

PHILOSOPHY AS HUBRIS

Kierkegaard's Critique of Romantic Irony as a Critique of Immanent Thinking

I

The following image would perhaps be plausible: The postmodern philosophers of indifference to any metaphysical truth in the cheery garb of the early Romantic ironists – and Kierkegaard as their conqueror through the passionate engagement of a self which stands its ground against disintegration and frees itself through an ethical decision. - That the early Romantics developed a style of thought which "questions all systematic and dogmatic fixations"¹ has been investigated by literary theorists with an eye toward the way in which it anticipates deconstruction's critique of subjectivity. - But the view that these Postmodern, with its "pyromaniacal cheerfulness of god expulsion by means of electrifying gags and coups"², its plays on language and lively noncommittal paradoxes, is simply the reflex of a new infantile society, appears not yet in critical studies of deconstruction but already in Kierkegaard's view of early Romanticism. Torn between critique and sympathy, he recapitulates in his master's thesis *On the Concept of Irony* (1841):

A cool breeze, refreshing morning air, blows through Romanticism from the primeval forests of the Middle Ages or from the pure ether of Greece; it sends a cold shiver down the backs of the philistines, and yet it is necessary to dispel the bestial miasma in which one breathed up to this point. The hundred years are over, the spellbound castle bestirs itself, its inhabitants awaken again, the forest breathes lightly, the birds sing, the beautiful princess once again attracts suitors, the forest resounds with the reverberation of hunters' horns and the baying of hounds, the meadows are fragrant, poems and songs break away from nature and flutter about, and no one knows whence they come or whither they go./ The world is rejuvenated, but as Heine so wittily remarked, it was rejuvenated by Romanticism to such a degree that it became a baby again. The tragedy of Romanticism is that what it seizes upon is not actuality. Poetry awakens; the powerful longings, the mysterious intimations, the inspiring feel-

¹ Ernst Behler, Jochen Hörisch, eds. *Die Aktualität der Frühromantik*. Paderborn: Schöningh 1987 (7). All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

² G. Schulte: "Nietzsche und die Postmoderne. Oder: von der vorgeblich heiteren Inexistenz des Menschen". In: *Anstöße* 2 (1986) (Evangelische Akademie Hofgeismar) (54-62).

ings awaken; nature awakens; the enchanted princess awakens - the Romanticist falls asleep.³

This is an ambivalent evaluation, as was all of Kierkegaard's critique of the early Romantics. However, it carries within itself the possibility of a hermeneutic approach to the contradictory reception of the early Romantics. For Kierkegaard the decentralization of consciousness in a free poetic existence, which modern interpreters all too hastily construe as simply a disintegration into a play of signifiers, leads to a dead end. While their wish to transform life into a work of art⁴ and to rescue it from the entanglements of the relative is plausible, it does not offer a way out of the contradictions of life. Instead, it dreams up a world of its own, in which all consciousness of the ability to act is erased. The awakening that Romanticism promised was bought at the price of a complete denial of actuality. The *praise of nonsense* is not yet the conquest of uselessness, as one could suppose, it is not the freedom from social constraints and the rational structures of this habitat, which constantly and ever more hastily strive for self-perfection. It simply grows out of an enthusiasm whose causes reside for the most part in self-isolation and self-dissimulation. The ironist⁵ "does not, however, abandon himself to this enthusiasm for destroying (p. 262).⁶" The I of the Romantics does not cease in its self-reassuring intentions, but rather is only

³ All page numbers refer to Søren Kierkegaard. *The Concept of Irony. With continual reference to Socrates*. Edited and translated with introduction and notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1989 (304).

⁴ "Thus let us transform our life into a work of art, and we will be able to assert our immortality." In: Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder/ Ludwig Tieck: *Phantasien über die Kunst, für Freunde der Kunst*. Stuttgart: Reclam 1973 (57).

⁵ Kierkegaard claims that the term "ironic" is equivalent to the term "Romantic" or "Romantic esthetics": "Throughout this whole discussion I use the term "irony" and "ironist"; I could just as well say "romanticism" and "romanticist". Both terms say essentially the same thing; the one is more reminiscent of the name with which the faction christened itself; the other, the name with which Hegel christened it" (p. 275 fn).

⁶ It is indeed striking to see that the same argument which Kierkegaard criticizes in the structure of desire of the Romantics is formulated by Derrida as the positive aspect for a process which provokes the production of differences and so the process of meaning: "The desire for the intact kernel is desire itself, which is to say that it is irreducible [...] despite the fact that there is *no* intact kernel [...] without this desire [...] no desire would be set moving, likewise without necessity and without what comes along to interrupt and thwart that desire, desire itself would not unfold" (J. Derrida: *Dissemination*. Trans. By B. Johnson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 351.). Kierkegaard criticized this in his work on irony as a "sickly longing such as this is simply a way of wanting to have the perfect prematurely" (p. 329).

"negatively free and as such is suspended, because there is nothing that holds him (p. 262)." As an ironic subjectivity, this I, rather than becoming a reality-giving principle, remains in empty immanence and leads, not to a utopian world, but to distraction. Thus, it only marks but an interim state of utopian thinking which hasn't yet "grasped" reality, but instead – as Kierkegaard writes in his master's thesis – negates "all of historical actuality (p. 275)."

Kierkegaard's criticism is undoubtedly more plausible with regard to the *Romantic* aestheticizing of reality than to the postmodern celebration of difference, most likely because the aestheticizing of life which thinks itself to be postmodern is no longer dependent on the choosing of irresponsibility, as Kierkegaard maintains in *Either/Or* (1843), but rather has objectified and summed up this choice as the inescapable mark of the present⁷. The experience of powerlessness is then stylized only in the inexplicability of *différance*. But this is already part of the technical inventory of deconstruction, whose efforts allow for the increase in the same myriad of interpretations which it had intended to tear down in order to expose the shaken foundations⁸. It is precisely this kind of immanent thinking, for which it has become impossible to grasp its own occasion, that Kierkegaard's critique of irony attacks.

Decisive in Kierkegaard's criticism and more revealing for a deconstruction of the postmodern reception of the structure of irony is less the reproach that early Romanticism is merely an escapism from an imperfect reality, but rather that it carries on a self-concealment in the existential insecurity of man, from which it can not withdraw. The aestheticization of life conveys – and Kierkegaard interprets this as utterly paradoxical – only the insight that there can be *no* conception of man's existence which is not itself aestheticized. In the enjoyment of aesthetic self-complacency, the view of the ironist's own freedom from obligation and existential insecurity is concealed. Instead of actualizing actuality, he rescues himself "from the relativity in which the given actuality wants to keep" (p. 263) him; and even worse, he falls into negativity, to destroy "actuality by means of actuality itself" (p. 262). The ironist cannot become aware of the negativity of his own situation, since he is constantly postponing its inconceivability, even ameliorating it in this thematization to an ironic form of execution. Exactly

⁷ Cf. Klaus M. Kodalle. *Die Eroberung des Nutzlosen. Kritik des Wunschdenkens und der Zweckrationalität im Anschluß an Kierkegaard*. Paderborn: Schöningh 1988 (71).

