Aesthetic Ideology

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Edited with an Introduction
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The Concept of Irony

The title of this lecture is "The Concept of Irony," which is a title taken from Kierkegaard, who wrote the best book on irony that's available, called The Concept of Irony. It's an ironic title, because irony is not a concept—and that's partly the thesis which I'm going to develop. I should preface this with a passage from Friedrich Schlegel, who will be the main author I'll have to talk about, who says the following, talking about irony: "Wer sie nicht hat, dem bleibt sie auch nach dem offensten Geständnis ein Rätsel."1 "The one who doesn't have it (irony), to

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The Concept of Irony was transcribed and edited by Tom Keenan—and revised by the editor—from the audiotape of a lecture given at Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, 4 April 1977. De Man's lecture was based on two (perhaps even three) sets of notes (some pages of which go back to his seminar at Yale on "Theory of Irony" in spring 1976): one set includes an outline titled "Irony—the story of irony—"; a second set is the continuation of an unfinished essay titled "Ironies of Allegory." Some material from these notes (cited as N1 and N2) has been included in the footnotes here, and some was used to reconstruct a gap between the two sides of the audiotape. Significant insertions or additions are in square brackets. De Man's own parenthetical remarks are in parentheses (in brackets within quotes). Translations are de Man's unless otherwise indicated. All notes were supplied by Tom Keenan.

him it remains, even after the most open disquisition, an enigma.” You will never understand—so we can stop right here, and all go home.

There is indeed a fundamental problem: the fact that if irony were indeed a concept it should be possible to give a definition of irony. If one looks into the historic aspects of that problem, it seems to be uncannily difficult to give a definition of irony—although later, in the course of this discourse, I will attempt a definition, but you won’t be much the wiser for it. It seems to be impossible to get hold of a definition, and this is itself inscribed to some extent in the tradition of the writing on the texts. If I take the period I will mostly referring to, namely, the writings on irony, the theorization of irony in German Romanticism in the early part of the nineteenth century (the period when the most astute reflection on the problem of irony is going on), even in that time it seems to be very difficult to get hold of a definition. The German aesthetician Friedrich Solger, who writes perceptively about irony, complains at length that August Wilhelm Schlegel—who is the Schlegel we will be talking about the least (Friedrich is the one we want)—although he had written on irony, really cannot define it, cannot say what it is. A little later, when Hegel, who has a lot to say about irony, talks about irony, he complains about Solger, who writes about irony, he says, but who doesn’t seem to know what it is he is writing about. And then a little later, when Kierkegaard writes on irony, he refers to Hegel, whose influence he is at that moment trying to get out of, and he more ironically complains about the fact that Hegel doesn’t really seem to know what irony is. He says what and where Hegel talks about it, but then he complains and says he really doesn’t have much to say about it, and what he says about it whenever he talks about it is just about always the same, and it isn’t very much. ²

So there seems to be something inherently difficult in the definition of the term, because it seems to encompass all tropes, on the one hand, but it is, on the other hand, very difficult to define it as a trope. Is irony a trope? Traditionally, of course, it is, but: is it a trope? When we examine the tropological implications of irony, and we will be doing this today, do we cover the field, do we saturate the semantic area that is covered by this particular trope? Northrop Frye seems to think it’s a trope. He says it is “a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning,” and he adds, “(I am not using the word in any unfamiliar sense . . .)”³ “A pattern of words that turns away”—that turning away is the trope, the movement of the trope. Tropes mean “to turn,” and it’s that turning away, that deviation between literal and figurative meaning, this turning away of the meaning, which is certainly involved in all traditional definitions of irony, such as “meaning one thing and saying something else,” or “praise by blame,” or whatever it may be—though one feels that this turning away in irony involves a little more, a more radical negation than one would have in an ordinary trope such as synecdoche or metaphor or metonymy. Irony seems to be the trope of tropes, the one that names the term as the “turning away,” but that notion is so all-encompassing that it would include all tropes. And to say that irony includes all tropes, or is the trope of tropes, is to say something, but it is not anything that’s equivalent to a definition. Because: what is a trope, and so on? We certainly don’t know that. What is that trope of tropes? We know that even less. Definitional language seems to be in trouble when irony is concerned.

Irony also very clearly has a performative function. Irony conscribes and it promises and it excuses. It allows us to perform all kinds of performative linguistic functions which seem to fall out of the tropological field, but also to be very closely connected with it. In short, it is very difficult, impossible indeed, to get to a conceptualization by means of definition.

It helps a little to think of it in terms of the ironic man, in terms of the traditional opposition between eiron and alazon, as they appear in Greek or Hellenic comedy, the smart guy and the dumb guy. Most discourses about irony are set up that way, and this one will also be set up that way. You must then keep in mind that the smart guy, who is by necessity the speaker, always turns out to be the dumb guy, and that he’s always being set up by the person he thinks of as being the dumb guy, the alazon. In this case the alazon (and I recognize that this makes me the real alazon of this discourse) is American criticism of irony,⁴ and the smart guy is going to be German criticism of irony, which I of course understand. I have in mind, on the American side, an authoritative and excellent book on the problem of irony, Wayne Booth’s A Rhetoric of Irony. Booth’s approach to irony is eminently sensible: he starts out from a question in practical criticism, doesn’t get involved in definitions or in the theory of tropes.⁵ He starts from a very reasonable question, namely: is it ironic? How do I know that the text with which I am confronted is going to be ironic or is not going to be ironic? It’s very important to know that: lots of discussions turn around this and one always feels terrible when one has read a text and one is told later on that it’s ironic. It is a very genuine question—whatever you have to do, it would indeed be very helpful and very desirable to know: by what markers, by what devices, by what indications or signals in the text we can decide that a text is ironic or is not?

