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When Negativity Becomes Vanity: Hegel's Critique of Romantic Irony

Jamila M.H. Mascat

Sapienza University of Rome

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Abstract

Hegel, the “philosopher of negation” par excellence, took great care throughout his speculative enterprise to distinguish between opposite stances of the *negative*, highlighting and differentiating the multiple modes through which negativity deploys itself. And although, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he celebrated the “tremendous power of the negative” and the constitutive function performed by negativity as the fundamental motion of being, thinking, and acting, he nonetheless developed a harsh critique of Romantic irony’s negative *Stimmung*¹. This article, by focusing on the peculiar exercise of negativity that the philosopher attributes

¹ For a detailed discussion of irony, see Knox 1973. The German word *Ironie* (from the Latin *ironia* and the Greek *eironeia*) traditionally refers to the Socratic method described in Plato’s dialogues in which Socrates, first claiming to know nothing so as to encourage his listeners to voice their own opinions, would refute them dialectically in the ensuing discussion. As Hegel observes, Socratic irony stimulates *Nachdenken*, as well as moral and intellectual freedom (Hegel 1979: 121). Schlegel likewise takes the term “irony” from Plato, but broadens its meaning: Romantic irony expresses a “mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above its own art, virtue, or genius” (quoted in Norman, 2000: 140). On modern and contemporary uses of irony in literature and philosophy (Schlegel, Mann, De Man, Adorno, Deleuze et al.), see Peters 2005.

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to Romantic irony in the *Aesthetics* and his “Review of Solger’s Posthumous Writings and Correspondence” (1828), investigates Hegel’s characterization of *irony as vanity (Eitelkeit)*². Hegel’s critical understanding of vanity, in fact, conveys a significant political stance regarding the very concept of negation, one that warns against the apolitical retreat into both *narcissism* and *nihilism*.

Keywords

Hegel, irony, negativity, nihilism, Romanticism.

Negating in Vain

Associated with the experience of the Jena circle (1797–1800), and especially with Friedrich Schlegel’s literary criticism, Romantic irony played a leading role in early nineteenth-century German aesthetic theory³. Hegel’s interest in the subject appears in many of his works (*Aesthetics*, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, and “Review of Solger’s Posthumous Writings and Correspondence”)⁴, always “marked by a certain resentment,” as Kierkegaard later observed in his dissertation on *The Concept of Irony* (1989: 266)⁵. The source of this *resentment* clearly emerges in each of these texts, where Romantic irony is depicted as the ultimate artistic expression of a “highly cultivated age” (the modern era), embodying a paradigmatic example of *dangerous negativity* that improperly shapes the relationship between the subject and the objective world (Hegel 1991: 184). According to Hegel, Romantic irony,

² *Eitel* and *Eitelkeit* are best translated here as “vain” and “vanity,” which conveys the double meaning of “empty” (vacuous) and “conceited.”

³ Romantic irony in German literature reached its expressive peak in the Jena circle, which originated in 1797 around the journal *Athenäum* (whose final issue came out in 1800). Its members included, among others, the brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, who founded the journal, the writer and translator Caroline Schlegel-Schelling, the poet Novalis, and the playwright Ludwig Tieck. Friedrich Schlegel, a literary theorist and writer, was the circle’s leading spirit. Among other works, he was the author of a novel called *Lucinde* (1799), which Hegel attacked repeatedly in his own writings. For a critical analysis of Schlegel’s theory of irony, see Norman 2000, and Miller 2000.

⁴ Hegel’s review of Solger’s *Nachgelassene Schriften und Briefwechsel*, split into two articles, was first published in 1828 in the *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*, the journal Hegel had founded in Berlin in 1827.

⁵ Kierkegaard remarks that “as soon as Hegel mentions the word ‘irony,’ he promptly thinks of Schlegel and Tieck, and his style is immediately marked by a certain resentment” (Kierkegaard 1989: 265–266).

which he defines in the *Aesthetics* as “the most inartistic of all principles,” has produced nothing in poetry except torment and longing; nothing in theater except insipid figures and “worthless yearning natures”; and nothing in art theory except capricious judgments and facile enthusiasm for mediocre works. Lastly in philosophy, irony has turned out, in the worst case, to be simply the expression of a “critical talent”⁶ pervaded by “miserable philosophical ingredients,” and in the best case, such as that of K.W.F. Solger⁷, an unsuccessful attempt to reach the speculative Idea that has ended up abstractly hypostatizing only its negative moment (Hegel 1975: I, 63, 68).