⁸ With this formulation, Jürgen Habermas characterizes the "paradoxical work" of deconstruction as a "continuation of tradition", in which "the healing energy renews itself solely through spending itself". In: Jürgen Habermas. *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne. 12 Vorlesungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1985 (216).

because one cannot, according to the edict of the early Romantics, discuss irony in any other manner than ironically, and poetry can "only be criticized through poetry"⁹, Kierkegaard as well as Hegel¹⁰ subjects it to a critical revision. Ironic reflection as the establishment of a difference, or even – from a postmodern viewpoint – as "the effect of the play of *différance* itself"¹¹, continues a contradiction which only leads to the bad infinity of an eternal recurrence. If one interprets this self-thematization of irony not as a strength, as for instance, in the post-Fichtean sense of the intentionally paradoxical dealings with reflection's claim to universality, but rather as a weakness of the methodology, then the ironic reevaluation of existence only leads to a "dwelling in the realm of the subjective and the virtual. In that irony clings to the negative, it becomes itself negativity, despite having been conceived as its overcoming."¹²

Kierkegaard in any case introduces a critical caesura where the early Romantic ironists interpreted the constant alternation of reflection positively as a "floating of the imagination"¹³. With this difference, he hopes to confront the carelessness which emerges from the ironist's discontinuous consciousness of life: "Irony is health in as far as it rescues the soul from the entanglements of the relative, it is sickness in as far as it can only bear the absolute in the form of nothing." Irony is justified for Kierkegaard only as dissimulation, in constructing an antithetical situation, "as the subject frees himself by means of irony from the restraint in which the continuity of life's conditions hold him" (p. 255n). Seen existentially, it is therefore not a question of "eternal" or even "divine freedom" (p. 279), but rather of boredom. For Kierkegaard, "boredom is the only continuity

⁹ "Poetry can only be critiqued with poetry. A judgement about art which is not itself a judgement about art, either in the material, as the portrayal of the necessary impression in its development or through a beautiful form and a liberal tone in the spirit of the old Roman satire, does not have a right to exist in the realm of art." In: Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe* (= KA). Ernst Behler u.a., eds. Paderborn: Schöningh 1967, II (162).

¹⁰ Just at the point where Hegel (e.g. in the "Vorlesungen zur Ästhetik") dissolves the contradiction of the early Romantics (Schlegel: "eternal agility") into a harmony of stillness, Kierkegaard begins to develop it further in its contradictoriness. See especially Kresten Nordentoft: *Kierkegaard's Psychology*. Pittsburg: 1978.

¹¹ Winfried Menninghaus. *Unendliche Verdopplung. Die frühromantische Grundlegung der Kunsttheorie im Begriff absoluter Selbstreflexion*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1987 (131).

¹² Peter Szondi: *Friedrich Schlegel und die romantische Ironie*. In: Helmut Schanze, *Friedrich Schlegel und die Kunsttheorie seiner Zeit*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1985 (143-161) (155).

¹³ The "floating" of the imagination is Friedrich Schlegel's central cipher for "irony" (cf. KA III, 100; IV, Nr. 1081; XVIII, 287).

the ironist has. Boredom, this eternity devoid of content, this salvation devoid of joy, this superficial profundity, this hungry glut. But boredom is precisely the negative unity admitted into a personal consciousness, wherein the differences vanish" (p. 285).¹⁴ Boredom is the basic mood of the aesthete. Kierkegaard vividly described boredom in *Either/Or* with the example of the "Augenblicks-existenz"¹⁵ (existence for the moment) of the aesthete. The ironist establishes his unstable happiness *in time* upon boredom's experience of indifference, which – constantly fleeing from emptiness – seeks redemption in ever new moments of enjoyment, even those of horror¹⁶ – but which simultaneously calls forth boredom again and again as the basic mood of his existence. Only from the point of view of the ethicist, who does not make the mistake of taking a principle of his subjective moral action for a problem of a more general applicability, does this paradoxical relation to the self become evident.

As sweeping as this repudiation of ironic subjectivity at first sounds, it would be incorrect to accuse Kierkegaard of wanting to use it to persuade the Romantic ironist to relinquish the freedom granted by arbitrariness in order to make room for a *gravity of life* as it should emerge from the what Kierkegaard calls the stage of the ethicist. When he criticizes irony, it "by no means indicates that irony should now lose its meaning or be totally discarded" (p. 326). The ethical suspension of the aesthetic towards which Kierkegaard strives is not to be understood as a fundamental alternative to the ironist's aesthetic experience of life. Rather, this suspension remains dialectically related to experience. The ironic difference which supports the never-ending conflict of reflection remains much more the impassable horizon of Kierkegaard's dialectic of existence. It is precisely in its contradictoriness that ironic difference is not only negated by this dialectic but also interpreted as an upheaval that points beyond itself. The ironic perspective as the prerogative to a transcendence towards the ethical: this is Kierkegaard's perspective, even in the novel *Either/Or*. He deploys its poetic

¹⁴ For an existential analysis of boredom, see: Wolfgang Janke. *Existenzphilosophie*. Sammlung Götschen 2220. Berlin - New York: 1982 (43-47).

¹⁵ Wilfried Grewe. *Kierkegaards maieutische Ethik. Von Entweder/Oder II zu den Stadien*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1990 (68).

¹⁶ For Kierkegaard, the ironist becomes enthusiastic about a sacrificing virtue, "just as a spectator in the theater becomes enthusiastic; he is however a harsh critic who knows very well where this virtue becomes dull and untrue. He even regrets, but he regrets aesthetically and not morally. He is, in the moment of his regret, already over his regret, and examines whether it is poetically coherent, whether it is suitable for a dramatic rendering in the mouth of a poetic figure" (p. 284).

power in order to show that the aesthetic program of Romantic irony is only accomplished in the ethical.