This supposes, of course, that such a thing can be decided, that the decision we make in saying that a text is ironic can be made, and that there are textual elements

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4. NJ: “alazon is Am. criticism (not Burke).”
6. NJ: “empirical approach—but can one avoid theorization of irony?”
which allow you to make that decision, independently of problems of intention which might be hidden or might not be apparent. Wayne Booth is aware of the fact, although he puts it in a footnote, that there is a philosophical problem involved in this decision, to decide that a text is ironic or not, and that you can always put in question whatever decision you make once you think you have arrived at that decision. His footnote will be, in a way, my starting point. You remember that in his book he makes a big point of distinguishing what he calls stable or definite irony from another kind of irony which would not be stable and with which he deals much less. He says the following: “But no interpreter of stable irony ever needs to go that far, even though some ironies, as we see in part III, do lead to the infinite” [p. 59]. There’s going to be more talk of this infinite in a moment. But then he has a footnote where he raises the question. “In this way,” he says, “we rediscover, in our practical task of reading ironies (which is the task he’s set for himself), why Kierkegaard, in his theoretical task of understanding the concept of irony, should have defined it finally as ‘absolute infinite negativity.’”

Irony in itself opens up doubts as soon as its possibility enters our heads, and there is no inherent reason for discontinuing the process of doubt at any point short of infinity. How do you know that Fielding was not being ironic in his ostensibly ironic attack on Mrs. Partridge? If I am answering this with a citation or other “hard” data in the work, I can of course claim that Fielding was ironic in his use of them (instead). But how do I know that he was not really pretending to be ironic in their use, not in fact ironically attacking those who take such data without irony? And so on. The spirit of irony, if there is such a thing, cannot in itself answer such questions: pursued to the end, an ironic temper can dissolve everything, in an infinite chain of solvents. It is not irony but the desire to understand irony that brings such a chain to a stop. And that is why a rhetoric of irony is required if we are not to be caught, as many men of our time have claimed to be caught, in an infinite regress of negations. And it is why I devote the following chapters to “learning where to stop” [p. 59 n. 14; Booth’s emphases].

This is a very reasonable, very sensible, and very perceptive note. The way to stop irony is by understanding, by the understanding of irony, by the understanding of the ironic process. Understanding would allow us to control irony. But what if irony is always of understanding, if irony is always the irony of understanding, if what is at stake in irony is always the question of whether it is possible to understand or not to understand? The main theoretical text on irony next to Kierkegaard, to which I will refer later but without reading it exhaustively, is a text by Friedrich Schlegel which happens to be called “Über die Unverständlichkeit”—“On the impossibility of understanding,” “On incomprehensibility,” “On the problem of the impossibility of understanding.” If indeed irony is tied

with the impossibility of understanding, then Wayne Booth’s project of understanding irony is doomed from the start because, if irony is of understanding, no understanding of irony will ever be able to control irony and to stop it, as he proposes to do, and if this is indeed the case that what is at stake in irony is the possibility of understanding, the possibility of reading, the readability of texts, the possibility of deciding on a meaning or on a multiple set of meanings or on a controlled polysemia of meanings, then we can see that irony would indeed be very dangerous. There would be in irony something very threatening, against which interpreters of literature, who have a stake in the understandability of literature, would want to put themselves on their guard—very legitimate to want, as Booth wants, to stop, to stabilize, to control the trope.

It would have been difficult, though not impossible, but more difficult, for Wayne Booth to write this way, and to write the sentence I’ve just quoted, if he had been more cognizant of the German tradition which has dealt with the problem, rather than centering his argument as he does on the practice of eighteenth-century English fiction. Booth knows about the Germanic tradition, but he wants to have nothing to do with it. This is what he says: “But, fellow romantics, do not push irony too far, or you will pass from the joyful laughter of Tristram Shandy into Teutonic gloom. Read Schlegel,” he says [p. 211]. Clearly we shouldn’t do this, if we want to keep at least reasonably happy. I’m afraid I’m going to read Schlegel, a little bit, though I don’t think of Schlegel as particularly gloomy. But then I’m not entirely sure that the laughter in Tristram Shandy is entirely joyful either, so I’m not sure how safe we are with Tristram Shandy. But at any rate, it’s a different kind of texture. Schlegel’s own German contemporaries and critics, and there were many, didn’t think he was gloomy at all. They actually rather held it against him that he was not nearly serious, and not nearly gloomy, enough. But (I will say this as a simple and not particularly original historical statement, if you are interested in the problem and the theory of irony, you have to take it in the German tradition. That’s where the problem is worked out. You have to take it in Friedrich Schlegel (much more than in August Wilhelm Schlegel), and also in Tieck, Novalis, Solger, Adam Müller, Kleist, Jean Paul, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and all the way up to Nietzsche. An enumeration from which I more or less pointedly omit Thomas Mann, who is generally considered to be the main German ironist. He is, but he is less important than any of the others I mentioned. But Friedrich Schlegel is the most important, where the problem really gets worked out. Schlegel is an enigmatic figure, a curious work and a curious person. It’s an enigmatic career, and a work which is by no means impressive—very fragmentary, unconvincing, with no really finished works, only books of aphorisms and unfinished fragments—a fragmentary work entirely. It’s a bewildering personal career, also politically bewildering. He has just one finished work, a little anecdotal roman à clef called Lucinde, which is not a novel that most people nowadays still read a great deal (they’re making a mistake, but that’s the way it is).  

