Critical Irony or the Lovers of Ruins: The Aesthete, the Dandy and the Flâneur

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Abstract

This essay examines the critical character of Friedrich Schlegel's Romantic irony, following its considerations and appropriations by Walter Benjamin, Harold Bloom and Paul de Man. Likewise, it shows a parallelism of this critical attitude of irony with three Romantic literary figures: the aesthete, the dandy and the *flâneur*. These figures, joined by a prophetic faith in art, make of irony a profession which moves between creation and destruction. Appropriation in the poststructuralist context allows us to perceive irony in such a radical incomprehension, developing an aesthetic pattern that operates between creation and annihilation.

Keywords: irony, critical, interruption, aesthetic, romanticism.

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La ironía crítica o los amantes de las ruinas: el esteta, el dandy y el flâneur

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Resumen

El ensayo examina el carácter crítico de la ironía romántica de Friedrich Schlegel siguiendo las consideraciones y apropiaciones de Walter Benjamin, Harold Bloom y Paul de Man. También, el ensayo pretende mostrar el paralelismo de la actitud crítica de la ironía con tres figuras literarias románticas: el esteta, el dandy y el *flâneur*. Estas criaturas, unidas por una fe profética en el arte, hacen de la ironía una profesión que se mueve entre la creación y la destrucción. La apropiación en el contexto post-estructuralista nos permite percibir a la ironía en una incomprensión radical, desarrollando un patrón estético que opera entre la creación y la aniquilación.

Palabras claves: ironía, crítica, interrupción, estética, romanticismo.

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I

Baudelaire said that the aesthete, the dandy and the *flâneur* are musical creatures, amused by the seduction of the world's spectacle, and that over them a de-realization and dissolution of contents and limits operate. In these creatures, irony's critical attitude and character are summarized (Cfr. Givone, 2009: 182-183). These strange, sometimes even suspicious, beings are those whom, in the world's spectacle, bear their attitude in a critical frame and question us that possibility of understanding of reality.[1] In some way, they constitute a limit to understanding in general. They are, let's say, an anti-hermeneutic hypothesis. Sergio Givone, in *Storia della Nulla* (*History of Nothingness*) points out that narcissism, mystification and pleasure for scandal are some of the features of the Romantic intellectual, and he highlights the will to mount any aesthetic enterprise. The Italian author stresses that such features of Romantic intellectuals lead them to act following an aesthetic principle which disfigures the great artistic and social ideals any narrative has.[2] The aesthete, the dandy and the *flâneur*, consequently, through those characteristics, are custodians of the critical attitude buried in the break of the Western word. These figures, elaborated in the frame of Romanticism, according to Givone, hold the impossibility of that which appears as unique and unquestionable. In other words, for

[1] To go deeper into Baudelaire's considerations on these figures, one of his most Romantic works can be consulted, (1922) *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Let us remember that, for the French poet, these creatures show in a certain way the crisis of the modern vision on ultimate moral values. Precisely in the name of those values, in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, is that Baudelaire will stand on trial in 1857. The charges on "offence to public morality and religion" show that the aesthetic form presented by the French poet starts to consider not only a profound criticism of modern times, but also the emergence of moral and political consequences of the aesthetic praxis itself. The aesthete, the dandy, and the flâneur, at last, become the perfect excuse to try to show, in Baudelaire's poetry, the appearance of the aesthetic autonomy of those spheres that intend to dominate artistic imagination. However, here we do not only want to indicate some general features which allow to trace a parallel with the attitude of Romantic critical irony, and not so much detain on them. For a detailed study on these figures in Baudelaire, an old work from Rhodes, S. A. (1928) can be consulted.

[2] The discontinuism this idea represents for Classicism's expectations might be considered.

them, their only certainty is uncertainty, the impossibility[3] of finding the desired object.

However, even though their critical attitude refers to the impossibility of having access to a universe of objects, because that impossibility is aesthetically experienced, these Romantic figures do not care if they risk emptiness or self-destruction. Their choices–so provisional in the game of their irony–are annihilated and scorned, secured and taken at the same time. In Givone's view, they are prisoners of the dizziness produced by the difference, there "operate a de-realization and a dissolution of the specific contents that invades their social status, making them strange, incomprehensible beings" (Givone, 2009: 151). In some way, their desires without objects, the passion for absence, those unsatisfied needs, give way to the indeterminacy of the forms.