This is above all the reason for inserting a critical caesura (Kierkegaard speaks of it in the figure of a surgeon's operation¹⁷) into the movement of Romantic irony as a whole which the Romantic existence is to take beyond itself. The immanent mode of thought of the early Romantics is to be broken up so that it has its "cause" (as Kierkegaard puts it) in view and so that it can be mindful of how ironic existence is indebted to a whole movement of thought that reaches beyond the ironist's immanent mode of thinking. The Romantic I is confronted with a mirror of the truth of a paradox by which its self-assertions, instead of succeeding, actually *fail* in order to gain access to itself as a fundamentally unhappy consciousness. It is confronted with the contradiction that thinking about one's own existence is *always* accompanied by the fact that it is *not* existence, since it merely remains on the level of representation and the idea. Paradoxically, it is precisely the failure in the attempt to bring about fruitful relationships with one's self out of finite relationships, the production of a reference which is to be brought about by infinite gravity. The ironist himself draws attention to this paradox, even if, in so doing he runs completely contradictory to his purpose (namely "negatively" or "as the exact opposite of this"¹⁸) when he maintains that it is only because he "manages to be master over the irony at the time of writing he is master over it in the actuality to which he himself belongs" (p. 324). "The difficulty here", writes Kierkegaard in a Hegelian spirit, "is that, strictly speaking, irony actually is never able to advance a thesis, because irony is a qualification of the being-for-itself subject, who in incessant agility allows nothing to remain established and on account of this agility cannot focus on the total point of view that it allows nothing to remain established (...). Ultimately the ironist always has to posit something, but what he posits in this way is nothing. But then it is impossible to be earnest about nothing without either arriving at something (this happens if one becomes speculatively earnest about it) or despairing (if one takes it personally in earnest). But the ironist does neither, and thus we can also say that he is not in earnest about it" (p. 269n).

With the formulation of the *infinite light playing with nothing* or *playing that is terrified of nothing*, Kierkegaard sums up his ambivalence vis-a-vis the idea that in the ironic assertion of identity only the experience of powerlessness is in the end given expression and that a successful self-relation can only be achieved by constantly deferring it as an unsolvable problem. "The more actuality is cari-

¹⁷ See p. 328.

¹⁸ After a formulation by Kierkegaard in: Søren Kierkegaard. *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*. Translated by Walter Lowrie. Harper Torchbook, New York: 1962 (147).

catured", Kierkegaard suggests, "the higher the idea wells up, but the fountain that wells up here does not well up into an eternal life. The very fact, however, that this poetry moves between two opposites shows that in the deeper sense it is not true poetry" (p. 305). A difference of experience is secretly established which does not transform reality poetically, but rather turns it into a "total impression of unserious existence"¹⁹, and, in so doing, ironically destroys it. The experience of the difference, of the crisis, and of one's own inadequacy folds back upon the Romantic consciousness. Instead of dispersing himself in the colorful variety of a poetic reality, the Romantic can conjure up successful relationships with the self only in an unsatisfied yearning which refuses him fulfillment. The difference between idea and reality only finds its disintegration in a fantastic reality, whose naive immediacy cannot turn into actuality. However, for Kierkegaard, the Romantic thus merely grasps the one side of eternity, the annulment of time, but not the introspection of time in eternity, and thus remains in a *negative* freedom.

From the perspective of the ethical, the ambivalence of the ironic assertion of identity presents itself as a position of undecidedness, which continually betrays its own unsteadiness. The ironic sovereignty of the Romanticist represents only *half* of the way, a not-choosing of the self, an impersonal historical way of life. Behind the Romantic *desire* there always stands the unmastered potential of the self's *choice*; behind the romantic arbitrariness there always stands the unmastered potential of the responsibility towards self-realization; and behind the Romantic inactivity there always stands the unmastered potential of the *act* in the ethical decision.

As much as Kierkegaard tries to burst open the empty immanence of ironic subjectivity by inserting a critical caesura in the early Romantic notion of irony in order to keep the possibilities of a transcendental experience open, he does not abolish them, as Hegel did in his dialectic of ideas in a synthesis²⁰. The es-

¹⁹ Michael Theunissen. "Der Begriff Ernst bei Søren Kierkegaard." *Symposium* 1. Freiburg i. Br.: 1958 (96).

²⁰ "Bleibt das Ich auf diesem Standpunkt [der Negativität] stehen, so erscheint ihm alles als nichtig und eitel, die eigene Subjektivität ausgenommen, die dadurch hohl und leer und selber *eitell* wird. Umgekehrt aber kann sich auf der anderen Seite das Ich in diesem Selbstgenuß auch nicht befriedigt finden, sondern [muß] sich selber mangelhaft werden (...). Dadurch aber kommt dann das Unglück und der Widerspruch hervor, daß das Subjekt einerseits wohl in die Wahrheit hinein will und nach Objektivität Verlangen trägt, aber sich andererseits (...) dieser unbefriedigten abstrakten Innigkeit nicht zu entwinden vermag und nun von der Sehnsüchtigkeit befallen wird, die wir ebenfalls aus der fichteschen Philosophie haben hervorgehen sehen. (...) Dieses Sehnen aber ist nur das Gefühl der Nichtigkeit

establishment of a caesura itself is for him a deeply paradoxical undertaking, precisely in that it takes on the conflict in the process of Romantic irony – rather than overcoming it – and hence turning it against irony itself. The paradoxical claim of breaking through ironic subjectivity with regard to human existence is itself based on the assumption of the surpassability of the ironic movement, and so remains attached to it – even if negatively. In a certain way it is precisely the *ironic* reflection which – revealed as nonsensical – is meant to set free the requirements of possibility in order to surpass the aesthetic stage of the ironist and to set the ethical stage itself free²¹. Kierkegaard attempts to characterize succinctly the dialectical relationship of these stages to one another in *The Point of View for my Work as an Author* as a movement which continually negates itself, and in so doing takes back the contradiction of ironic reflection, which perpetually seeks to strive after this reflection. "This again, I say, is the dialectical movement, or is essentially dialectics, namely, in one's *action* to *counteract* oneself at the same time, which is what I call reduplication, and it is an example of the heterogeneity which distinguishes every true godly effort from worldly effort. To strive or to work *directly* is to work or to strive in immediate continuity with an actual given condition. The dialectical movement is the exact *opposite* of this, namely, by one's action to counteract one's effort at the same time - a duplication which is "seriousness", like the pressure upon the plough which determines the depth of the furrow, whereas a direct effort is a slurring over, which not only goes more quickly and easily, but is by far a more thankful task, for it is worldliness and homogeneity"²².

Decisive for an understanding of Kierkegaard's criticism of the Romantic notion of irony is that he employs the same mode of thought that the ironists inter-

keit des leeren eiteln Subjekts, dem es an Kraft gebricht, dieser Eitelkeit entrinnen und mit substantiellen Inhalt sich erfüllen zu können" (Hegel, Werke XIII, p. 96).

²¹ In the same vein, it has been discussed whether Kierkegaard's criticism of irony in *The Concept of Irony* and his criticism of the aesthete in *Either/Or* are not themselves communicable solely aesthetically, presentable only in the medium of literature. "What this says is that in Kierkegaard *philosophy becomes poetry*. Modern philosophers have always thought it possible to be objective; that is, they have claimed to occupy an existentially neutral standpoint, to view reality from the perspective of the angels. Kierkegaard counters: every standpoint is in fact not neutral but biased, not objective but subjective, not angelic but human and finite. Philosophy as understood by modern tradition is impossible." In: Louise Mackey. *Kierkegaard: A kind of Poet*. Philadelphia: 1971. (266). Edo Pivcevic (Ironie als Daseinsform bei Søren Kierkegaard. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann 1960) attempts to interpret this process as a "compensatory process" in which the ironic subject consciously transfers its privileges to the Absolute (God) – a "clever act of self-irony, whereby the Romantic fiasco [is to be] thwarted and the possibility of freedom assured" (92).