Still, that little novel, which isn’t very long and which seems to be anecdotal related to his love relationship with Dorothea Veit before he married her, has provoked a totally unpredictable amount of irritation in the people who commented on it later on. Though it seems slight enough and not very serious, whoever wrote about it later—and some very big names wrote about it—got extraordinarily irritated whenever this novel came up. This is the case most notoriously with Hegel, who refers to Schlegel and Lucinde and loses his cool, which doesn’t happen so easily to Hegel. Whenever this comes up he gets very upset and becomes insulting—he says Schlegel is a bad philosopher, he doesn’t know or he hasn’t read enough, he should not speak, and so on. And Kierkegaard, although he is trying to get away from Hegel, echoes Hegel in the discussion of Lucinde which intervenes in his book on irony. He calls it an obscure book and gets very upset too, so much so that he has to invent (we’ll come back to that in a moment) a whole theory of history to justify the fact that one should get rid of Friedrich Schlegel, that he’s not a real ironist. And this is significant, in a sense. What is it in this little book that got people so upset? Hegel and Kierkegaard—that’s not n’importe quoi.\(^{8}\)

This continues in Germanistik, in the academic study of German literature, where Friedrich Schlegel plays an important part but where there is considerable resistance to him. It would hardly be hyperbolic to say (and I could defend the affirmation) that the whole discipline of Germanistik has developed for the single reason of dodging Friedrich Schlegel, of getting around the challenge that Schlegel and that Lucinde offer to the whole notion of an academic discipline which would deal with German literature—seriously. The same thing happens with Friedrich Schlegel’s defenders, where there is a counterattempt to say that he is not really frivolous but in fact a serious writer. When that happens, in a curious way, the issue which is raised by Friedrich Schlegel, and by Lucinde in particular, is also being dodged. This is the case with critics who fall out of the academic tradition, critics such as Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and more recently Peter Szondi and others, to whom we will return briefly at the end of this lecture.

What is it, then, in Lucinde that gets people so upset? It’s a slightly scandalous story, where people aren’t really married, but that’s not sufficient reason to get so upset—after all, on en avait vu d’autres. There is in the middle of Lucinde a short chapter called “Eine Reflexion” (A reflection), which reads like a philosophical treatise or argument (using philosophical language which can be identified as that of Fichte), but it doesn’t take a very perverse mind, only a slightly perverse one, to see that what is actually being described is not a philosophical argument at all but is—well, how shall I put it?—a reflection on the very physical questions involved in sexual intercourse. Discourse which seems to be purely philosophical can be read in a double code, and what it really is describing is something which we do not generally consider worthy of philosophical discourse, at least not in those terms—sexuality is worthy of it, but what is being described is not sexuality, it’s something much more specific than that.

Now, if this sends you all to Lucinde you will probably be disappointed (not if you really know what’s going on). I’m not going to refer to this, but there is a particular scandal here, one which got Hegel and Kierkegaard and philosophers in general, and other people too, very upset. It threatens in a fundamental way something which goes much deeper than this apparent joke. (It is a joke, but we know that jokes are not innocent, and this is certainly not an innocent passage.) There seems to be a particular threat emanating from this double relationship in the writing which is not just a double code. It’s not just that there is a philosophical code and then another code describing sexual activities. These two codes are radically incompatible with each other. They interrupt, they disrupt, each other in such a fundamental way that this very possibility of disruption represents a threat to all assumptions one has about what a text should be. This is a genuine enough threat to have generated in its turn a powerful critical and philosophical argument, which set up a whole tradition of studies that have dealt with Friedrich Schlegel—or with equivalent things in German Romanticism, but they are never as acute as they are in the case of Schlegel.

The way in which Schlegel is being defused, the way in which irony is being defused (and we will see in a moment to some extent why irony is involved in this, which is not the case at first sight), follows a somewhat systematic path. Schlegel is being defused by reducing irony to three things, by coping with irony in terms of three strategies which are related to, not independent of, each other. First, one reduces irony to an aesthetic practice or artistic device, a Kunstmittel. Irony is an artistic effect, something a text does for aesthetic reasons, to heighten or to diversify the aesthetic appeal of this text. This is traditionally how authoritative books about irony deal with the problem. For example, the authoritative study on irony by a German author, Ingrid Strohschneider-Kohrs, Die Romantische Ironie in Theorie und Gestaltung [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1960], deals with irony in those terms, using Schiller and the notion of the aesthetic as play, as free play. Thus irony allows one to say dreadful things because it says them by means of aesthetic devices, achieving a distance, a playful aesthetic distance, in relation to what is being said. Irony in that case is a Kunstmittel, an aesthetic, and can be absorbed into a general theory of aesthetics, which may be a very advanced, Kantian or post-Kantian, at least Schillerian, theory of aesthetics.

Another way in which irony can be dealt with, and can be in a sense defused, is by reducing it to a dialectic of the self as a reflexive structure. The chapter in Schlegel in question is called “Eine Reflexion” and has to do with reflexive patterns of consciousness. Irony clearly is the same distance within a self, duplications of a self, specular structures within the self, within which the self looks at itself from a certain distance. It sets up reflexive structures, and irony can be de-
scribed as a moment in a dialectic of the self. It is in that way, to the extent that I have written about the subject, that I have dealt with it myself, so what I have to say today is in the nature of an autocritique, since I want to put in question this possibility. At any rate, that’s the second way of dealing with irony, by reducing it to a dialectic of the self.

The third way of dealing with irony (and this is very much part of the same system) is to insert ironic moments or ironic structures into a dialectic of history. Hegel and Kierkegaard, in a sense, were concerned with dialectical patterns of history, and, somewhat symetrically to the way it can be absorbed in a dialectic of the self, irony gets interpreted and absorbed within a dialectical pattern of history, a dialectics of history.

The reading which I propose (basically the reading of two fragments in Schlegel) will to some extent put in question those three possibilities—that’s what I will try to do with you today. The fragments which I’m using are very well known, and there’s nothing original in their selection. I’ll start from a fragment, Lyceum Fragment 37, where indeed Schlegel seems to be speaking of irony within an aesthetic problematic. The problem is how to write well: how shall we write well? (The translation which you have [Beher and Struc] is an excellent translation. The only reproach that I could make to this translation is that it is too elegant. Schlegel is elegant, in his own way, but in order to be at all elegant in English you have to do away with anything that smacks of philosophical terminology. That has been done to some extent in this translation, thus hiding the use of philosophical vocabulary, in this case, I’m afraid, not to describe sexual intercourse, but to describe whatever Friedrich Schlegel is describing. There is a presence of philosophical terminology here, which is, as we shall see in a moment, very important.) Here’s what Schlegel says:

In order to be able to write well upon a subject, one must have ceased to be interested in it; the thought which is to be soberly expressed must already be entirely past and no longer be one’s actual concern. As long as the artist invents and is inspired, he remains in a constrained [illiberal, coerced] state of mind, at least for the purpose of communication. He then wants to say everything, which is the wrong tendency of young geniuses or the right prejudice of old bunglers. Thus he fails to recognize the value and dignity of self-restraint [Selbstbeschränkung, self-limitation], which is indeed for both the artist and the man the first and the last, the most necessary and the highest goal. The most necessary: for wherever we do not restrain ourselves, the world will restrain us; and thus we will become its slave. The highest: for we can restrain ourselves only in those points and aspects (along those

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10. This passage is omitted in the Beher and Struc translation from which de Man quotes.