In irony, as well as in these creatures, there is a passion for absence. They share that need that does not want to be satisfied, and they delight in their unsatisfaction as pleasure. Criticism, in such a sense, is an object-less science trying to find which conditions of possibility exist, not for the access to knowledge, but for the conditions limiting its impossibility. *Absence*, a key trait in Romanticism, can be found in various forms, as a lost mistress under the nostalgic or melancholic impulse, the motherland, the ideal, the divine, the absolute, etc. The form of such *absence* is an ever-going indeterminacy, an ironic gesture of immortal contradiction that never succeeds in grasping its object. This result is not given by a disgrace of fate or by the tragic consequence of his acts, but because of his own verdict and wish, because of the indeterminacy of the forms.

Criticism says it is impossible to come across the idea of finding, while reading the texts or in philosophical systems, the certainty of any certain knowledge. In fact, the operation of ironic criticism is to dismount such narrative illusion. For example, Baudelaire's critical approach was full of these narrative uncertainties, everything was to him suspiciously safe and rigorous, and everything was the focus

[3] The Italian thinker says this: "if criticism today truly identifies with the work of art, it is not because criticism itself is also 'creative', but (if at all) insofar as criticism is also a form of negativity. Criticism is in fact nothing other than the process of its own ironic self-negation: precisely a 'self-annihilating nothing' or a 'god that self-destructs,' according to Hegel´s prophetic, if ill willed, definition" (Agamben, Giorgio, 1993: xvi).

of his sardonic mistrust.[4] The problem of criticism, and of the three figures proposed in the similarity drawn here, is knowledge, but a sort of cognitive relationship that reminds us of possession-dispossession and the pleasure for the object. In both cases, we see their unconcerned attitude: the more ruined the object is or the less they can possess it, the more pleasure it produces. The question of the *distance* in ironic criticism is capital, too. The interruption in the narrative, its shadowed suspension, puts a veil on the object making it stay further away in the self-displacing distance. However, despite its distant and estranging confusion, it does not abandon the construction of knowledge. That is why, Agamben highlights:

> […] the negativity of irony is not the provisional negative of dialectic, which the magic wand of sublation (*Aufhebung*) is always already in the act of transforming into a positive, but an absolute and irretrievable negativity that does not, for that, renounce knowledge (Agamben, 1993: xvi).

Criticism is represented in these Romantic figures when they do not try to find its object. The desire that moves them is a desire for desiring just for the sake of desiring. The pretension of this desire is to avoid referentiality of any particular form, thus the love for ruin. Authors like Harold Bloom have seen in Romanticism that desire as a trope disfiguring of artistic forms, understanding its radical negation as the true meaning of poetry and literature. Bloom identifies in irony a form of aggressive and transgressive reading, which allows for new senses in poetry and literature. These procedures of psychic defense represented in the tropes–in this case, irony–are the ones that enable the break of traditional and crystallized forms. This task is what Bloom calls "misreading". Irony's misreading faces us with the identification of the

[4] In *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1922) Baudelaire sometimes exchanges the figures of his narrative, coming back to the same uncertainty. In some way, an ironic effect from Romantic poetry is presented when it provokes a metamorphosis in the faces of the devil, for instance, displacing its images in the tropes in a successive manner. This would allow for the interruption of the systematic narrative of Classical poetry, as in the same poem the author transfigures, from the deformation of the tropes, the images of the narrative. On this, the following works can be consulted: Wright, B. (2005) and J.A. Hiddleston (2005).

difficulties of reading. Despite that, the American critic, without totally agreeing with de Man on the impossibility of reading, believes these difficulties end up in referring to some critical tropes of "misreading" or "misprision". Bloom says this 'de-reading' process is similar to "the triumph of Romantic irony in purified form by way of the allegory of reading formulated by Paul de Man" (1979: 16).

In fact, Bloom himself holds his criticism is inscribed in the projects where the allegory of reading is a way of disintegration of the forms in dialectic terms (from Crates to Miller). Bloom understands that:

> The breaking of form to produce meaning, as I conceive it, depends upon the operation of certain instances of language, revisionary ratios, and on certain topological displacements in language that intervene between ratios, displacements that I have been calling 'crossings' (Bloom 1979: 14).

Nevertheless, this destructive and reconstructive alternative takes a risk already noted by Schlegel: "The irony of irony is the fact that one becomes weary of it if one is offered it everywhere and all the time […]" (Bloom 1979: 16).