However, in the *Aesthetics*, Hegel’s critique targets other *Kunstformen*, such as *satire* and *subjective humor*, which like irony stem from a sort of discrepancy or mismatch that occurs between the artist’s subjectivity and the world’s objectivity. Because of their capacity for reproducing and exacerbating discrepancies, both satire and subjective humor (which arise at the peak of the Classical and the Romantic eras, respectively) bring the dissolution of those cultural experiences to a close. Satire, in Hegel’s words, represents an “art-form which assumes this shape of the emerging opposition between finite subjectivity and degenerate externality,” while the satirical artist is the one who, from the height of his own virtue’s purity, taunts the foul world, which clashes with his ideals of goodness and justice. By cultivating hostility between the individual and the reality that surrounds him, satire portrays a universe in which “inner and outer remain in fixed disharmony.” The problem in this case lies precisely in the unresolved character of the opposition produced by satirical wit: satire generates conflict without reconciliation, and by performing the dissolution of the Ideal, it achieves only a “prosaic” representation of the existing state of things. The philosopher thus detects a form of “abstract wisdom” in the behavior of the satirical artist—in his “passionate indignation [...] and colder bitterness against the reality”—that does not deserve to be labeled as art. “Satire,” he concludes, “does not enjoy the

⁶ In his doctoral dissertation “The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism,” Walter Benjamin argues that Romantic criticism can neither be reduced nor assimilated to the experience of modern criticism: “Thus, an analysis of the Romantic concept of criticism leads at once to that feature that will show itself even more clearly [...] *the complete positivity of this criticism, in which the Romantic concept of criticism is radically distinguished from the modern concept which sees criticism as a negative court of judgment*” (Benjamin 1996:152; emphasis is mine).

⁷ Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger was a professor of philosophy and Hegel’s colleague in Berlin. Interested particularly in the philosophy of fine art and the philosophy of religion, Solger was close to the Romantic circle and re-elaborated Friedrich Schlegel’s notion of irony in his two-volume work on aesthetics, *Erwin, Vier Gespräche über das Schöne und die Kunst* (1815).

free unhindered beauty of imagination or pour forth this enjoyment; on the contrary, it clings discontentedly to the disharmony between its own subjectivity, with its abstract principles, and empirical reality, and to this extent produces neither true poetry nor true works of art” (Hegel 1975: I, 512–516).

The case of subjective humor is much the same. Its ingredients are “subjective notions, flashes of thought, striking modes of interpretation,” with which the humorist aims at “destroying and dissolving everything that proposes to make itself objective and win a firm shape for itself in reality, or that seems to have such a shape already in the external world.” This particular kind of humor consists in an exercise of absolute and dis-solute freedom in which the artist, by means of “a criss-cross movement of subjective expressions, views, and attitudes,” mixes, confuses, and dis-joins frames and contents for the sole purpose of glorifying his own wit. By doing this, the humorist, who can arbitrarily dispose of all things “because he is no longer dominated by the given conditions,” attains a limitless creative omnipotence vis-à-vis both matters and forms that marks the sunset of the Romantic era (Hegel 1975: I, 600–602).

With regard to both genres, satire and subjective humor, Hegel’s critique focuses on the imbalance that defines the relation between the subjective element and the objective, skewed in favor of the former; whereas in considering the stances of Romantic irony, which functions by a similar mechanism and in this sense can also be interpreted as an expression of *hyper-subjectivism*, the philosopher traces some peculiar characteristics that concern more closely its *negative conduct*. In Hegel’s view, in fact, one of Romantic irony’s major failings lies in its “infinite absolute negativity” (*Unendliche absolute Negativität*), as we read in his “Review of Solger’s Writings and Correspondence” (Hegel 1975: I, 68). Although in principle the philosopher draws no boundary around the “power of the negative”—negativity has no quantitative limit, because everything can be negated, and negation can be infinitely extended and reiterated—Hegel seems to blame Romantic irony precisely for its *negative surplus*. In reality, as will subsequently become clear, his reproof targets a specifically dysfunctional way of *processing negativity* that takes two partially overlapping but distinct directions, both of which Hegel illustrates throughout his works. On the one hand, Romantic irony displays the subject’s incapacity for adequately negating the objective element, and in this sense we can speak of a *deficit of negativity* that proceeds from its purely formal aspects. While Socratic irony, which Plato staged in his dialogues “against the complacency of the uneducated consciousness and that of the Sophists” to preserve the truth of the Idea, obeys a properly dialectic movement that sinks thought into the substantial, Romantic irony stands above all content without actually engaging with it. It aims to destroy all substantiality with the mere intent of upholding the ego’s narcissistic freedom (Hegel 1991:

180)⁸. On the other hand, the ironic subject lacks the capacity for governing the negative course of its dispositions, to the point where it constantly annihilates everything and reduces even the noble, the moral, and the great to naught: in this case, we are confronted with an *irretrievably nihilist negativity*. The two critical paths explored by Hegel share, nevertheless, a common theoretical argument: the rejection of any fruitless and futile deployment of the negative that eventually attains only “the vanity of all things” (Hegel 1991: 184).