“To write well about something, one must no longer be interested in it; the idea one wishes to express with composure [Besonnenheit] must already have passed by entirely, should no longer be of primal concern to us. As long as the artist is in a state of passion and enthusiasm, he is, at least as far as expression is concerned, in a state of coercion [Illebera]. He will want to say everything—and this is the misguided tendency of a young genius, or the proper caution of old dandies. In so doing, he ignores the value and the dignity of self-limitation [Selbstbeschränkung], although it is the most necessary and the highest of obligations for the artist as for man in general. It is the most necessary: for wherever one does not restrict [beschränkt] oneself, one is restricted by the world. It is the highest: for one can restrict oneself only in the points and along the lines where one has infinite power, in self-creation and in self-destruction. Even an amicable conversation that cannot be gratuitously broken off at any moment [aus unbedingter Willkür] has something coercive. A writer, however, who wants to say everything, who holds nothing back, and wants to say all that he knows, is to be felt sorry for. One has to beware of only three dangers. Pure gratuitousness, what appears and should appear as irrational or supernormalal, must become downright necessary and reasonable (economy); otherwise the mood becomes one of willfulness, and again coercive (obessional), and self-limitation turns into self-destruction. Second: one should not hurry too much with self-limitation, and first leave ample room for self-creation, for passion and enthusiasm to come fully into being. Third: one should not overdo the self-limitation.”

self-limitation or self-definition—are philosophical terms which, as is well known, Schlegel borrowed from the contemporary philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Schlegel himself, in the essay called “Über die Unverständlichkeit,” designated what were for him the three main events of the century: the French Revolution, the publication of Wilhelm Meister, and the publication of Fichte’s Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre, which therefore is for him as important an event as the French Revolution [K.A. 2:366; cf. Firehow, p. 262]. That’s not quite the way we look upon it now—I don’t assume Fichte is something you read every night before going to bed, but maybe you should. At any rate, if you want to get into Schlegel, it is necessary to have some contact with Fichte, and I will have to talk for a moment (I’m sorry) about Fichte and do some exposition on that.

Those three moments—self-creation, self-destruction, and what he calls self-limitation or self-definition—are the three moments in Fichte’s dialectic. Fichte is the theoretician of the dialectic before Hegel. Hegel is inconceivable without Fichte. In Fichte, the dialectic is stressed, and is developed in a highly systematized way, and it is the object of the particular book from which Schlegel borrows it (the Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre).13 The generally received idea about Fichte—what one knows about Fichte, if anything—is that Fichte is the philosopher of the self, the man who set up the category of the self as an absolute. We think of Fichte, therefore, as being in the tradition of what we would call nowadays phenomenology of the self, and so on and so forth. That is a mistake. Fichte is not essentially to be thought of as the philosopher of the self, if we think of the self (as we necessarily have to) in terms of a dialectic of subject and object, in terms of a polarity of self and other. Fichte’s notion of the self is not itself a dialectical notion, but is the necessity or the condition of any dialectical development at all. The self, in Fichte, is a logical category. And Fichte talks about the self not in terms of anything experiential, not of anything we think of when we say ‘self’: ourselves, or somebody else, or even a transcendental self in any form. Fichte talks about the self as such as a property of language, as something which is essentially and inherently linguistic. The self is, says Fichte, posited originally by language. Language posits radically and absolutely the self, the subject, as such. “Das Ich setzt ursprünglich schlechthin sein eignes Sein,” “the I posits originally its own being” [p. 18, S.W. 1:98; emphasis in original], and the self does this—can only do this—by means of an act of language. Therefore


the self is, for Fichte, the beginning of a logical development, the development of a logic, and as such has nothing to do with the experiential or the phenomenological self in any form, or at least not originally, not first of all. It is the ability of language to posit, the ability of language to setzen, in German. It is the catchphrase, the ability of language catachetically to name anything, by false usage, but to name and thus to posit anything language is willing to posit.

From the moment language can thus posit the self, it can also, and it has to, posit the opposite, the negation of the self—which is not the result of a negation of, but which is itself an act of positing equivalent to, the act of the positing of the self.14 To the extent, the same way, that the self is being posited, the nonself (das nicht-Ich) is implied in the very positing of the self, and is as such equally posited. “Entgegengesetzt ist schlechthin durch das Ich gesetzt,” says Fichte, “to posit against (the negation of the positing) is also posited by the I,” at the same time. The I, language, posits A and posits minus-A at the same time, and this is not a thesis and antithesis, because the negation is not an antithetic negation, as it would be in Hegel. It is different. It is itself posited and it has nothing to do, for example, with a consciousness. About this self, which is thus posited and negated at the same time, nothing can be said. It’s a purely empty, positional act, and no acts of judgment can be made about it, no statements of judgment of any kind can be made about it.