In Bloom's analysis, the radical negativity of irony is in danger of converging in destructive tiredness. However, what we want to emphasize here is how Paul de Man's ironic deconstruction goes beyond this. De Man's procedure consists in dissolving the poetic being and transforming its very heart into irony. In fact, this wound is the cause of its poetic aggressiveness or differentiating distance.[5] Contrasted with Bloom, Demanian deconstruction brings poetic forms to the most disfiguring ruin. Both authors are unique in this point. In Bloom's case, the poetic process of reading and "misreading" implies three psychic levels of the subject: poetic narcissism, the wounded ego, and finally aggression. All of this can be seen in the changes undergone by

[5] Some studies written in English on early Romanticism reduce the viewpoints of Paul de Man, Bloom, Miller and other authors from deconstructive literary criticism, seeing it as a postmodern position to the interpretation of Romanticism. Said studies hold the impossibility of seeing in Schlegel an *avant la lettre* deconstructivist who anticipates criticism to the logocentric conception of language as the oppressive consequences of Modernity. As to these critiques, works from Jane E. Kneller (2003), and Beiser, F. (2003).

poetry and criticism in the history of literature; displacements are only produced by means of aggression. This aggression, that is, the violence in reading, seeks to restore narcissism, something de Man would have considered impossible. Bloom, however, is willing to reassert it, in order to avoid the radical nature of paranoid thought that protects the poet of being influenced: that is what acts as a shield against poetic influence, i.e., against the contending, agonic and conflictive process of the anxiety of influence.

II

The negation of irony places the object in the distance, but at the same time installs its renouncement, without which it couldn't be irony. The form of ironic criticism is similar to an unfinished novel, where the assertion of unreality and of that which cannot be appropriated allows for the tension of the opposites. It is the theory of irony that allows for those weird conditions of possibility and impossibility for philosophical criticism. When this theory is represented, whether it is when the dandy masks himself, when the *flâneur* is reifying himself or when the aesthete ironizes himself, in these three cases we find very similar ways of doing criticism. They make of nothingness as tension–their eternal and perpetual, never-to-be-realized love, an assimilation means for experiences to be converted into a game of fantasy and fiction. It is not strange that Schlegel held that only poetry can criticize poetry, until it becomes philosophy. In his *Lyceum,* in the 42nd fragment, it reads:

> Philosophy is the real homeland of irony, which one would like to define as logical beauty: for wherever philosophy appears in oral or written dialogues — and is not simply confined into rigid systems—there irony should be asked for and provided. And even the Stoics considered urbanity a virtue. Of course, there is also a rhetorical species of irony which, sparingly used, has an excellent effect, especially in polemics; but compared to the sublime urbanity of the Socratic muse, it is like the pomp of the most splendid oration set over against the noble style of an ancient tragedy. Only poetry can also reach the heights of philosophy in this way, and only poetry does not restrict itself to

> isolated ironical passages, as rhetoric does. There are ancient and modern poems that are pervaded by the divine breath of irony throughout and informed by a truly transcendental buffoonery. Internally: the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above its own art, virtue, or genius; externally, in its execution: the mimic style of an averagely gifted Italian buffo (Schlegel 1991: 56).

In this fragment, there is a self-parodying postulate of irony. It shows the critical displacement of the artist upon his work, which gives him a new position that takes his work to infinite potential. The constant contradiction between the work, the artist and their suppositions is akin to the principle of pleasure, and it is also found in the three aesthetics, that of the dandy, the *flâneur* and the aesthete.

The desire for the ruins, the unfinished, the dismembered, death, lost objects, bears resemblance with irony's passion of interrupting discourses until they have become absurd, insignificant, a pleasurable nothingness (e.g., Stendhal's and Diderot's novels, Baudelaire's poems, Schlegel's *Lucinde*). If we think of a specific case, as the *flâneur's*, recuperating his attitude does not aim for a regression to a petrified exalted past, but to the restitution of the *flâneur's* own experience as a "necessary critical knowledge for a rupture with the most recent historical configuration" (Buck-Morss, 1995: 123). The *flâneur*, as well as the irony, allows himself the contradictive blend of disperse look and dreamy beholding. Both have the critical need of dismounting meanings which seem architectonically fit together. Both annihilate and ruin whatever they find on their way, later to cast light on that from the darkness, making it be born again in their game. Paul De Man observes, taking Benjamin's view that «the ironization of form consists in a deliberate destruction of the form» (De Man, 1996: 182). The negative power of the ironic parabasis (following de Man's indefinite definition: "irony is the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes" (De Man, 1996: 179) is, by its negative impact, destructive of the form, a critical instance that, from the ruins, sets another form.