The Evil of Irony

In the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), more specifically in the second part, on “Morality,” and in its third section, on “The Good and Conscience,” Hegel classifies irony as one of the moral forms of evil, along with *hypocrisy*, *probabilism*, *good intention*, and *conviction* (Hegel 1991: 170–184). These reproachable ethical expressions bear the peculiar mark of modernity, which consists in the crystallization of a principle of subjectivity—“the higher principle of the modern era, a principle unknown to Plato and the ancients” (Hegel, 1983: 160), as the philosopher stated in his early Jena lectures (1805–1806)—to the extent that “the abstraction of self-certainty, according to him, is always a part of *evil*,” inasmuch as it precludes the higher sins of self-referentialism and self-indulgence (Hegel 1991: 168).

Irony appears at the end of the lengthy §140 as “the supreme form in which [...] subjectivity is completely comprehended and expressed,” and as “the only possible culmination [...] of that subjectivity which regards itself as the ultimate instance.” The two definitions Hegel sets out here imply that irony curiously ranks worst among all the moral forms of evil. What accounts, then, for the superior immorality of the ironic attitude? First of all, Hegel objects to the exacerbated presumption of a “particular selfhood” (*Ichkeit*), which proclaims itself judge of truth, right, and duty, supposing surreptitiously that “it is not the thing [*Sache*] which is excellent, it is I who am excellent, and master of both law and thing,” (Hegel 1991: 180–184). Breaking the rules according to its own whims and deliberately misrecognizing the highest and greatest moral principles, this arrogant subjectivity is bound to meet a counter-penalty very much like the destiny of the *beautiful soul*, who vanishes “like a shapeless vapor dissolving into thin air,” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 2008: 599). Following a similar trajectory indeed, the ironist eventually perishes in noble inconsistency (*Inhaltlosigkeit*) for having annihilated the whole substantiality of the real.

⁸ For an analysis of Hegel’s interpretation of Romantic irony, Pöggeler 1999; Norman 2000, and Rose 2009: 145. Rose proposes an original revisiting of the topic of irony, making “the case for irony as a severe style” through Hegel’s lectures on *Aesthetics*, which, however, does not coincide with our reading of the subject.

Second, one of Hegel's primary concerns in the *Philosophy of Right* is to highlight the ethical consequences of the ironic attitude, which stem from its excess of narcissism. Though the ironist admits the existence of "objective goodness," he prefers to keep his distance from it, remaining free to choose, enjoy, and be faithful to his own private inclinations. Instead of plunging *seriously* into the realm of ethics and acting in consequence, the ironic consciousness considers "the supreme instance which obliterates good and evil" as something "contingent" and "of little value." For this reason, not only does it precipitate into the vanity of an ego that "knows itself as this emptiness of all content and, in this knowledge, knows itself as the absolute," but in so doing, it also nullifies the entire ethical arrangement. Here, Hegel considers the twofold shape of vanity, which he portrays as "subjective emptiness [*Eitelkeit*]", on the one hand, and as *ethical* emptiness (*die Eitelkeit alles sittlichen Inhalts*), on the other; it is precisely in the latter that he grasps the manifestation of what he defines as an "evil, in fact, of an inherently and wholly universal kind." As the philosopher remarks in the note to §140, where he refers to the theory of irony that Solger exposed in his "Critique of August Wilhelm von Schlegel's Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature," the worst danger lies in the ironist's scornful attitude to the objective world, which threatens to undermine the very foundations of ethical life. For Hegel, in fact, the grounds of the *Sittlichkeit* (the ethical life) are "actuality" and "action," which are meant to be accomplished within the context of finite objectivity (namely, the State), since only within such a determinate context can subjective freedom take shape and fulfill itself. Conversely, the negative freedom that the ironist attempts to gain by countering the ethical order remains the expression of a purely abstract liberty that in Hegel's opinion utterly lacks any moral consistency (Hegel 1991: 180–184).

Knowing How to Say No

A detour through the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* allows us to uncover some other significant aspects of Hegel's critique of irony. Here, Hegel does not specifically address this subject; instead, he outlines the profile of *Räsonieren*, a figure of reflexive thinking that displays some analogies with the practice of irony in regard to the exercise of negativity. *Räsonieren* (clever argumentation) stands opposed to *materielles Denken*, a kind of knowledge produced by the "contingent consciousness which is sunken into what is material and which at the same time finds it exceedingly difficult to lift its own self out of this matter." Unlike *materialized thinking*, in fact, *Räsonieren* "amounts to freedom from content and to the vanity [*die Eitelkeit*] that stands above all content." Both processes, however, represent mirror images of the one-sidedness that animates non-conceptual thinking and fails to achieve the goal of speculation.