²² Kierkegaard, *Point of View* (ed. W. Lowrie) (147)

pret as *positive* and uses it in revealing this interpretation as contradictory. Whereas the early Romantics define the essence of irony as a "floating alternation (...) in the eternal seeking and never-quite-finding"²³, Kierkegaard's critical caesura directs attention back to the internal disruption of this type of reflection and thus to the process in which the ironist, by means of this internal disruption, apparently possesses an enormous power, "just as the ardor of despair gives rise to authentic strength (p. 293)." Whereas the early Romantics celebrate idleness as the highest form of reflection precisely because it embodies an attitude between that which should be achieved but cannot be achieved²⁴, Kierkegaard counteracts this attitude with a position which directs attention to the hidden powerlessness of this seeking. The determination to let fantasy alone prevail "exhausts and anesthetizes the soul and robs it of all moral tension"²⁵, precisely *because* the power of imagination does not succeed in securing this poetical movement and positioning it in a simple, eternally moving image. And where finally the early Romanticists hope to understand poetry as a *progressive* universal poetry²⁶ because it, as Schlegel says, "floats freely in the middle of all real and ideal interest on the wings of poetic reflection, thereby magnifying this reflection over and over and reproducing it as an endless row of mirrors"²⁷, Kierkegaard

²³ F. Schlegel KA III (100).

²⁴ Kierkegaard here quotes words spoken by Julius in Schlegel's *Lucinde*: "'Only in yearning do we find peace', replied Julius. 'Yes, there is peace only when our spirit remains completely undisturbed in its yearning and seeking after itself, only when it can find nothing higher than its own yearning'" (p. 296 fn).

²⁵ An especially succinct explanation of the manner in which Kierkegaard reveals the Romantic ironist's revolutionary consciousness of its own negativity can be found in *The Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age*: "A passionate, tumultuous age wants to *overthrow everything, set aside everything*. An age that is revolutionary but also reflecting and devoid of passion changes the expression of power into a *dialectical tour de force*: *it lets everything remain but subtly drains the meaning out of it; rather than culminating in an uprising, it exhausts the inner actuality of relations in a tension of reflection that lets everything remain and yet has transformed the whole of existence into an equivocation that in its facticity is - while entirely privately a dialectical fraud interpolates a secret way of reading - that it is not.*" In: Søren Kierkegaard. *The Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age*. Translated by Howard Hong and Edna Hong. Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1978 (77).

²⁶ The well-known 116th *Athenaeumsfragment* of Friedrich Schlegel reads as follows: "Die romantische Poesie ist eine progressive Universalpoesie [...] Andere Dichtarten sind fertig, und können nun vollständig zergliedert werden. Die romantische Dichtart ist noch im Werden; ja das ist ihr eigentliches Wesen, daß sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann." Friedrich Schlegel KA II (182).

²⁷ (182).

draws attention to the state of being self-lost [*Selbstverlorenheit*]. Such an external consciousness believes itself to be in an endless progression, despite the fact that it always produces the same reflections. For Kierkegaard, irony must be controlled. It must be halted in the wild infinity into which it ravenously rushes. "As soon as irony is controlled, it makes a movement opposite to that in which uncontrolled irony declares its life" (p. 326). Only then does irony assume its proper meaning, its true validity.

Those who have understood the starting point of Kierkegaard's critique of irony can no longer view identity in Romantic reflection as the "effect of the play of *différance* itself"²⁸, but are rather directed to a dialectic which surpasses *yet again* the universal experiment of Romantic irony in the consciousness that this experiment has only gone half of the way. Indeed, the early Romantics did not want to draw attention merely to the "remaining difference of the between" which keeps the never-ending alternation of reflection in motion for the purpose of renouncing every metaphysical assumption. On the contrary, the Romantics, especially those centred in Jena, investigate with their concept of irony the *universal experiment* of an "eternal seeking and never-quite-finding"²⁹ indeed still with the awareness that precisely a feeling of *irresolvable* conflict between the unconditional and the conditional will remain intact³⁰. For this reason, their act of understanding, although it remains immanent and is not interrupted by interpretations, wishes to express a transcendental perception. Far from renouncing all transcendental reference in their poetic point of view (or even revealing the illusion of the "transcendental signified" in order to devalue it as a formerly metaphysical assumption into a play of signifiers which can be infinitely combined with and substituted for one another³¹ the early Romantics understand irony to

²⁸ Winfried Menninghaus: *Unendliche Verdoppelung. Die Frühromantische Grundlegung der Kunsttheorie im Begriff absoluter Selbstreflexion*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987 (131).

²⁹ Friedrich Schlegel KA III, 100.

³⁰ Cf. Friedrich Schlegel KA II, 160 (=106th Lyceumsfragment). Using the Romantic fragment as an example, Friedrich Schlegel does not draw attention to the impossibility but rather to the *necessity* of an "incomplete communication" in the consciousness, that the universal whole, or that which the Romanticists call *life* in the emphatic sense, can only be rendered ligually broken: The fragment "contains and stimulates a feeling of the irresolvable conflict of the unconditional and the conditional, of the impossibility and the necessity of a complete communication. It is the freest of all licenses in that through it, one disregards himself; but also the most legitimate, since it is absolutely necessary." (100)

³¹ Winfried Menninghaus: *Unendliche Verdoppelung*. (131)

be, as it were, "an epideixis [Zurschaustellung] of eternity"³². This occurs not *despite* a bad finiteness, but rather *because* this finiteness is constantly relativized towards an outstanding lack³³. The characteristic *floating* of positing, countering, and synthesizing of (poetic) reflection would in fact be groundless if the inconceivability of the absolute did not remain present within it. Kierkegaard, may have found an interest in the Romantic fundamental figure of an "infinite lack of being" when he suggests that "there is in our days a prodigious enthusiasms, and, strangely enough, that which makes it enthusiastic seems to be prodigiously little" (p. 328). He too is marked, especially through his Schelling studies, by a preliminary decision "which is shared between Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis and the whole tradition of negative theology in the tradition of Parmenides, namely that of being able to encounter the absolute in no other manner but in the mode of transgression"³⁴. After all, he emphasizes in his criticism of Solger that, with the addition of middle-terms³⁵ in the Romantic concept of creation, there is still an adherence to an absolute - even if negatively severed - which can be perceived: "God has entered into nothing in order that we might cease to be nothing" (p. 316)³⁶. But Kierkegaard then proceeds to whether the

³² Friedrich Schlegel KA XVIII, 128. Novalis also characterizes this figure of thought as "Assumption - eternal peace is already here - God is among us" (Novalis III, 421; quoted from Novalis: *Schriften*. Richard Samuel, ed. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960n.)