Romantic irony–now critical irony–is an act in which subject and object share together the same space and time that, even though it is fragmented, interrupted and strange, it offers an instance of knowledge. Trying to understand the interrupted arabesque in the novel is a sentence

to the prison of rationality, an ultra-hermeneutic capable of finding the senses through understanding. The three chosen figures are paradigmatic examples of this criticism style. The critical act–paraphrasing Benjamin's *The Concept of art criticism*–is, firstly, a radical destruction of the form of the work of art,[6] not from the focus of an analytical understanding, but from the profane negativity disseminated in the immanence of the work of art itself. Such negative force is dispersed through the work's texture; it is a complete objectivation of the work up to the point that it ends up destroying it. Despite this, in the moment of the loss, of its disfiguring interruption (Wordsworth,[7] Mallarmé and Hölderlin are testimonies of that negativity); this is recovered through the progression to the absolute and the infinite to where his displacement is targeted. Following the Hegelian scheme in its first two moments, irony is destroyed and then built upon its own negation. Benjamin will see in this dimension the paradox of constructing through a deconstruction. He highlights:

> Criticism fulfills its task insofar as, with greater closure of reflection and more rigorous form in the work, it drives these the more manifoldly and intensively out of itself, dissolves the original reflection in one higher, and so continues. In this project, criticism depends on the germ cells of reflection, the positively formal moments of the work that it resolves[8] into universally formal moments (Benjamin, 1996: 156).

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[6] For an extended and detailed discussion on Benjamin's study of Romanticism, the compilation made by Hanssen, B. and Benjamin, A. (2002) can be consulted. Also, the limitations as the Kantian legacies in Benjamin's Romanticism can be seen in Gasché, R. (1996).

[7] According to Julián Jiménez Heffernan, in the prologue to Paul de Man's *Rhetoric of Romanticism* [Spanish version *La retórica del Romanticismo*], "the miracle of Wordsworth's diction consists in that, when he enunciates his own poverty without any aesthetic evasion, it recovers the phenomenic world, the aesthetic in the rejection process" (Jiménez Hefferman, 2007: 19).

[8] Bloom, in his essay "The Breaking of Form", when analysing Ashbery's poetry, chooses to relate it with the great critic of the Sublime in the 20th century: Walter Benjamin. He tags Benjamin as the precursor of deconstruction, before de Man or Derrida. Ashbery's expression "Perhaps an angel looks like everything" entices Bloom to see in this Benjamin's angel when he says "The angel, however, resembles all from which I have had to part: persons and above all things. In

We choose to recognize, in Benjamin's quote, not criticism's resolution but its dissolution, understanding the German thinker from a poststructuralist perspective.[9]

Consequently, the importance of Schlegel's irony consists in highlighting the creative, self-destructive power it has. Such a two-faced reading code, evident in *Lucinde* as we see in de Man's analysis, operates in the instance of the disappearance of the limits of discourse. De Man defines Schlegel's interruption-through-irony as anacoluthon, which continues in post-Romantic literature, in the lovers of art's ruins. De Man states that expresses an ironic structure anacoluthon:

> Nor can we hope to map it out as one topos among topoi, as would be the case with regular tropes of substitution. It is possible to find, in the terminology of rhetoric, terms that come close to designating such disruptions (e.g., *parabasis* or *anacoluthon),* which designate the interruption of a semantic continuum in a manner that lies beyond the power of reintegration. One must realize at once, however, that this disruption is not topical, that it cannot be located in a single point—since it is indeed the very notion of point, the geometrical zero,13 that is being dislodged—but that it is all-pervading. The anacoluthon is omnipresent, or, in

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the things I no longer have, he resides. He makes them transparent" (Bloom, 1979: 31). For Bloom, Benjamin's "*aura*" is the Sublime's light, "truly visible only in the shock of its disappearance, the flight of its repression" (Bloom, 1979: 31). However, poets try to avoid the abyss; all of them hesitate at the threshold. Poetic image is like a face reflected from mirror to mirror, in some way it fades or melts away, in each reflection becoming weaker. Finally, deconstruction or the antithetical critic must oppose abysses of deconstruction to a super mimesis reached through an art not exclusively limited to language, as there is always something more than language.

[9] Poststructuralist interpretation of early German romanticism can be compared to the objections posed by Manfred Frank and Andrew Bowie. Both criticise the interpretation of the disappearance of subjectivity as organizing principle, that is why irony does not represent the possibility of annihilation of the id. See Frank, M. (2004); as the critics to the poststructuralist movement, that Frank calls Neostructuralism (1984) *Was ist Neoestructuralism?*; also Andrew Bowie (2003) and (1997).

> temporal terms and in Friedrich Schlegel´s deliberately unintelligible formulation, the parabasis is permanent. Calling this structure ironic can be more misleading than helpful, since *irony,* like *zero,* is a term that is not susceptible to nominal or real definition. To say then, as we are actually saying, that allegory (as sequential narration) is the trope of irony (as the one is the trope of zero) is to say something that is true enough but not intelligible, which also implies that it cannot be put to work as a device of textual analysis (De Man, 1996: 61).

In fact, knowledge through ruins makes knowledge advance to a progress, incomprehensible–in the least–for rationality, latent for pleasure or displeasure for aesthetic experience. Romantic art criticism, following Benjamin, aims for the realization of two antagonistic postures (dogmatism and skepticism), not epistemologically–as in Kant and his criticism, but as aesthetic synthesis.