The abstract freedom of *Räsonieren* and its inappropriate relationship to concrete matters call to mind some acute traits of Romantic irony. Indeed, according to Hegel, its *vanity*, in the same way as ironic vanity, “is expected to make an effort to give up this freedom, and, instead of being the arbitrary principle moving the content, it is supposed to let this freedom descend into the content and move itself by its own nature, which is to say, to let it move itself by means of the self as its own self and then to observe this movement” (Hegel 2008: 54)⁹. Hegel then describes the blind alleys into which *Räsonieren* desperately and necessarily blunders. The first coincides with the emptiness of the knowledge acquired by *clever argumentation*, which mirrors the vanity of its content as well as the vanity of its bearer. In fact, when thought precipitates into the “reflection into the empty I,” it cannot but remain prisoner of “the vanity [*Eitelkeit*] of its own knowledge,” and “what this vanity expresses is not merely that this content is vain but also that this insight itself is vain,” along with the subject who is accountable for it (Hegel 2008: 55).

The second target of Hegel’s critique concerns a specific mode of dispensing negativity, whose operation helps shed light on the genesis of that vanity to which *Räsonieren* seems to be doomed. “[M]erely clever argumentation,” Hegel writes, “conducts itself negatively towards the content apprehended; it knows how to refute it and reduce it to nothing. It says, ‘This is not the way it is’; this insight is the merely *negative*; it is final, and it does not itself go beyond itself to a new content” (Hegel 2008: 54–55). To this extent, *Räsonieren* makes use of an abstract and partial form of negativity, a *merely* negative form that destroys everything and creates nothing, and *derives nothing from the nothingness it generates by means of its negation*. Such negativity, unable to descend into the subject matter, ultimately shows itself to be sightless, for it seizes only one element of negation; as Hegel points out, “it is the negative which catches no glimpse of the positive within itself.” On the contrary, conceptual thinking is supposed to articulate the negative within the content itself, inasmuch as it recognizes

⁹ In the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel also spends some time condemning the vanity attained by a fearful consciousness, which is afraid to undertake the painful venture of achieving *Knowledge*. “The fear of truth may lead consciousness to conceal itself both from itself and from others and to take refuge behind the façade that holds that its fiery enthusiasm for the truth itself makes it more difficult or even impossible to find some truth other than the individual truth of vanity itself, which at any rate always takes fright about any of the thoughts one might get from oneself or from others. This vanity—which understands how to render each and every truth powerless so that it can return back into itself and revel in its own intellect, which always knows how to bring all thoughts to dissolution and which, instead of finding any content, finds merely the barren ‘I’—is a satisfaction which must be left to itself, for it flees from the universal and seeks only being-for-itself” (Hegel 2008: 77–78).

negativity as the immanent movement of the finite and its determinacies. Accordingly, from the speculative standpoint of the concept, what applies is not only the principle that *omnis determinatio est negatio*, but also the assumption that *omnis negatio est determinatio*, for *omnis determinatio* “taken as a result, [...] is the *determinate* negative which emerges out of this movement and is likewise thereby a positive content” (Hegel 2008: 55).

Divine Genius and its Discontents

The *Aesthetics* is Hegel’s fullest treatment of the subject of Romantic irony. In the introduction, the philosopher devotes a whole paragraph to irony, in the section that illustrates the “Historical Deduction of the True Concept of Art.” Here, as in the other texts we have briefly analyzed, he traces the invention of irony back to Friedrich Schlegel’s theory of aesthetics (emphasizing its deeply non-speculative and unphilosophical character), as well as to the fundamental principles of Fichte’s philosophy, namely, the absolute principle of the *Ich*, turned by the Romantics into a formal and abstract notion of subjectivity (Hegel 1975: 55)¹⁰.

The alarming feature that Hegel detects in ironic art can be identified, once again, with the dissonant matching of the subjective and the objective that underlies the ironist’s relation to the world. Since Romantic art, as even Schlegel admitted, originated from the awareness that the Absolute could no longer be represented in sensible mediums (Norman 2000: 132), its reflective character increasingly released the artist from all ties to matter, the sensible, and the determinate, culminating in the subjectivism of the ironic stance that rejects any external limit to its freedom to create. Hence the ironist’s feeling that he possesses a negative omnipotence allowing him to become a *divine genius*.