³³ To remind us of this, also with regard to Kierkegaard, is the point of Lore Hühn's work (Lore Hühn. *Das Schweben der Einbildungskraft. Zur frühromantischen Überbietung Fichtes*. In: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift* 70 (1996), 569-599. The Romantic "reflection renews in its perpetually unsuccessful quest that which without this execution would not be what it is. Precisely in constantly attempting to redeem what is unredeemable, it constitutes, even if negatively, what it strives for. Reflection which by this way always renews its attempt to reach infinity forms a presence which propels and masters the self-renewing process of reflection in the method of revocation" (578).

³⁴ Lore Hühn. *Das Schweben der Einbildungskraft* (580).

³⁵ Recapitulating the speculative side of the Romantic concept of irony Kierkegaard explains: "He [Solger] does still have the negation of the negation, but still there is a veil in front of his eyes so that he does not see the affirmation. It is well known that he died at an early age. Whether he would have succeeded in carrying through the speculative ideas he seized with so much energy or whether his energy would instead have been consumed in maintaining the negation, I shall not decide at this point [...]" (p. 323).

³⁶ Strikingly, Kierkegaard represses the possibly most interesting theoretician of early Romanticism, since it is Novalis who, in contrast to Solger, thinks in the manner of Kierkegaard in maintaining the reference to an absolute foundation in the perspective of negativity. This absolute foundation can only be represented in a pure feeling (which the Absolute *has*, but in the status of not-knowing). In the *Fichte-Studien*, Novalis attempted to develop his own approach as a systematic paradox which exists paradigmatically in the fact that

early Romantic fixation on the immanence of the self falls into a movement which, against its own claims, can in its *actions* no longer absorb a transcendental fixation, and thus needs correction, which places the human agent *existentially* as well in a relationship with the absence of truth? Is the same never-ending *alternation* of reflection which, according to the self-understanding of the Romantics as well as of the poststructuralist conception of "decentering", precisely does *not* aim at a fulfillment in the future, but rather wishes to leave this fulfillment in the present - is this not an encapsulation, which suggests that there is "no ear for its whispering" but rather "a lack (eo ipso)" of "what could be called the absolute beginning of personal life?" (p. 326). The early Romantics, and, with them, the adherents of non-linear or non-discursive thought forget in "their joy over the achievement [...] that an achievement is worthless if it is not made one's own. [...] Anyone who has a result as such does not possess it, since he does not have the way" (p. 327). One lives, then, in a lack of self-consciousness above one's own existential contradiction which, on the other hand, is also impossible for an immanent thinking to grasp, and so one practices philosophy as hubris. It is exactly this contradiction where Kierkegaard's inverse criticism of irony is engaged. For a *critical* irony, after the likes of which Kierkegaard strives, "brings the way, but not only the way whereby someone fancying himself to have the achievement comes to possess it, but the way along which the achievement deserts him" (p. 327n). Breaking down immanent thinking allows Kierkegaard to argue that the poetic is the very thing the early Romantics misses, "because true inward infinity comes only through resignation,

philosophy which according to its longings must always be "a striving for the imagining of a foundation [ein Streben nach dem Denken eines Grundes]", "but which can only be relatively satisfied [das doch nur relativ gestillt werden kann]" (Novalis II, 269, Nr. 566). The "highest principle contains the highest paradox in its purpose [das höchste Prinzip enthält das höchste Paradox in seiner Aufgabe]": "Alles Filosofiren muß also bei einem absoluten Grunde endigen. Wenn dieser nun nicht gegeben wäre, wenn dieser Begriff eine Unmöglichkeit enthielte so wäre der Trieb zu Filosofiren eine unendliche Thätigkeit und darum ohne Ende, weil ein ewiges Bedürfniß nach einem absoluten Grunde vorhanden wäre, das doch nur relativ gestillt werden könnte und darum nie aufhören würde. Durch das freywillige Entsagen des Absoluten [sic] entsteht die unendliche freye Thätigkeit in uns - das Einzige mögliche Absolute, was uns gegeben werden kann und was wir nur durch unsre Unvermögenheit ein Absolutes zu erreichen und zu erkennen, finden. Dies uns gegebne Absolute [sic] läßt sich nur negativ erkennen, indem wir handeln und finden, daß durch kein Handeln das erreicht wird, was wir suchen. (...) Filosofie, Resultat des Filosofirens, entsteht demnach durch Unterbrechung des Triebes nach Erkenntniß des Grundes (...)" (Novalis II, 269n, Nr. 566). In his criticism of Solger Kierkegaard stresses in exactly the same way: "Thus we are not uplifted by the destruction of the great but are reconciled to its destruction by the victory of what is true, and we are uplifted by its victory" (p. 322).

and only this inner infinity is truly infinite and truly poetic" (p. 289). With regard to this immanent tragedy of poetic reflection, Peter Szondi has described the ironic consciousness very precisely:

"The subject of romantic irony is the isolated, alienated man who has become the object of his own reflection and whose consciousness has deprived him of his ability to act. He nostalgically aspires toward unity and infinity; the world appears to him divided and finite. What he calls irony is his attempt to bear up under his critical predicament, to change his situation by achieving distance toward it. In an ever-expanding act of reflection he tries to establish a point of view beyond himself and to resolve the tension between himself and the world on the level of fiction. He cannot overcome the negativity of his situation by means of an act in which the reconciliation of finite achievement with infinite longing could take place; through prefiguration of a future unity, in which he believes, the negative is described as temporary and, by the same token, it is kept and checked and reversed. This reversal makes it appear tolerable and allows the subject to dwell in the subjective region of fiction. Because irony designates and checks the power of negativity, it becomes itself, although originally conceived as the overcoming of negativity, the power of the negative. Irony allows for fulfillment only in the past and in the future; it measures whatever it encounters in the present by the yardstick of infinity and thus destroys it. The knowledge of his own impotence prevents the ironist from respecting his achievements: therein resides his danger. Making this assumption about himself, he closes off the way to his fulfillment. Each achievement becomes in turn inadequate and finally leads into a void; therein resides his tragedy."³⁷

³⁷ Peter Szondi: Friedrich Schlegel und die Romantische Ironie. In: Satz und Gegensatz. Frankfurt am Main: Insel 1964, p. 17n. Paul de Man who quotes this passage in *Blindness and Insight* (Paul de Man: *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1983, p. 219n) stresses, that this "quotation is right from the point of view of the mystified self, but wrong from the point of view of the ironist. Szondi has to posit the belief in a reconciliation between the ideal and the real as the result of an action or the activity of the mind. But it is precisely this assumption that the ironist denies. (...) Contrary to Szondi's assertion, irony is not temporary (vorläufig) but repetitive, the recurrence of a self-process in exhilarating terms, understandably enough, since he is describing the freedom of a self-engendering invention" (p. 220). But Szondi and Kierkegaard want to emphasize that "freedom as a self-engendering invention" or as an "ever-expanding act of reflection", as Schlegel says ("immer wieder potenzierte[r] Reflexion"; F. Schlegel KA II, 182), is a *temporal* invention, which only leads to an eternity devoid of content. Therefore it remains *temporary* with regard to a true eternity (in contrary to a pure *rhetoric of temporality*). What the Romantics describe as a *floating of imagination* is a permanent oscillation between two opposites which has no continuity. Therefore it is repetitive in the deeper sense of boredom. The continuity in which the iro-