Romantic criticism is focused on the relations of the work of art with the rest of the works of art, and with the idea of art expressed in it. Thus, Romantic criticism's task is, on the one hand, busy with trying to avoid putting the work forward for trial, and on the other, to dissolve–in the sense of a movement–the critical sense immanent in it. That is why "criticism in its central intention is not judgment but, on the work and, on the other hand, its resolution in the absolute. Both of these processes coincide in the end […]" (Benjamin, 1996: 159).

However, it is important to note that de Man, at the end of his lecture on irony does not believe in the possibility that Benjamin offers about building from the ruins. This Demanian seal on irony radicalizes his approach by holding that irony destroys everything, including the story that ciphers the protection of speeches. In de Man's words:

> Any expectation that one may have that deconstruction might be able to construct is suspended by such a passage, which is very strictly a pre-Nietzschean passage, heralding exactly "Uber Wahrheit und Luge". Any attempt to construct—that is, to narrate—on no matter how advanced a level, is suspended, interrupted, disrupted, by a passage like this. As a result, it also makes it very difficult to conceive of a historiography, a system of history, that would be sheltered from irony.

> Friedrich Schlegel's interpreters have all felt this, which is why all of them, including Kierkegaard, have to invoke history as hypostasis as a means of defense against this irony. Irony and history seem to be curiously linked to each other (1996; 184).

This approach finds a constellation close to the reflections of De Man on the operation of anacoluthon in Rousseau at the end of *Allegories of Reading*. In the *Confessions,* De Man reads a way to disrupt and interrupt the speech, pointing identical to the one pointed by Schlegel as *parekbasis*. Such disruption is so extreme that it produces a dismantling of all forms of cognition of the understanding, reaching aesthetic aberration.

III

Recovering Schlegel's, Benjamin's, Bloom's and de Man's reflections has the intention of questioning the unsurpassable limits between poetry-literature and critical-philosophical discipline. In the Romantics, this was already expressed through the nostalgia of the world's dismemberment sensed by poets and artists. Neither the first Romanticism's insistence upon gathering all the genres in one undifferentiated all-containing unit is random, nor is the use of the novel as tool for this is. Schlegel remembers, in *Lyceum's* 60th fragment, how pointless a distinction between genres is, "All the classical poetical genres have now become ridiculous in their rigid purity" (Schlegel, 1991: 8). This supposes understanding how narratives, tropological systems, are a marionette dance destined to catastrophe. De Man and Bloom perceive Romanticism's fateful anticipation: every tropological system is a dance of the dead, of objects lost with each step taken, and their loss is, precisely, what makes them so delightful. Benjamin's and de Man's contributions to the potential of irony as criticism assume the placing, in the philosophical discussion, of a disruptive element intrinsic to every narrative, even to the philosophical narrative, as it is caught by the universe of literary forms derived from the novel.[10]

[10] In *Lyceum's* 65th fragment, he holds: «Poetry is republican speech: a speech which is its own law and end unto itself, and in which all the parts are free citizens and have the right to vote» (Schlegel, 1991: 8). In another, the 117th, he will say that poetry is criticism only for poetry. It is devoid of rules and lays, it is strength, that is why Schlegel is against a theory or concept of poetic genre in this fragment. In 117th we can see how poetry can be criticised by poetry, which

It is in the novel where the critical reflection is expressed at its utmost, its divine confusion of the forms does not only provoke the explosion of the philosophical model but it also destroys every genre standard. There is no difference between Romantic poetry (novel) and irony; according to Schlegel they are both destined to the destruction of the form, none of them is ever completed. Their quintessential critical act is, precisely, the energy of destruction. Rebellion as to discourses having an absolute and determined form is interrupted by irony (Hegel's fear in *Aesthetics*), that is why, when intervening in philosophy as criticism, it is breaking with the philosophical form and, at the same time, it has to disappear with it. Its death is preannounced when the action happens.[11]

Like the aesthete, the dandy and the *flâneur* in their attitude of resignation, irony as a critical instance disappears by destroying itself, while at the same time it progresses to an indeterminate infinite of the

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accounts for the artist coming back on himself, using his work as a mirror that looks at itself, destroying itself as a medusa. Such a characterization of criticism is what Benjamin understands that overcomes traditional critical model, which needs a model outside the work of art. In this case, criticism is immanent and the artist anticipates in the work itself his criticism as self-reflection, showing consciousness of the production, usually unconscious. Precisely, that is the sense of irony as critical model or form.