At the will of the ironic artist, who is “lord and master of everything,” everything can be negated; the valuable is only what has value for the ego, to which are attributed caprice and the power to produce and annihilate any element. Ultimately, from an ironic perspective, nothing per se has value: reality thus turns into “a mere appearance” (*ein bloßes Scheinen*)—a “self-made and destructible show”—in the hands of the artist who intends to live his life *artistically*, while art itself precipitates into the vacuous out-

¹⁰ Hegel also touches on this in the *Philosophy of Right* (addendum to §140), though there he seems to absolve Fichte of Schlegel’s deviation into irony, pointing out that “this point of view was in fact a product of Fichte’s philosophy, which maintains that the ‘I’ is absolute, i.e. that it is absolute certainty, the universal selfhood [*Iellheit*] whose further development leads to objectivity. It cannot in fact be said of Fichte that he made the arbitrary will of the subject into a principle in the practical sphere, but this [principle of the] particular, in the sense of Friedrich von Schlegel’s ‘particular selfhood,’ was itself later elevated to divine status in relation to the good and the beautiful” (Hegel 1991: 184).

pouring of this empty ego that in all its acts and utterances shapes its existence to reflect its “God-like geniality.” In this way, however, it enjoys a merely inconsistent will that results from its being unattached to any kind of content: the artist simply dabbles in the objective world, for he is “not bound.” In fact, the ironic attitude has eliminated all ties and boundaries in order to preserve the ego’s pure self-enjoyment (Hegel 1975: I, 65–66).

As a result, the ironist’s abstract negativity prevents him from appropriately negating *any* kind of matter, and to Hegel’s mind this is equivalent to leaving *every* kind of matter unaltered. Consequently, the boomerang effect that the philosopher attributes to the reflexive device of abstraction backfires against the ironic artist, too: without ever really plunging into concrete matter and by performing only a formal semblance of negativity, the ironist ends up integrating within his creative process the unsettling presence of contingent and unmediated contents that have not been effectively negated. At the same time, the parabola of abstract negativity leads the artist—for whom nothing has validity “since validity is ascribed only to the formalism of the ego” (Hegel 1975: I, 65)—to experience the vacuity of his own existence.

Unlike comedy, which aims to “bring the absolutely rational into appearance,” irony aims to reveal “the vanity of everything factual, moral, and of intrinsic worth, the nullity of everything objective and absolutely valid” (Hegel 1975: II, 1202; I, 66). So the ironist, to whom everything except his own subjectivity appears in principle null and void, gradually finds himself hollow and characterless, at the mercy of the emptiness he himself has generated. The fate of contradiction and suffering thus befalls him: since he finds no satisfaction in the conceit of his life, he “longs for objectivity” and wants to penetrate into the solid truth of the substance; but at the same time, he cannot abandon his “abstract inwardness” and thus remains trapped in a perpetual state of yearning as a “*morbid beautiful soul*” (*Schönseelingkeit*). Nevertheless, as Hegel points out, “a *truly beautiful soul* acts and is actual,” whereas the ironist lacks the strength to overcome his own detachment and remains haunted by his futility and the worthlessness of reality (Hegel 1975: I, 66–67). Insofar as the ironic artist is forced to test himself against the unbearable nullity that emanates from his ego, the dialectic between vanity (*Eitelkeit*) and fulfillment (*Erfüllung*) comes to a halt, because the first element prevails over the other, such that ironic narcissism gives rise to an irretrievable manifestation of nihilism.

Irony as Negativity: Matter and Modus Operandi

What is the specific mode of negation that accounts for this regrettable nihilist drift? In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel describes in detail the negative process enacted by the ironist, referring in the first place to the contents that distinguish irony from the comical, which embodies a very different

kind of negativity. In comedy, the comical spirit reduces to naught “what is in itself null” (such as “a false and self-contradictory phenomenon”), whereas irony, by showing that characters who decide to embrace lofty values eventually come to grief, annihilates the highest and the best, the moral and the true (Hegel 1975: I, 67).

