all representation. On the one hand, therefore, in “A Reflection,” the interplay of both elements indicates that, as Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert observes, “irony is a tool that puts us on the trail of the Absolute, helping us to approximate it” (2007, 173). On the other hand, it must contain the awareness of the inevitable failure of this project, because, after all, “the ironist feels a conflict between the unconditioned and conditioned because any attempt to know the unconditioned would falsify it and make it conditioned” (Beiser 2002, 448). The Romantic vindication of nature, elevated to the rank of the Absolute, recognized as the basis of all conscious human activity, and construed as “an allegorical miniature of the warp and woof of ever flowing creation” (Schlegel 1971c, 120), is in fact one of the first attempts to overcome the radical nature of Fichtean idealism founded upon the theses that “all reality is posited in the self [I],” and that “there is no reality at all in the not-self [non-I], but only sheer negation” (Fichte 1970, 128). The absolutization of nature must, however,

entail the relativization of the activity of the human spirit, which, in itself, is an ironic reversal of Fichte's principle. It is thus only in "A Reflection" that Schlegel brings out the full sense of Julius's and Lucinde's role play described in "A Dithyrambic Fantasy," which exchange reflects the final synthesis of two conflicting extremes. Such a synthesis consists in energizing ("spiritualizing") the passive nature, and, simultaneously, in locating the moment of passivity in the orbit of the human spirit ("naturalizing" it).

Towards a conclusion

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On the basis of our inquiry into Schlegel's theory of irony as it was formulated in the *Fragments* and then transferred onto the pages of *Lucinde*, we can say that the categories of dissimulation, dialectics, and reflection describe its most characteristic features. These three categories seem particularly important, because they link the irony to the ideas of individuality and subjectivity that are at the heart of Jena Romanticism. The idea of Romantic individuality reveals itself both in the comedic/Socratic attitude adopted by the subject (of which only select individuals are capable) as well as in the novelist's focus on getting to know himself and on his unique existential experience. Simultaneously, Schlegel links his concept of individuality with the ironic dialectics of life itself, which, in its infinite becoming "wills that every individual should be perfect in himself, unique and new" (1971c, 120). Finally, it has its roots in irony understood as a poetic reflection, which, like a mirror, reflects the primal activity of Fichte's "I." In turn, the category of subjectivity relates, like irony itself, to the attitude and personality of Socrates, with whom, as Kierkegaard points out, "subjectivity asserts its rights in world history for the first time" (1989, 242). Still, it is only in Fichte's philosophy that it attains its proper form by becoming "subjectivity raised to the second power, a subjectivity's subjectivity, which corresponds to reflection's reflection" (ibid.). In other words, the close connection between Romantic ideas of individuality and subjectivity and dissimulation, dialectic, and reflection—distinguished in the present essay as the main categories defining Schlegel's notion of irony—situate his project within the horizon of transcendental philosophy, bestowing upon it a thoroughly modern form. In this context, Socrates, to whom Schlegel would allude so often, seems to play

little more than a symbolic role. Insofar as irony, regardless of its historical form, will always remain irony, the Athenian philosopher remains, at best, a source of the German author's intuitive inspiration.

Translated by Paweł Jędrzejko

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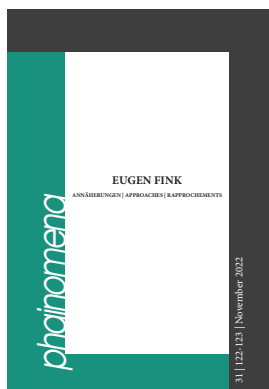
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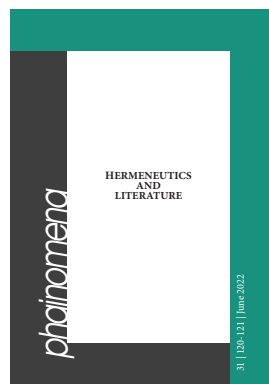
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