[11] Menke holds Schlegel's irony is given by a theory of the presentation where the product cannot be shown if it simultaneously does not show what produces it. Menke, in his analysis of tragedy, points out that Schlegel favours a theory of presentation in which reflection always is self-reflection, as "[...] permitting Schlegel the step from philosophy to poetry, reads that a performance or portrayal is 'transcendental' when it presents 'that which produces along with the product'. The self-reflection of presentation occurs as the 'co-presentation' of that which produces or conditions, of that which presents in that which is presented. [...] That self-reflection is constitutive for tragedy implies not only that there is no tragedy in which a co-presentation of its form does not also occur, but furthermore that tragedy first comes about *through* the co-presentation of its form; that in tragedy the tragic quality of the presented content has its basis in the co- presentation of its form [...]" (Menke, 2009: 46). In *Aesthetics and Negativity* [Spanish version Estética y Negatividad] as well as in *Tragic Play*, Menke warns us that Schlegel's thought is pierced by self-reflection, co-presentation and co-representation. Aesthetic subjectivity derived from Schlegel's conception of irony is, in Menke's view, a presentation of a product showing its presentation conditions while presenting itself. Subjectivity, in this case, has the possibility of becoming self-reflective and thus, critical of its presuppositions.

forms (novel). Irony and the lovers of ruins sustain an aesthetization of life capable of recovering artistic experience. This parallelism, then, shares the paradoxical and oscillating situation of a "[…] capacity of abandoning itself to the most selfless contemplation, as to the most participant action […]" (Givone, 2009, 151). Their criticism is never complete, the reason why the Romantics find in the novel the possibility of a criticism intrinsic to the work of art itself (criticality). The key moment of irony that we try to put at stake here is an *ad infinitum* revision of the limits, given that its reflection is driven to an absent absolute. The presence of this absolute only represents a heartbreaking escape never to reach a definite form, it is "[…] always an institution and constitution of its form, creation of a form, formation, *Bildung* or *Gestaltung*" (Sánchez Meca, 2013: 239). In other words, this criticism is a formation of the forms never to be closed or concluded.

Early Romantic criticism intends to build the parameters for artwork criticism from the work itself. Schlegel points out, in *Athenäum*'s 238th fragment: "this poetry should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry" (Schlegel, 1971: 195). Criticism is inherent to the work of art, that which Benjamin calls criticality (*Kritisierbarkeit*). With this concept, he tries to evoke the critical germ present in the object or the artwork. There is a latency, a kind of demand coming from the work. That is why Romantic criticism is not transcendental, something beyond the work, but transcendental poetry. Because, as Schlegel used to say, poetry (the work) and philosophy (criticism, reflection) come together in one genre: the novel.

Criticism in early Romanticism supposes a counter-hegemonic element of the illustrated Modern world that tried to set these spheres apart and make them distinguishable from each other. Poetry and criticism, from a theological standpoint (the historical theology present in Romanticism), belong to prophetic work, as the possibility of combining creation with salvation. Inside the prophetic work, art and philosophy are the same one and only sacred will. However, Modernity has secularized the prophetic work elements relying on criticism (philosophy) for the task of salvation, while on art for creation. Considering Agamben, we find that religious tradition, secularized by the Modern world, has lost its historical and conceptual memory in relation to the intimate bond existing between art (work of creation) and criticism (work of salvation), both united in the prophetic work. Agamben writes:

> Hence the complicated and almost schizophrenic character that seems to mark this relationship. Once, the poet knew how to account for his poetry ("To open it through prose," as Dante puts it), and the critic was also a poet. Now, the critic has lost access to the work of creation and thus gets revenge by presuming to judge it, while the poet no longer knows how to save his own work and thus discounts this incapacity by blindly consigning himself to the frivolity of the angel (Agamben 2011: 5).

The poet's strength is evident in his possibility of fusing criticism and poetry. His aesthetic *strength* is the living paradox that makes the infinitely diverse and proteiform possible. We can say, then, that philosophical criticism sprung from early German Romanticism consists in expressing that the function of the artistic form is to turn into truthful contents, of a philosophical character, the factual contents, of a historical essence, which constitute the cornerstone of every meaningful work. When turning the factual contents in truthful contents there is a price to be paid: loss, fall; this makes the lack of effectiveness suffered by a work of art, due to its internal negativity, the starting point to a regeneration. The Romantic concept of criticism, as Benjamin sustains, is a radically esoteric, mysterious and secret one.