II

If one looks back from here to the argumentation in the decisive second part of Kierkegaard's master's thesis *The Concept of Irony*, it becomes clear how Kierkegaard breaks down and reformulates historically the early Romantic concept of irony by taking a hermeneutic recourse to the Socratic concept of irony. Seen historically, the definitive caesura of both concepts is described in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794): "In Fichte, subjectivity became free, infinite, negative" (p. 275). But it was initially in the early Romantic reception of Fichte, especially in the surpassing of the productive activity of the transcendental I through the literary Romantics's ironic freedom of empirical subjectivity, that Kierkegaard recognized a weak point in the philosophical origin of Romantic irony. As a result, Fichte's principle of practical subjectivity is lost, for "in the first place, the empirical and finite I was confused with the eternal I; in the second place, metaphysical actuality was confused with historical actuality. Thus a rudimentary metaphysical position was summarily applied to actuality. Fichte wanted to construct the world, but what he had in mind was a systematic construction. Schlegel and Tieck wanted to obtain a world.*" (p. 275). Finally, Romanticism allegedly counters Socratic irony by adopting a higher level of "ironic formation", in which the subject – aware of its own irony – flourishes in ironic freedom. With the early Romantics, "the intensified subjective consciousness [...] declares irony as its position" (p. 242). On this higher level of consciousness, which "corresponds to reflection's reflection" having "a subjectivity's subjectivity" as a precondition, is the "consciousness that finitude is a nothing is obviously just as earnestly intended as Socrates' ignorance" (p. 269). The preconditions, however, have been switched: "the Romantic ironist, who raises himself to a transcendental I, actually suspends concrete historical reality in the same way that he uses irony to create his own poetic reality as pure possibility (Z3[© ; ùM3KEM)"(p. 262³⁸). "The ironist is the eternal I for which no actuality is ade-

nist wants to live exists only in the moment. Seen existentially (which the ironist cannot be aware of), this in an *empty* moment of time [see footnote 42].

* Continuation of the quote: "But this ironic endeavor by no means ended with Tieck and Schlegel, on the contrary, in Young Germany it has a crowded nursery. In fact, in the general development of this position, considerable attention is directed to this Young Germany".

³⁸ Revealing for the reflection problematic which Kierkegaard imagines here is his comment on this part: "Like water in relation to what it reflects, the negative has the quality of show-

quate" (p. 283). Kierkegaard's polemics against Romantic irony, which strives to exchange infinite absolute negativity with a never-ending poetic freedom, begin here. He subjugates the modern manifestation of Romantic irony to the critical perspective of Socratic irony under the meaning of history.

Socratic irony negates existing reality in order to allow subjectivity to come to the fore. But this "subjectivity's emancipation" which is "carried out in the service of the idea" (p. 263) does not question actuality at all, but rather "was demanding [...] the actuality of subjectivity, of ideality" (p. 271). Socrates' irony endeavored to move his contemporaries from the confusing limits of custom to the true idea of the good as an object of ethical passion. His irony was obligated with respect to a new positivity beyond all negativity, a consciousness of subjectivity which inaugurated the historical development as pure possibility. Socratic irony was thus simply a vehicle, a stimulating power that was, according to Kierkegaard, "world-historically justified" (p. 271).

However, Romantic irony does not stand in the service of the world spirit, since it is not applicable here that "an element of the given actuality [...] must be negated and superseded by a new element, but it was all of historical actuality that it negated in order to make room for a self-created actuality. It was not subjectivity that should forge ahead here, since subjectivity was already given in world situations, but it was an exaggerated subjectivity, a subjectivity raised to the second power. We also perceive here that irony was totally unjustified..." (p. 275). In contrast to Socratic irony, which works towards a positive ethical idea, aesthetic subjectivity of ironic-Romantic consciousness situates itself critically against *all* of reality. It relativizes not only ironic reality in general, but also destroys existing reality [actuality] and, with it, all of historical existence in favor of a poetic life without history. Its sole positive expression as regards reality is that it is only vanity and pretense. The Romantics' total irony misses precisely that which "is constitutive in actuality, that which orders and supports it: that is, morality [Moral] and ethics [SFdelighted]" (p. 283). This irony becomes a "seducer" through which existence is exchanged for the emptiness of pretense, which confuses life with a noncommittal existence in reflection, and which is the halting of all historical actuality and thus an abuse of ironic sovereignty.

The arguments in Kierkegaard's harsh polemics against Romantic irony refer, in their hermeneutic approach, to Socrates, who has just shown that irony is only a "guide" (p. 327), an "excellent surgeon" (p. 328), but is not identical to the *idea*. Yet since Socrates has been in this regard "lacking in all positivity", he has, according to Kierkegaard's correction of Hegel's perspective, become the

ing as high above itself that which it supports as it shows beneath itself that which it is battling; but the negative, like the water, does not know this" (p. 262).

beginning of the initiation of all historical development: He is the beginning and therefore positive, but as *only* the beginning, he is negative³⁹. Romanticism inverts this relationship of the higher reflection of irony precisely to its opposite. It can no longer be said about Romanticism, as was the case with Socrates, that "his negativity virtually carries within itself, so to speak, the positivity of his historical consequences"⁴⁰. The gravity which stands behind the infinitely absolute negativity of Socratic irony like an "incognito", a "magnificent pause" (p. 198), a "turning point in history" (p. 200) and which finally, in contrast to Hegel's concept of morality, is broken down by Kierkegaard through a Christian anthropology, reveals itself against the backdrop of the existential abuse inflicted upon it by Romantic irony. The world-historical meaning of irony – according to the fundamental idea – is deduced from Socratic irony not only as paving the way for morality, but also – contrary to fact – from the injury which is inflicted by Romantic irony upon historicized morality. Christ as the salvation from negativity forms the caesura. After Christ, Socratic irony can only live on in a higher form as Romantic irony and thus becomes its opposite.