There is a third stage in which the two contradictory elements which have been posited engage each other, so to speak, come in contact with each other and delimit each other, by isolating in those entities which have been posited parts which Fichte will call “properties (Merkmale)” [p. 31, S.W. 1:111]. The self that’s posited by language has no properties—it is an empty, nothing can be said about it. But because it posits its opposite, the plus and the minus can get to some extent in contact with each other, and they do this by delimiting and defining each other: Selbstbeschränkung, Selbstbestimmung—Selbstbeschränkung, which is involved [p. 28, S.W. 1:108]. Fichte says: “Einschränken heißt die Realität desselben durch Negation nicht gänzlich, sondern zum Teil aufheben.” “To limit, to determine, is to suspend (aufheben, Hegel’s term) in part the reality (of the self and the nonself) by negation, but not entirely, but to some extent (zum Teil, to a degree)” [p. 29, sec. 8, S.W. 1:108; emphasis in original]. And the parts thus isolated in the self become properties of the self (Merkmale). From that moment, it is possible to start making acts of judgment involving the self. It becomes possible to say things about entities, and the entity being as such a posited self, it becomes possible to make comparisons between them and to start to emit acts of judgment. What was originally a mere catchphrase now becomes an entity as we know it, a collection of properties, and it becomes possible to compare them with each other and to find

14. N.: “negation is radical, in the sense that it is not derived from or in any way subsidiary in relation to an act of position but entirely co-extensive with it.”
between different entities resemblances and differences. These are, according to Fichte, acts of judgment—an act of judgment is to see what entities have in common, or to see in what they differ.

I have to push the development a little further for reasons which I hope will become clear in a moment. Judgments or acts of judgment, which now allow for language, for a logic, to develop, proceed according to two patterns—either as synthetic judgments or as analytical judgments. Synthetic judgments are judgments in which you say that something is like another. Following Fichte [p. 33, S.W. 1:113], whenever you do that, every entity which is like another must be unlike it in at least one property. You must be able to distinguish between them in at least one property: if I say that A is like B, it supposes an X in which A and B are distinct or different. If I say that a bird is an animal, this supposes a distinction between animals, that there are differences between animals which allow me to make this comparison statement, between animals in general and birds in particular [p. 36, S.W. 1:116]. That’s a synthetic judgment, which thus postulates differences, assumes differences, when a similarity is being stated. Or, if I make an analytic judgment, a negative judgment, if I say that A is not B, then it supposes a property X in which A and B are alike. If I say, for example, that a plant is not an animal, it supposes a property that plants and animals have in common, which in this case would be the principle of organization itself, which plant and animal have to have in common for me to be able to say, to make the analytic judgment, that something is not like something else [p. 36, S.W. 1:116]. You see that, in this system, every synthetic judgment always supposes an analytical judgment. If I say that something is like something, I have to imply a difference, and if I say that something differs from something, I have to imply a similarity.

There is a very specific structure here, by means of which the properties which are isolated in the entities circulate between those several elements, and that the circulation of those properties becomes itself the basis of any act of judgment. Now this structure (and this may not be convincing, I don’t know, but I’ll just announce it as a statement), this particular structure which is here being described—the isolation and the circulation of properties, the way in which properties can be exchanged between entities when they are being compared with each other in an act of judgment—is the structure of metaphor, the structure of tropes. This very movement which is being described here is the circulation of properties, the circulation of tropes, within a system of knowledge. This is the epistemology of tropes. This system is structured like metaphors—like figures in general, metaphors in particular.

Now, there is a third stage in this, and then the worst is over. Every judgment, says Fichte [pp. 35–38, S.W. 1:115–18], implies also a thetic judgment; it is analytical, synthetic, but it is also thetic. This is a judgment in which the entity now doesn’t compare itself to something else but in which the entity relates to itself, a reflexive judgment. The prototype, the paradigm, of the thetic judgment is the judgment, indeed, “I am,” in which I assert the existence of myself, in which the existence of the subject—which was originally, as you know, just posited by language—is now being stated as existent, where predication takes place. It is an empty predication, infinitely empty, and the statement “I am” is as such to some extent an empty statement [p. 37, S.W. 1:116]. But this statement doesn’t have to be made necessarily in the first person—it can be done in the form of stating properties of the self, for example (it’s Fichte’s example), [: "man is free."] If “man is free” is considered a synthetic judgment (positive, comparison)—that is, man belongs to the class of free beings—then this supposes that there must be men that are not free, which is impossible. And if it is considered an analytic judgment (negative, distinction)—that is, man is in opposition to all species that stand under the coercion of nature—then there must be another species that shares the property of freedom with man, and there is none. “Man is free” is not simply synthetic or analytic; in the thetic judgment “man is free,” freedom is structured as an asymptote (as is, Fichte adds, aesthetic judgment). “Man should come infinitely close to an unreachable freedom,” “Der Mensch soll sich der ein unerreichbaren Freiheit ins Unendliche immer mehr nähern” (p. 37, S.W. 1:116–17). Man’s freedom can thus be stated as an infinite point toward which he is under way, as a kind of asymptote toward which he comes closer and closer, as a kind of infinite movement of ascent (or descent, it doesn’t matter), toward which man is under way. As such, the notion of the infinite, which is essential in this whole problematic, is at play.

You can translate this abstraction (this excessive abstraction, if you want) into a slightly more concrete experience, though that is illegitimate, because it is at the beginning, I remind you, not an experience—it is a linguistic act. From the moment that there are comparative judgments, it becomes possible to speak of properties of the self and it may appear as an experience; it becomes possible to talk about it in terms of an experience. With that necessary caveat, you can, to some extent, translate this into experiential categories, and you can think of this self as some kind of super-, transcendental self which man approaches, as something that’s infinitely agile, infinitely elastic (and those are Friedrich Schlegel’s words), as a self that stands above any of its particular experiences and toward which any particular self is always under way. (This is something, if you want, like Keats talking about Shakespeare’s “negative capability,” about Shakespeare as the man who can take on all selves and stand above all of them without being anything specific himself, a self that is infinitely elastic, infinitely mobile, an infinitely active and agile subject that stands above any of its experiences. The reference to

15. The section inserted within square brackets is not transcribed from the tape. It fills the gap between the two sides of the only tape recording of this lecture, and is taken almost verbatim from N2 (with help from N1's version of the same moment in de Man's exposition) and Fichte's text.
Keats, and more specifically the reference to Shakespeare, would not be amiss in this case.)