This pleasure of the contradictive, the paradoxical, the discordant and absurd, revealed in the aesthetizing attitude of the Romantic triad of musical creatures, is a taste cultivated also by modern and contemporary authors–from Nietzsche to Blanchot–,who decide to build an a-systematic work in order to grow either several articles atomized in different genres, or only one that contains all of them. In this sense, Schlegel's figure exalts this suspension of coherence. His portrait, as Blanchot well studies it in *The Infinite Conversation*, is representative of the contradiction and the paradox accompanying every early movement in Romanticism. His youth writings, as *Lucinde* and *On incomprehensibility*, are completely different from his later support of Catholicism, the Holy Allegiance and the Conservative reform of Metternich, or his work for *Europa* magazine. Blanchot places in Romanticism a tension between its authentic features and those less important, simultaneously a part of its inherent contradiction. In general, the author thinks the authentic features of early Romanticism are:

> […] to consider the taste for religion accidental and the desire for revolt essential; to consider the concern with the past episodic and the refusal of tradition, the appeal to the new, and the consciousness of being modern as determinant; to consider nationalist penchants as a momentary trait and as decisive the pure subjectivity that has no fatherland (Blanchot, 1993 352).

All these features, taken as necessary traits for the characterization of Romanticism, do not indicate its complete definition or description. On the contrary, they signal another feature, better, its most sensible need: contradiction, the desire of opposing, its conscious break, anyway, the experience of contradiction. This, for Blanchot, is the confirmation of the "vocation of disorder–menace for some, promise for others, and for still others, futile threat or sterile promise" (Blanchot, 1993, 352). The possibility of finding oneself in any of these perspectives is the product of approaching Romanticism either from its initial intentions or from its results, if we can speak of a product of such process. This is why the younger Schlegel is the ultimate expression of Romanticism's internal contradiction. In his own figure, the contradicting and less coherent symbol of the aspects irradiated from Romanticism incarnates. In one and the same person, in a brief period, two antagonistic expressions coexist, almost to forget each other, or to try to make each other pervade in an eternal dream. Blanchot describes Schlegel:

> Friedrich Schlegel is the symbol of such vicissitudes: as a young man, he is an atheist, a radical, and an individualist. The freedom of spirit he displays, the intellectual richness and fantasy that each day lead him to invent new concepts, not irreflectively but in the high tension of a consciousness that wants to understand what it is discovering, are surprising to Goethe himself –who feels less intelligent, less learned and free than those Wieland names "the proud seraphim", and who feels grateful to know he is honored by them. Some years pass: the same Schlegel, converted to Catholicism, a diplomat and journalist in the service of Metternich, surrounded by monks and pious men of society, is no longer anything but a fat philistine of unctuous speech, lazy, empty, his mind on food, and incapable

> of remembering the young man who had written: "A single absolute law: the free spirit always triumphs over nature (1993: 352).

The vicissitudes referred to by Blanchot is the strange, surprising oscillation made when at the end of his youth he converts to Catholicism. The fragmentary character of his first studies is a direct opposite to his conservative religious spirit after conversion. Blanchot questions himself upon the authenticity of these moments, but recognizes this unsolvable situation, full of questions for him, is a feature of Romanticism. Schlegel, in his paradoxical figure, incarnates, characterizing it, poetry as a renovation project through contradiction and the power gained by overcoming obstacles, which are still present in thought patterns.

This is why we insist on how the function of criticism is oriented towards the interrupted or split character of objects. It does not make any effort towards a solid comment from previously set categories; there is criticism only when it decides to renounce. Thus, irony demands the reader to identify not only the constant explosion of the principle of literary resolution –hoping to fulfill the expectations for the genre–, or the promised end of a tale, but the need to be accepted as the most satisfying rhetorical and aesthetic expression of identifying the contradictions in the world, in the art and in the literature.[12]

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[12] Ernst Behler, in *Irony and Discourse of Modernity* says something similar to Schlegel's considerations on poetry and modernity: "Modern poetry, however, is in a permanent state of becoming", and he adds that this "in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected." Modern or romantic poetry "can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize its ideal" *(FS,* 2:182-83; *LF, 175).* This infinite becoming, irreducible to a knowable principle with regard to beginning and end, seems to express Schlegel's notion of history most concisely and also best represents the state of an accomplished modernity, fully conscious of its separation from classical perfection and equally distant from any utopian goal of accomplishment. Schlegel illustrated his self-reflective modernism in a great variety of ways, one of which was his frequent use of formulas such as "not yet" or "as long as." Thus, he justifies fragmentary writing "as long as" we have not yet established the completed system of knowledge, or he demands irony "as long as in oral or written dialogues we philosophize not yet fully in systematic fashion" *(F5,*2:152)" (Behler, 1990: 60-61).