In his 1828 review of Solger’s writings, Hegel indirectly tackles the issue of nihilism. Reconstructing and analyzing Solger’s theory of irony, Hegel complains that his speculative apparatus lacks a middle ground for mediating the transition from the presupposed nullity of the earthly world to the essentiality of the divine. What is missing is “the point in which what is ‘holiest and highest’ gains its worldly presence as ethical order, law and love” (Hegel 1979: 258). The limit of Solger’s doctrine can be seen precisely in its implicit annihilation of that “mundane presence” (*weltliche Gegenwart*) in which ethical life unfolds and the Absolute manifests itself. In these same pages where Hegel compares irony to *devotion* (*Andacht*), meaning the uplifting of thought that strives toward the divine by transcending and superseding every earthly concern, he notes, “[T]his elevation is nothing other than the Sunday of life, which is followed by working days.” To this end, against the disengaged detachment of the ironic attitude, the philosopher calls for a radically different stance that demands men leave their “inner room for a sort of particular presence and a particular work” (Hegel 1979: 258). Unlike Solger, in fact, Hegel argues that worldly activity per se is not nothing; on the contrary, it defines the necessary middle term where the suprasensible mediates with the sensible. Hence his praise of that “particular presence” which coincides with an involvement in the terrestrial, and his call for a ground of mediation for accomplishing the proper *work of the negative*, absent which both the finite and the infinite, the profane and the divine, would be perpetually fated for abstraction. Referring to the syllogism of existence illustrated by Hegel in the “Doctrine of the Concept” section of the *Science of Logic*, Jeffrey Reid notes “the consistence of the world depends entirely [...] on the possibility that what is highest can exist in the particularity of the world” (Reid, 1997: 53). Conversely, irony, by discrediting this very possibility and disqualifying the particular’s plane of existence, exposes the world to the vacuum of vanity.

Heretofore we have examined Hegel’s criticisms only with regard to the contents towards which irony adopts a negative approach (ethical values, moral principles, and every substantial feature), even if his argument suggests that the issue at stake it is not only a matter of contents. It is also a matter of irony’s *modus operandi*; in other words, what counts is not only *what* it negates, but also the *way* in which irony performs its negativity. At the end of the paragraph devoted to irony in the *Aesthetics*, after enumerating the various limits of ironic art, Hegel briefly refers to the works of Solger and Ludwig Tieck, both of whom contributed to the elaboration and promotion of the Romantic theory of irony. Solger, who

elsewhere deserves credit for having transformed the “specter” of irony into a “speculative principle” (Hegel, 1979: 254), here is praised for having seized and emphasized the negative nature of the ironic stance. “In this process,” Hegel remarks, “he came to the dialectical moment of the Idea to the point I call ‘infinite absolute negativity.’” Solger perceptively read irony in a speculative key, and in the negativity that irony conveys he grasped the dialectic element that pertains to the deployment of the Idea. However, Hegel continues, “to this negativity Solger firmly clung,” and this was the main limitation of his interpretation¹¹. Indeed, the stage of absolute negativity is only a transitional position—a moment in the speculative process, which, as such, cannot be thought of as a mere exercise of negativity. But Solger mistook the whole for the part, and infinitized the ironic-dialectic principle to the point where he turned it into “the *whole* idea.” The outcome of his philosophy is thus “purely dialectical unrest and dissolution of both infinite and finite” (*diese bloße dialektische Unruhe und Auflösung des Unendlichen wie des Endlichen gefaßt*) (Hegel 1975: I, 68–69).

Therefore in Solger’s reading as well, irony remains a *non-spiritual* activity (namely, one that does not achieve the proper movement of the Spirit), because it fixates on the merely negative element and does not manage to transcend the state of *Unruhe* it produces. From this standpoint, Solger’s theory of irony can be likened to Schlegel’s or, more precisely, to a metaphor Schlegel employs in one of his *Critical Fragments*, where he describes irony as a *permanent parabasis* (*eine permanente Parekbase*)¹². In ancient Greek comedy, parabasis, the moment when the actor (or the chorus) removes the mask and comes forward to address the audience in the poet’s name, is a break in the drama’s flow. The ironist who, like the actor, performs his parabasis, momentarily suspends every relation with objectivity (whether discursive, ethical, political, etc.) as he pleases, and does so precisely by exercising ironic negativity. The *permanent parabasis* to which Schlegel refers could be read as a perpetual suspension which, recurring indefinitely, ends up by vitiating the very act of suspension. The phrase thus contains an oxymoron and, as has been noted, “is an aporia in the etymological sense: a dead end or blind alley in thought, beyond which it is impossible to progress” (Miller 2000: 61). Paul de Man in fact argues that “permanent parabasis is not just at one point but at all points” (De Man 1996: 179); consequently, the danger entailed by a process of this kind is the emergence of a sort

¹¹ In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard, seems to endorse Hegel’s judgment of Solger, whom he defines as “the *metaphysical knight* of the negative [who] has gone completely astray in the negative” (Kierkegaard 1989: 309; emphasis is mine).

¹² Schlegel affirms that “Die Ironie ist eine permanente Parekbase” (quoted in Miller 2000: 60).

of *hypertrophic negativity* that cannot bind itself to anything and continues to replicate in a perpetual motion uprooted from contents. In parallel with Schlegel's use of the metaphor of "permanent parabasis," one might say in Hegelian terms that irony represents a *permanent antithesis*, an antithesis that allows no *Aufhebung*, or "an antithesis without any possibility of synthesis at a higher stage" (Miller 2000: 61); in other words, one that interrupts and prevents any dialectical deployment of the Absolute.