Now, this whole system, as I have begun to sketch it out here, is first of all a theory of trope, a theory of metaphor, because (that's why I had to go through those steps) the circulation of the property (Merkmal) described in the act of judgment here is structured like a metaphor or a trope, is based on the substitution of properties. It's structured like a synecdoche, a relationship between part and whole, or structured like a metaphor, a substitution on the basis of resemblance and of differentiation between two entities. The structure of the system is tropological. It is the tropological system in its most systematic and general form.

But it is not just that, because it is also a performative system, to the extent that it is based on an original act of positing that exists in a linguistic mode in the form of the catachresis, of the power of setzen, which is the beginning of the system and which itself is a performative rather than a cognitive. There is first a performative, the act of positing, the original catachresis, which then moves to a system of tropes; a kind of anamorphosis of tropes takes place, in which all the tropological systems are engendered, as a result of this original act of positing.

Fichte describes this (I haven't done justice to it) in a highly systematic way. He describes it as what one can only call an allegory—it is a narrative, a story that he tells, hardly an exciting story as I told it, but in Fichte it's very exciting indeed. It is an allegory, the narrative of the interaction between trope on the one hand and performance as positing on the other hand. It is therefore like a theory of narrative, and it sets up a coherent system, fully systematic, in which there exists a unity between the system on the one hand, and the form of the system on the other. And it sets this up as a narrative line: the story of the comparison and the distinction, the story of the exchange of the properties, the turn where the relation is to the self, and then the project of the infinite self. This all makes a coherent narrative, one in which there are radically negative moments. It's a complexly negative narrative: the self is never capable of knowing what it is, can never be identified as such, and the judgments emitted by the self about itself, reflexive judgments, are not stable judgments. There's a great deal of negativity, a powerful negativity within it, but the fundamental intelligibility of the system is not in question because it can always be reduced to a system of tropes, which is described as such, and which as such has an inherent coherence. It is genuinely systematic. Schlegel has said somewhere: one must always have a system. He also said: one must never have a system.

any rate, before you can say that you must never have a system, you have to have a system, and Fichte had a system. Here the system is the tropology, the tropological system, and a narrative line which that system is bound to engender—the arabesque, as Schlegel will say, of the tropological narrative. And what the arabesque narrates, what it tells, is the anamorphosis of the tropes, the transformations of the tropes, into the system of tropes, to which the corresponding experience is that of the self standing above its own experiences.

That seems to be what Schlegel is saying in Lyceum Fragment 42 (the other fragment that I want to read). In which he is describing this detached self, the self that speaks in philosophy, he says, and that speaks in poetry. He describes it as follows (he's talking about philosophy and distinguishing between philosophy and what he calls rhetoric—this is not rhetoric the way I use it, but the rhetoric of persuasion—which he considers a minor form as compared to philosophy):

Philosophy is the true home of irony, which might be defined as logical beauty: for wherever men are philosophizing in spoken or written dialogues (he's thinking of Socrates, of course), and provided they are not entirely systematic, irony ought to be produced and postulated; even the Stoics regarded urbangy as a virtue. It is true, there is also a rhetorical irony which, if sparingly used, performs a very excellent function, especially in polemics, but compared to the lofty urbanity of the Socratic muse, rhetorical irony is like the splendor of the most brilliant oratory compared to ancient high tragedy (namely, very inferior to it). In this respect, poetry alone can rise to the height of philosophy, since it is not, as oratory, based upon ironic passages [Stellen]. (The irony is everywhere, it's not just in specific passages.) There are ancient and modern poems which breathe in their entirety, and in every detail, the divine breath of irony. In such poems, there lives a real transcendental buoyonery. Their interior is permeated by the mood [Stimmung] which surveys everything and rises infinitely above everything limited, even above the poet's own art, virtue, and genius; and their exterior form by the histrionic style of an ordinary good Italian buffo. 18

Now this buffo has given the critics a lot of trouble, and that's what it's all about. Because what we get in the passage (that's what I think we spent so much time on Fichte) is the full assimilation and understanding of the systematic Fichtean system, in all its implications. We get a remarkably concise summary of the Fichtean system here, where the negativity of that self is stressed—but it is the detachment in relation to everything, and also in relation to the self and to the writer's own work, the radical distance (the radical negation of himself) in relation to his own work. This particular mood (Stimmung) is interiorly what we find in poetry. But what we find exteriorly in poetry, or in the actual, exterior, outward meaning,
is the buffo. The buffo here has a very specific meaning, which has been identified in scholarship very convincingly. The buffo, what Schlegel refers to in commedia dell’arte, is the disruption of narrative illusion, the aporté, the aside to the audience, by means of which the illusion of the fiction is broken (what we call in German aus der Rolle fallen, to drop out of your role). This concern with the interruption has been there from the beginning—you remember that, in the first thing we read, Schlegel said you have to be able to interrupt the friendly conversation at all moments, freely, arbitrarily.

The technical term for this in rhetoric, the term that Schlegel uses, is parabasis. Parabasis is the interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register. It’s what you would get in Sterne, precisely, the constant interruption of the narrative illusion by intrusion, or you get it in Jacques le Fataliste, which are indeed Schlegel’s models. Or you get it in Stendhal, still later on, or (which is specifically where Schlegel refers to) extensively in the plays of his friend Tieck, where the parabasis is constantly being used. There’s another word for this, too, which is equally valid in rhetoric—the word anacoluthon. Anacoluthon or anacoluth is more often used in terms of syntactical patterns of tropes, or periodic sentences, where the syntax of a sentence which raises certain expectations is suddenly interrupted and, instead of getting what you would expect to get in terms of the syntax that has been set up, you get something completely different, a break in the syntactical expectations of the pattern.