We could, to put an end to our characterization of the critical spirit of Romanticism in irony and the three creatures proposed as analogous, state, as Massimo Cacciari, "that it is this renouncement, at the same time a development, the matter of contemporary 'thinking poetry'" (Cacciari, 2000: 148). Criticism, in its Romantic and ironic sense, is focused on dissolving the form to distort the fragmentary work into an absolute work of art, that is, romanticize it. Analogously, irony, far from representing a simple subjective frivolity of the author, destroys the form by assimilating the contingent work to the absolute (from the finite to the infinite). Far from being considered an arbitrary decision of the subject, as it has been interpreted by Romantic criticism, irony keeps an objective component. It is not a coincidence that Socratic irony is for Schlegel a constant reference in his Fragments when characterizing irony. Perhaps this aspect was not taken into account by Kierkegaard in his work *The Concept of Irony*,[13] when he asserts, following Hegel, that Romantic irony falls into the isolation of pure, subjective irony. According to the Danish author, the Romantic ironist, in his search for aesthetic freedom, renounces community and ethical values, becoming an individual isolated from collective productions. Although in Kierkegaard's work elements properly Romantic can be found, in the second part of his work, particularly in thesis XI, aesthetic irony is put at the service of ethics (*Recentior ironia inprimis ad ethicen revocanda est*). Therefore, so as to avoid irony's supposedly subjective and frivolous character, Kierkegaard opposes to it Socrates' ethical world, disregarding that Schlegel himself does not cease to refer to him when he characterizes irony.[14] Precisely,

[13] See Kierkegaard, S. (1989).

[14] Hegel and his inheritors, e.g. Kierkegaard, will qualify early Romantics –Schlegel, specifically–, as authors whose spirits are full of frivolity. Later, Carl Schmitt will signal all early Romantic thinkers as autistic to reality, devoid of commitment and deaf due to their foolish irresponsibility. Cfr. Schmitt, C. (1986). Karl H. Bohrer has characterized these authors as the tradition that questions Romanticism as a subjectivist movement under the name of "Romantic criticism". This tradition will extend from Hegel to Schmitt, going through Heine, Kierkegaard and Lukács. All these authors shall coincide in identifying the Romantic movement as a mere subjectivism reducing everything to nothing, without taking the objects seriously. Bohrer starts by observing that in Romantic criticism an ethical imputation to Romantic aesthetic would cipher, for the first time, as the artist would play with the materials without any responsibility. This criticism, according to Bohrer, would try to penalize

the work of critical irony, as explained by Benjamin, is to recover that objective dimension art has. Walter Benjamin explains: "Hence, in this kind of irony, which arises from the relation to the unconditioned, it is a question not of subjectivism and play but of the assimilation of the limited work to the absolute, of its complete objectivization at the price of its ruin" (Benjamin: 1996, 164).

It is in the inconsistence where the aesthetic taste for ruin emerges. The three Romantic figures take this critical masquerade as a way of life or an attitude to it. The Bohemian triad make of irony their pleasure and delight, and they build on it an artistic premise that can be identified from early Romanticism to young Nietzsche, Blanchot and Surrealism. This road, reconfiguring a mandate intrinsic to their nature, intends to demonstrate *how life itself is already artistic*. Actually, they comply with the intuitive sanction of the prophet Novalis "world must become a fable", something Nietzsche saw realized in the spectacle of his eyes: "the world is a fable". This instability and confusion is what poststructuralist deconstruction understands in irony as the signifier's free play, because "For Deconstruction, irony is nor a trope but finally is, as Paul de Man says, 'the systematic undoing ... of understanding' […]" (Bloom, 1979: 4). Irony interrupts narration as well as the id's story (the history of subjectivity) until it makes the id disappear: this is the tropological system where thought, language, history and culture move. This progress of complex elements is contaminated by the poetics of the destruction of the forms. In this critical act, finally, forms are eventually

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the possibility of the autonomy in art in favour of an element external to art proper. A usual target to this criticism to aesthetic irony is, precisely, Romantic irony. Faced with that criticism, Bohrer holds that it is not a coincidence that Schlegel, when referring to irony, alludes to Socrates. Socratic philosophy, in Bohrer's analysis, would offer the Romantic youngster the power to characterize irony under the objectivist features that would give it autonomy from the artist's subjectivist arbitrariness, different from Kierkegaard, who opposes Schlegel's irony to Socrates' philosophic irony. The "logical beauty", "logical enthusiasm", "novels are the Socratic dialogues of our times", "sublime urbanity", all these references from Schlegel pointed at Socrates, would make it possible to connect his aesthetic theory with an operation that subsumes philosophy and thought to aesthetics. Bohrer makes efforts to find, not only in Schlegel now, but also in all the aesthetic tradition, a way of distinguishing it and emphasizing the aesthetic outside the criteria of philosophical-historical thought, stating that which he calls "artistic-literary criticism" See Bohrer, K.H. (1989).

de-mystified. That is reason enough for this debate not to be closed. Subjectivity cannot play safe in it interiority, or in Modernity's desolate world, it prevails as irony.

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