On the one hand, irony thus appears to be *not negative enough*, since it displays a practice of negation that is never immersed in the subject matter but is always suspended above and beyond it. On the other hand, its corrosive power as *permanent parabasis* proves to be *too negative*. These two characterizations are not actually opposites, as a negativity that is not tied to content ends up like an idling engine, spinning incessantly but never really affecting the substance of the *Sache selbst* with its own negative conduct. The unsettling side of irony lies, then, not simply in its negative surplus, but rather in the only apparently paradoxical fact that such surplus is defective, precisely because its negation of *everything* turns out to be the inability to negate *something*.

Irony vs. Philosophy

In Hegel's view, Romantic irony is the outcome of a spiritual age that brought the contradictions of modernity to a head. For this reason it is related to other contemporary cultural experiences (such as sentimentalism and pietism as regards religious matters, or subjective idealism as regards philosophy), with which it shares the deep sense of split (*Entzweiung*) and fragmentation that tormented the times. In this sense, irony simply represents the highest mode of expression that Romantic art has achieved: an art that displays "from the beginning the deeper disunion of the inwardness which was finding its satisfaction in itself and which, since objectivity does not completely correspond to the spirit's inward being, remained broken or indifferent to the objective world" (Hegel 1975: I, 609)

Adopting a historical standpoint in his review of Solger's works, Hegel argues that Romantic irony grew out of a crisis in German literature that began in the late eighteenth century and consisted of a retreat to subjective abstraction and "a shapeless weave of the Spirit" (*ein gestaltlosen Weben des Geistes*), both of which epitomize the principal traits of "the most brazen and flourishing period of irony" (Hegel 1979: 213–215).

Therefore, the fundamental divide between irony and philosophy clearly lies in the *seriousness* (*Ernst*) that only belongs to the latter. Seriousness indeed constitutes a typically philosophical *Stimmung* that the

ironist, according to Hegel, seems not to possess at all. Celebrating the irreverent character of ironic art, Schlegel compares it to a “continuous self-parody” (*diese stete Selbstparodie*) that takes what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke. Echoing Schlegel’s words, Hegel also points out that Romantic irony “treats nothing seriously and carries on the business of joking merely for the sake of joking,” for it can transform reality into appearance, making any *serious* understanding of it impossible (Hegel 1975: I, 296).

Lacking “the seriousness, the suffering, the patience and the labor of the negative,” irony is necessarily downgraded into “triteness” (*Fadheit*) (Hegel 2008: 16). Its knowledge is nothing but vain, its art is nothing but formal and frivolous. Conversely, philosophy is concerned with what is essential, *die Sache selbst*, and that is what defines its particular seriousness. “Genuine earnestness,” Hegel states, “enters only by means of substantial interest, something of intrinsic worth like truth, ethical life, etc., — by means of a content which counts as such for me as essential, while the ironic attitude gives all this up in the name of the right to freely dispose of the world” (Hegel 1975: I, 65).

This is why Hegel considers Schlegel’s theory of irony “non-philosophical,” and despite the fact that he acknowledges the Schlegel brothers have shown a certain “critical talent” as well as “freedom of speech and boldness of innovation,” (Hegel 1975: I, 63), he maintains that Friedrich Schlegel never understood “the need of the thinking reason” that is proper to philosophical science, though he never ceased to claim that he had reached “the highest peak of philosophy.” Schlegel’s judgmental attitude toward philosophical contents—“a decidedly negative bias against objectivity”—reflects thus a “diabolic insolence” that has always refused to descend from the pedestal of irony to relate to worldly matter and measure oneself patiently with the plain truths of philosophy (Hegel 1979: 233–235).

In reality, Hegel recognizes that there exists a genuinely speculative moment that corresponds to something constitutive of irony: it is “the *negativity* that rises to maximum abstraction and is the fundamental determination of Fichte’s philosophy,” the I=I principle in which “not only all finiteness, but, most important, all consistency [*Gehalt*] disappears.” But Schlegel is only interested in the subjective side of this negativity and misunderstands and neglects its implicit speculative ground. As a result, he reduces this negativity to irony, that is, to the “negation [*Verneinen*] of the vitality of reason and truth” (Hegel 1979: 254–255). In this respect, irony turns out to be profoundly anti-philosophical in Hegel’s view: it is not simply an artistic practice separate and distinct from philosophy that nevertheless shares with it the common device of negativity. Rather, it represents philosophy’s worst enemy, for it counters, with its uninvolved creative play, the speculative warning to “look [...] the negative in the face and eventually linger [...] with it” (Hegel 2008: 29).