The best place to go if you want to find out about anacoluthon is in Marcel Proust, who in the third volume of the Recherche, in the section called “La Prisonnière,” discusses the lies of Albertine. You remember that Albertine lies. She tells him terrible things, or at least he imagines she tells him terrible things. She is always lying, and he analyzes the structure of her lies. He says she begins a sentence in the first person, and so you expect that what she’s telling you—they’re dreadful things—she’s telling you about herself, but by some device in the middle of the sentence, without your knowing it, suddenly she’s not talking about herself anymore but about that other person. “Elle n’était pas, elle-même, le sujet de l’action,” and, he says, she does this by means of the device “que les rhétoriciens appellent anacoluthon.”19 It is a striking passage, a profound understanding of the structure of anacoluthon: this syntactical disruption which, exactly in the same way as a parabasis, interrupts the narrative line. So the buffo is a parabasis or an anacoluthon, an interruption of the narrative line, of the elaborate arabesque or line which Fichte had set up. But parabasis is not enough, for Schlegel. Irony is not just an interruption; it is (and this is the definition which he gave of irony), he says, the “permanent parabasis.”20 Parabasis not just at one point but at all points, which is how he defines poetry: irony is everywhere, at all points the narrative can be interrupted. Critics who have written about this have pointed out, rightly, that there is a radical contradiction here, because a parabasis can only happen at one specific point, and to say that there would be permanent parabasis is saying something violently paradoxical. But that’s what Schlegel had in mind. You have to imagine the parabasis as being able to take place at all times. At all moments the interruption can happen, as, for example, in the chapter of Lucinde from which I started; the philosophical argument at all times is brutally interrupted when you see that it corresponds to something completely different, to an event which has nothing to do with the philosophical argument. This interrupts, disrupts, profoundly the inner mood (the Stimmung), in the same way that in this passage the inner mood being described is completely disrupted by the exterior form, which is that of the buffo, that of the parabasis, that of the interruption, that of the undoing of the narrative line. And we now know that this narrative line is not just any narrative line: it is the narrative structure resulting from the tropological system, as it is being defined systematically by Fichte. So that we can complete, if you want, Schlegel’s definition: if Schlegel said irony is permanent parabasis, we would say that irony is the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes. (That’s the definition which I promised you—I also told you you would not be much more advanced when you got it, but there it is: irony is the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes.) The allegory of tropes has its own narrative coherence, its own systematicity, and it is that coherence, that systematicity, which irony interrupts, disrupts.21 So one could say that any theory of irony is the undoing, the necessary undoing, of any theory of narrative, and it is ironic, as we say, that irony always comes up in relation to theories of narrative, when irony is precisely what makes it impossible ever to achieve a theory of narrative that would be consistent. Which doesn’t mean that we don’t have to keep working on it, because that’s all we can do, but it will always be interrupted, always be disrupted, always be undone by the ironic dimension which it will necessarily contain.

Now, in what linguistic element does this parabasis occur? In what element of the text does the parabasis as such take place?22 Let me approach this obliquely by referring to Schlegel’s theory, or implicit theory, of an authentic language (reelle Sprache). This comes up frequently in the discussion of Friedrich Schlegel, where


21. Ni: “irony is (permanent) parabasis of allegory—inelligibility of (representational) narrative disrupted at all times.”

22. Ni: “(from anacoluthon to play of signifier in Rousseau’s Confessions),” See “Excuses (Confessions) in Allegories of Reading, pp. 278–301.
the claim is generally made, especially by aesthetic critics like Strohschneider-Kohrs and others, that Schlegel had an intuition of an authentic language (reelle Sprache) and that he saw it to be present in myths, for example. But, unlike Novalis (who is always held up as the example of the successful poet, the poet who produced real work, as compared to Schlegel who produced nothing but fragments), who also saw authentic language in myth, Schlegel somehow drew back from it, didn’t have the power, or the confidence, or the love, to abandon himself to it, and he retreated from it. To the contrary, it is said, Novalis could acquiesce to myth, and therefore became the great poet which we all know him to be, whereas Schlegel only wrote Lucinde.

Schlegel treats authentic language in the “Rede über die Mythologie,”23 and he does so in the passage where he discusses the similarity between the wit which is characteristic of romantic poetry (by which he means the poetry of Cervantes and of Shakespeare—not Romanticism, in a sense, but literary imagination, where wit includes both the Coleridgean fancy and the imagination) and mythology. In mythology, he says, “I find great similarity with the marvelous wit of romantic poetry.” He discusses this particular distinctive feature of romantic poetry which he says is like mythology: wit is present in mythology the way it is present in romantic poetry. He describes it by a series of attributes, which is all well known in the theory of Romanticism, very much corresponding to the received ideas about Romanticism. He says it’s an “artificially ordered confusion,” the “seductive symmetry of contradictions,” the “marvelous and the perennial alteration of enthusiasm and irony.” It lives, he says, “even in the smallest part of the whole” and it is all an “indirect form of mythology.” “The structure of wit and mythology is the same,” he says. “The arabesque is the oldest and the most original form of the human imagination. But they [wit and mythology] could not exist without something primal and original (that seems to be the authentic language) that cannot be imitated, that lets the original nature and the original force [Kraft] shine through, despite the transformations which it undergoes, and that allows,” he says, “with naive profundity, the glow (of this original language) to shine through.” In the first version he wrote of this, he had written that what shines through as reelle Sprache was the strange (das Sonderbare), even the absurd (das Widersinnige), as well as a childlike yet sophisticated naïveté (geistreiche naïveté). And this version—the strange and the absurd and the sophisticated or sentimental naïveté—together corresponds very much to our notion of Romanticism as a playful irrationality, as a playful fantasy. When Schlegel rewrote this, he took those terms out (Sonderbare, Widersinnige, geistreiche naïveté), and instead of them he put three other terms. What reelle Sprache allows to light, to shine through, is “error, madness, and simpleminded stupidity” [K.A. 2:319 n. 4]. And then he says: “This is the origin of all poetry, to suspend the notions and the laws of rational thought and to replace us within a beautiful confusion of fantasy in the original chaos of human nature (for which mythology is the best name).”