In this way, Kierkegaard's intention to overcome the Hegelian dialectic of concepts through a finally theologically interpreted dialectic of existence forms the background of his criticism of German Romanticism. The pathos of this position developed with regard to Socrates' method is revealed in the fact that precisely the renouncing of the knowledge of the truth (of existence) in the purely passionate *appropriation* of truth is the only truth there can be for one who exists. Seen in Johannine terms, the knowledge of truth is not a knowledge of the correct existence; rather it is the true existence itself. The true existence which presides all knowledge of reason is for Kierkegaard in the end only communicable through a religious experience. It is not attainable through reflection.⁴¹ Reflection and contemplation of an original self lead precisely to the destruction of the unity of this self in antinomian powers which communicate themselves to the

³⁹ In his criticism of Solger, Kierkegaard makes clear how the concept of negation is to be speculatively defined in the problematic of an absolute, 'presuppositionless' beginning: "The negative has, namely, a double function - it infinitizes the finite and it finitizes the infinite. But if the reader [Solger] does not know in which current he is or, more correctly, if he is now in one current and than in another, everything is confused" (p. 310).

⁴⁰ Michael Theunissen. *Der Begriff des Ernst bei Søren Kierkegaard*. Symposium 1. Freiburg/ München: 1958 (18). [translated]

⁴¹ Kierkegaard develops in *The Sickness unto Death*, his analysis of desperation, precisely the reflection of the moments "of which the self consists as a synthesis" ("desperately wanting to be itself") and infers from this experience of contradiction an original synthesis of the self posited and created by God.

concrete individual as a fundamental contradiction in the feeling of fear and desperation. However self-realization for Kierkegaard is "a consciousness about one's self, which is itself an action", and realizes itself in the concrete existence of historical actuality. "What doubt is to science, irony is to personal life" (p. 326).

Kierkegaard's criticism of the ironic-Romantic form of life culminates in the accusation that it suspends the ethical. The suspension of a given reality and with it the conditions of historical existence into pure possibility – the "emigration of actuality" (p. 297) – leads to chaos and confusion, to the destruction of all that is objectively given. It is a flight into a sham existence, which is propelled solely by the motivation no longer to be exposed to the existential experience of contradiction. The Romantic shuts himself in a fantasy world where he becomes intoxicated with the "infinity of possibilities" (p. 262) and believes to encounter in this infinity – "the enormous reserve fund of possibility" (p. 262) – *true* infinity, but actually is intoxicated with bad infinity – an 'outer', or as Kierkegaard puts it, "external infinity". "Even if he enjoys the whole world, the person who enjoys poetically nevertheless lacks one enjoyment, for he does not enjoy himself" (p. 297). The negative dialectic in Socrates's method is transformed here into a poetic progression which is meant to reach in the infinite. The enthusiasm of this ironic freedom lacks all existential gravity, because it does not possess anything higher than itself. It is not at liberty to command an ethical position. It lacks the "negative moment" in the process of the dialectic of existence, which is precisely what characterizes Socratic irony. Socrates' path to truth becomes the truth itself in Romanticism – and is thus abused. The Romantic *exaggeration* of Socratic irony turns, according to Kierkegaard's criticism of, above all, Solger, "God's existence into irony" and thereby into "nothing" (317n).

Thus, the life of the ironist, who is intoxicated by the interplay of "creating" and "annihilating" the poeticized and self-creating reality also exists in actuality only in the *moment*. It breaks down into mere interesting details which, instead of existing in a actuality (or historical continuity), are gradual and occasional. "As the ironist poetically composes himself and his environment with the greatest possible license, as he lives in this totally hypothetical and subjunctive way, his life loses all continuity. He succumbs completely to mood. His life is nothing but mood" (p. 284). The only continuity of this "eternity devoid of content, this salvation devoid of joy, this superficial profundity, this hungry glut" (p. 285) is the selflessness of boredom, an emptiness which, as Kierkegaard writes in *Either/Or*, "rests upon the limitless infinity of change." Melancholy as "not to want deeply and introspectively", a flight from the world as the stepping out of temporality are the dark sides of ironic life, to which "no reality is suitable" but

which is constantly stranded in reality. The turning point in the "summit" of Socratic irony - when "in that magnificent moment" the enthusiasm for destruction becomes Eros ("and Socrates became the beloved rather than the lover", p. 190n) - transforms the Romantic irony in that empty moment⁴² in which intoxication and desperation, melancholy and enthusiasm exchange one another without continuity. In positing irony as absolute, Romanticism revokes Socratic irony as its corrective.

Finally, Kierkegaard's attack on Romantic irony culminates in the statement that the "poetic position taken by the writer" (p. 305) determines "the entire design" of the poetic work in such a way as to become a duplication of the poet's ironic freedom. Romantic poetry mirrors the inner strife of the Romantics's ironically transformed relationship to life: It becomes "poetic arbitrariness" and leaves behind as an overall impression "an emptiness in which nothing remains" (p. 305). Because "the writer himself does not enter into a true poetic relationship to what he writes", thus the consequence, he "cannot enter into a truly poetic relation to the reader" (p. 305). The ironically transformed relationship to life increases itself in the relationship between poetry and the author's self-image. Precisely in this deficient sovereignty vis-à-vis irony as a poetic principle, Kierkegaard must have seen the most striking confirmation of the Romantics inability to control

⁴² In *Fear and Trembling* and in the *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard explains that the discontinuous life of the ironist was first severed by Christianity, which in contrast to the specifically heathen philosophy of Platonism is *post factum* the absolute Other, and infers the true, concretely and as a "fullness of time" defined moment. In Kierkegaard's concept of Romantic irony, irony cannot become history since everything is subjective freedom and every moment signifies an empty point in the now. Finally Christianity is the qualitative jump which – without being pretended – teaches the experience of actuality as a paradoxical unity of the eternal and the temporal. "In the moment history starts at new." By the fulfilled present of this moment, a differentiation comes into the world which allows time to be developed from the future (next to that which can be called an abstract-steadily time), and which divides itself into the three different structures of present, past and future, making historicity possible in the first place. In contrast to the poetic-aesthetic origin of the ironist "to write himself", the life of the Christian consists of "letting himself be written". Kierkegaard imagines the decisive meaning of this moment both christologically and existentially: christologically he means the absolute paradox of God's becoming man by temporalizing the eternaty; existentially he means the absolute paradox that the (preexisting) eternal is only brought through time (but he himself is also the "starting point for the eternal" which formerly was not). This moment of decision which returns into life of every individual ("for the eternity *in time*") determines indeed first and foremost the becoming of a Christian, but is also interpreted neutral in the ethical decision, as in *Either/Or* (see Michael Theunissen's article "Augenblick" in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*).

irony (as a point of view) and his being controlled by it. Because it is one thing to let oneself be poetically composed and another to compose oneself poetically.