Conclusion: Seeking an Antidote to Irony's Hypochondria

In sacrificing philosophical earnestness on the altar of vanity, “ironic sublimation” dissolves the substance of reality, and by means of its art it offers the audience merely a “comet-like world [*einer kometarischen Welt*] made up of intangible sounds and scents without import.” Faced with this bleak scenario, nullity remains the only destination that irony can reach by pursuing the “self-conscious annihilation [*Vereitelung*] of what is objective” (Hegel 1979: 214, 233). Objectivity is indeed what is at stake.

It may be worth noting that in analyzing the phenomenon of Romantic irony, Hegel distinguishes “the purely abstract attitude of the speculative category of negativity” from negativity’s “reflection on the particular, on the terrain where duties, truth and fundamental principles begin.” Here, once again, his critique of the *vanity* of negativity deals with the practical implications caused by irony on the objective ground of ethical life, which he also illustrates in his *Philosophy of Right* (Hegel 1979: 257).

Taking the example of two Romantic writers, Ludwig Tieck and Heinrich von Kleist, Hegel points to the mysticism that pervades the works of both, a mysticism that emanates from a state of narcissist melancholy in which one loses the capacity for communicating with the world and devotes oneself instead to pursuing fantasies and unreal visions. This condition seems to be symptomatic of a “hypochondriac method,” namely, a diseased state in which “abstraction sets in as an obstacle to the development of thought” and prevents proper philosophical speculation as well as genuine artistic creation (Hegel 1979: 228). Hypochondria in fact goes hand in hand with a strong feeling of aversion to reality, which drives the ego to withdraw from the world and to sink into its own nostalgic subjectivity. Just as the hypochondriac abdicates real life, so the ironist, preferring virtuosity to seriousness, follows the whims of his genius and adopts an apolitical mode of conduct that exempts him from every concrete commitment to the world. Irony then, according to Hegel, shares the same characteristics as hypochondria, but dangerously celebrates them as artistic virtues, turning exaggerated subjectivism and the rejection of objectivity into values instead of symptoms. Yet with its negative paroxysm, irony does not allow any positive action and opens the doors wide to nihilist inaction.

In contrast with such fruitless and aloof exercises of negativity, Hegel seems to suggest a radically different practice of irony, one that implies discipline, labor, and speculative earnestness. Taking our cue from his recommendation to cultivate “a growing intimacy with the object, a sort of objective humor,” we might call it *objective irony*, assuming that objectivity could figure as a synonym for *Sittlichkeit*. Unlike subjective irony, which is confined to the inward realm of the ego, objective irony should

allow negativity to be immersed in real ethical matter and demand the subject seriously engage with it. In other words, it requires the ironist to abandon his self-referential posture and plunge into the worldly substance in order to look straight at the negative that stems from the *Sache selbst's* self-deployment and patiently *tarry* with it. In Hegel's mind, in fact, only by similarly welcoming the determinate can the subject experience the immanent negativity of the finite as well as accomplish its own reflexive self-negation. Objective irony would imply, then, a move from subject to substance, generating on the side of the ego an ecstatic openness to objectivity as the sole terrain on which negativity can finally activate and actualize itself. Should this move be understood as the hallmark of Hegel's inclination towards the real as against the possible? Should the philosopher's plea for "a sensitive abandonment of the heart to the object" (Hegel 1975: I, 609) be seen as devaluating the role of freedom and subjectivity? His critique of Romantic irony visibly shifts the emphasis from the ability to invent subjective negations to the capacity to destroy positive existing determinacies, and it is the second task, seemingly the less creative by far, that corresponds in Hegel's terms to the most powerful unfolding of the negative. Yet, in order to be accomplished, this task necessarily requires collective engagement; it has to take hold of the aspirations of individuals and mobilize their industrious will and duty, which means that, in the realm of objective irony, subjectivity qua agency still maintains a prominent political role. In fact, alongside Hegel's speculative ontology of negativity, a complementary *politics of negativity* emerges within the constellation of objective irony. In this context, agency acquires a peculiar negative profile inasmuch as its negativity does not amount to the abstract behavior of rejection, withdrawal or denial. Rather, it aims at effecting a concrete disruption of existent matters with their particular existing constraints. It is, in other words, a *negative* agency rooted in the *positive* and ceaselessly applied to it: *operativity* constitutes its pride, while *vanity* represents the insidious threat looming over the negative that eternally exposes agency to the nihilist danger of negating without acting. This is to suggest that Hegel's politics of negativity may be of greater interest to scrupulous craftsmen than imaginative artists.

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