This chaos is not what traditional interpretation of this passage has considered a somehow beautiful, irrational but beautiful, symmetry. But it is, in Schlegel’s own words and marked by the fact that it is the replacement of what he had first said, “error, madness, and stupidity.” The authentic language is the language of madness, the language of error, and the language of stupidity. (Bouvard et Pécuchet, if you want—that’s the authentic language, what he really means by reelle Sprache.) It is such because this authentic language is a mere semiotic entity, open to the radical arbitrariness of any sign system and as such capable of circulation, which as such is profoundly unreliable. In the essay “Über die Unverständlichkeit,” he works this out by literalizing the metaphor of gold, reelle Sprache as gold, what is really of value. But reelle Sprache turns out to be not just gold but much more like money (or, more specifically, like the money he doesn’t have at that time to publish the Athenäum)—namely, it is circulation which is out of hand, not like nature but like money, which is a sheer circulation, the sheer circulation or play of the signifier, and which is, as you know, the root of error, madness, stupidity, and all other evil. You have to think of this money like money in Balzac’s Le Peau de chagrin, the wear and tear of usurer, of usury.

And it is a free play of the signifier: “Über die Unverständlichkeit” is full of puns, etymological puns in the manner of Nietzsche, in which a great deal is made of plays on stehen and verstecken, stellen and verstellen, of verrücken (insanity), and so on. He quotes Goethe: “die Worte verstehen sich selbst oft besser, als diejenigen, von denen sie gebraucht werden” (“words understand each other often better than those who make use of them”) [K.A. 2:364]. Words have a way of saying things which are not at all what you want them to say. You are writing a splendid and coherent philosophical argument but, lo and behold, you are describing sexual intercourse. Or you are writing a fine compliment for somebody and without your knowledge, just because words have a way of doing things, it’s sheer insult and obscenity that you are really saying. There is a machine there, a text machine, an implacable determination and a total arbitrariness, unbedingter Willkür, he says [Lyceum Fragment 42, K.A. 2:151], which inhabits words on the level of the play of the signifier, which undoes any narrative consistency of lines, and which undoes the reflexive and the dialectical model, both of which are, as you know, the basis of any narration. There is no narration without reflection, no narrative without dialectic, and what irony disrupts (according to Friedrich Schlegel) is precisely that dialectic and that reflexivity, the tropes. The reflexive and the dialectical are the tropological system, the Fichtean system, and that is what irony undoes.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the very distinguished criticism from which

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Schlegel has benefited has always maintained the opposite, especially in its attempt to shelter him against the suspicion of frivolity. The best critics who have written on Schlegel, who have recognized his importance, have wanted to shelter him from the accusation of frivolity, which was generally made, but in the process they always have to recover the categories of the self, of history, and of dialectic, which are precisely the categories which in Schlegel are disrupted in a radical way.

To give just two examples—and that will be the end—Peter Szondi, who wrote very well on Schlegel, discussing the reflexive structure, says the following: "in Tieck, the part (the theatrical part, the role) speaks about itself as role (reflexively). It has insight into the dramatic determination of its own existence and in so doing it is not reduced; but, to the contrary, it rises to a new power. . . . The comedy of Tieck's plays is due to the pleasure of the reflection: it is the distance that reflection gains with regard to its own structure that is appreciated by means of laughter." 24 Here is the aesthetic Aufhebung of irony by means of the notion of distance. That could indeed be said of the comic, and in a sense Szondi is not discussing irony but confusing the two. He's thinking more about Jean Paul, and giving a theory of the comic. Irony is not comedy, and theory of irony is not a theory of comedy. This could be said about a theory of comedy, but it is precisely what a theory of irony is not. It is disruption, disillusion.

Benjamin, in Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik, 25 following Lukács to some extent, sees the impact of the parabasis much better. He sees the destructive power, the negative power, of the parabasis, fully. He sees that "the ironization of form consists in a deliberate destruction of the form" [p. 84]—not at all an aesthetic recuperation but, to the contrary, a radical, complete destruction of the form, which he calls "the critical act," which undoes the form by analysis, which by demystification destroys the form. Benjamin describes the critical act as such in a remarkable passage. He says: "Far from being a subjective whim of the author, this destruction of the form is the task of the objective moment in art, (the moment) of criticism. . . . This type of irony (which originates in

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25. Walter Benjamin, Der Begriff der Kunstkritik der deutschen Romantik, Werkausgabe vol. 1, Gesammelte Schriften (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980). References are to this edition. As in the case of the Szondi essay cited in note 24, de Man (in N1) cites the Benjamin text from the excerpt printed in Hass and Mohrstedt, pp. 145–48. The prepositional phrase in "de-constructing" and in "Ab-bruch" are de Man's in N1.
Reply to Raymond Geuss

The tenuous relationships between the disciplines of philosophy and literary theory have recently been strengthened by a development which, at least in this country and over the last fifty years, is somewhat unusual. Literary theorists never dispensed with a certain amount of philosophical readings and references, but this does not mean that there always was an active engagement between the two institutionalized academic fields. Students of philosophy, on the other hand, can legitimately and easily do without the critical investigation of literary theorists, past or present: it is certainly more important for a literary theorist to read Wittgenstein than for a philosopher to read I. A. Richards, say, or Kenneth Burke. But the situation has become somewhat more mobile. Several members of the philosophical profession have prominently taken part in literary conferences, including the yearly meetings of the Modern Language Association, and some literary theorists have been present in person or have been represented by their writings at gatherings organized by philosophers. It would certainly be an exaggeration to speak of an active, lively dialogue between them; yet symptoms of a renewed interest are discernible on both sides. Since many problems, technical as well as substantial, are shared by both fields, such a trend can only be salutary. It may not only prevent duplications but also renew the approach.

Raymond Geuss’s “A Response to Paul de Man” (i.e., to de Man’s “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s Aesthetics”) and de Man’s “Reply to Raymond Geuss” both appeared in Critical Inquiry 10:2 (December 1983). All page references to Geuss’s “Response” are to this issue of the journal. All notes are de Man’s.