Thus, Romantic poetry for Kierkegaard is not autonomous, but rather dependent on representation. It merely ironically caricatures reality to the point of the grotesque, destroying it in its most laughable moments without being able to supply a "true ideal". "On the one side stands the given actuality with all its paltry philistinism; on the other the ideal actuality with its dimly emerging shapes" (p. 304n). The incommunicability of these opposites, the condition "that this poetry moves between two opposites shows that in the deeper sense it is not true poetry" (p. 305). The restlessness in the polemically surpassing play of irony, the negation of all content, the lack of continuity, the poetic arbitrariness, which becomes a "laboratory" of noncommittal experimentation – all of this stands justified, viewed from Kierkegaard's critical standpoint, in a yearning for "poetic infinity" which is still only illusory, an eternity, which, "since it has not time", becomes a mere caricature. The strength of this poetry still remains at most only in the lyrical sphere, "because here mood - and mood, after all, is all-important - has absolute sway and is utterly free, since all content is negated" (p. 307). But ultimately "the musical element [in the lyric] isolates itself entirely" (p. 307) and becomes profane.

Kierkegaard stages his criticism of Romantic poetry on the example of Friedrich Schlegel's love story *Lucinde* and Ludwig Tieck's poetry. These reviews, which anticipate the later depictions of aesthetic life in *Either/Or*, pursue the goal of criticizing the poetic objectivizations of aesthetic forms of life by themselves. Romantic love – Schlegel's ideal of a poetic life – is discredited by Kierkegaard as a "catechism of love" (p. 291)⁴³ which proclaims "an infinitely cowardly life" (p. 298), an ahistorical "vegetating" and a "collapsing into esthetic stupefaction" (p. 295) – which goes even as far as to the point of the demonic nature of sensuality (302) – and which therefore must be measured by the ethics of marriage, since it is there that Romantic love first becomes historical. For Kierkegaard, the true poetic life lies in marriage, a poetry of life which is brought into representation by being lived.

Kierkegaard's criticism of Tieck's poetry and satirical dramas on the other hand reaffirms the accusation of mere puns, lyrical experimenting, tone poetry,

⁴³ Kierkegaard's polemic against Schlegel's *Lucinde* goes so far as to accuse it at being unexcusable even as a noncommittal work of youth because it is doctrinary, but rather he already believes to recognize in it a latent anti-Protestantism. Thus he reminds "that Schlegel, as is well known, became a Catholic later in his life and as such discovered that the Reformation was the second Fall of man, which adequately indicates that he had been in earnest with *Lucinde*" (p. 290).

silly "childishness" and "poetic abandon" which is carried away to the point of being "excessively ironic capering" (p. 302). Kierkegaard makes also clear that these forms of "poetic abandon", in as far as they exclude all contact with the real world, possess a historical justification. He recognizes this justification of Romantic irony as it becomes visible in Tieck in his refreshing polemics against the "totally fossilized" (p. 303) Enlightenment. "The world was in its dotage and had to be rejuvenated. In that respect, romanticism was beneficial" (p. 304). However, this applies only to its shutting the self off from all reality. The more this principle is infringed upon, the closer such poetizing "becomes intelligible [...] through a break with actuality", the more "it forgets its poetic indifference" (p. 302) and collides with the experience of reality. That this collision is unavoidable in the end is due to the fact that the adventurous independence of fantasy, which has no central point, "never finds rest" (p. 306) in its strivings (p. 306); it does not instill trust in its figurations, and even generates a "disquieting anxiety" (p. 306) in its absurd and shrill excesses. This fear most likely stems from the realization that the "infinitely light play with nothingness" does not encourage but rather injures "the identity of real temporality and even more real eternity, whose unity is first constituted in the entirety of reality."⁴⁴

In his conception of a "controlled irony", Kierkegaard, in a final conclusion, attempts to show that irony as a poetic principle and means of expression is not to be wholly rejected, since it can also establish a positive relationship to existence. For Kierkegaard, this is paradigmatically achieved by Goethe, who ironically limits the Romantics's immediate aesthetic standpoint, absolute subjectivity, "to let the objective dominate" (p. 324). This restriction occurs because the poet relates "ironically to his writing [...] so that the irony is in turn ironically controlled" (p. 324). Only when irony itself is turned against its "prodigious enthusiasm" does its impatience become discipline. Only then does it find "the center of gravity in itself" (p. 324), to become a "controlled element", a "disciplinarian", and "excellent surgeon" (p. 328). This controlled irony "limits, finitizes, and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, content; it disciplines and punishes and thereby yields balance and consistency" (p. 326). In this way the form of controlled irony becomes the corrective of the Romantic aesthete. To a certain extent, the higher form of Romantic irony is here turned against itself to such an extent that it appears, in poetry, to be Socratic in nature. In this manner the ironist stands above irony, controls it, can place it in the service of a "higher idea" and is immune to the abuse of it turning itself into an idea and a philosophy

⁴⁴ M. Theunissen. *Der Begriff Ernst* (23).

of life. Kierkegaard values this form of controlled irony, which overcomes the Romantic and moves towards a positive possibility, as being of "extremely important in enabling personal life to gain health and truth" (p. 328). For Kierkegaard, Goethe's poetry is the fitting expression of a poetic life: "Here, then irony is controlled, is reduced to an element. The essence is nothing other than the phenomenon; the phenomenon is nothing is nothing other than the essence. Possibility is not so prudish as to be unwilling to enter into any actuality, but actuality is possibility" (p. 325). As Goethe's, so was Shakespeare's life reconciled with actuality through an "irony's inner economy" (p. 325); or, "in other words, the poet does not live poetically by creating a poetic work (...) but he lives poetically only when he himself is oriented and thus integrated in the age in which he lives, is positively free in the actuality to which he belongs" (p. 326).

In the wake of Kierkegaard's work on irony, the conception of a *controlled irony* represents the utmost argument for the ability of the world-historical meaning of irony to, in poetry, be made fruitful for the artistic communication of existence. The criticism of Romantic irony which Kierkegaard develops from the standpoint of Socratic irony and which, from this point of view, furnishes proof of a perversion of its world-historical function, develops by itself criteria as to how poetry can be placed into the service of a true poetic life, that is to say of a historical existence. Through this hermeneutic approach, Kierkegaard takes up another position, which he later changes with regard to the technique of representation in *Either/Or*. In the situation of the novel *Either/Or*, the aesthetic is indeed radically confronted with the ethical. This occurs, however, not in order to question the existential meaning of art, but rather in order to be able to follow the transformation of an aesthete. At this point, Adorno's negative aesthetic and critical revision of Kierkegaard come into play. In his *Construction of Kierkegaard's Aesthetic* he writes: "Not the hubris of grandeur with which the 'moralist' so scornfully reproaches the 'aesthete', but rather the reverse of the hubris of greatness is his best attitude. It is the cell of a materialism whose vision is focused on 'a better world' - not to forget in dreams the present world, but to change it by the strength of an image that indeed may be as a whole 'portrayed according to the abstract criterion *in general*' whose contours are concretely and unequivocally filled in every particular dialectical element"⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ Theodor W. Adorno: *Kierkegaard. Construction of Aesthetic*. Translated, edited and with a foreword by Robert Hullot-Kentor. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1989 (130n).

