

POSTROMANTIC IRONY IN POSTMODERNIST TIMES

by Heide ZIEGLER, Universität Würzburg

In an essay entitled « Literary History and Literary Modernity » Paul de Man attempts once again to define the term « modernity » and to relate it to literature — in the process transcending the standard usage of the word as a varying description of what happens to be one's own present. De Man arrives at the insight that, in reflecting upon the meaning of literary modernity, « one is soon forced to resort to paradoxical formulations, such as defining the modernity of a literary period as the manner in which it discovers the impossibility of being modern¹. » The predicament of modernity is its inherent irony. De Man, citing Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thoughts Out of Season (Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen)*, relates modernity to « life », that is : to a spontaneity which can be understood as the radical impulse to forget the past in order to fully experience the presentness of the present. Considered as a principle of life, however, « modernity becomes a principle of origination and turns at once into a generative power that is itself historical². » It is impossible to overcome the past in the name of life, because life as action, as an expression of immediacy, must still always be concerned with a future that will in turn relegate the meaning of the momentary present to the past.

This ironic condition, taken as the diagnosis of every literary movement which — like literary modernism — lays claim to modernity, will become intensified when applied to a generation of writers who essentially view themselves as « post-modernist. » As an attitude adopted in good faith, postmodernism does not free the writer from the pressure of the immediate present — as the prefix « post » would imply ; instead it forces

the writer to acknowledge his own historicity at the same time as he deals with the present. The temporal paradox inherent in the term « post-modernism » itself, the denial of the present even as present, mirrors the necessity on the writer's part of a linkage of spontaneity with a reflection which, having entered the very realm of spontaneity, turns the process of writing as action into a permanent struggle for the ever-elusive past as the « real. » Thus, the predicament of the postmodernist writer tends to surface in his ironic infatuation with history. The writer, after having become increasingly conscious — historically since the days of early Romanticism — of his double role as the spontaneous creator and the critical commentator of his own text, has come to understand that his constant reflection upon the problematical status of the present entails an irrevocable loss of reality. Ironically, this loss can only be compensated for if the language of the historian, which is clearly distinct from the events it denotes, can be made to serve the purposes of fiction. It can then become the indirect means, if not of gaining immediate access to, then at least of regaining an innocent attitude towards reality.

In 1981 Alan Wilde published a study entitled *Horizons of Assent : Modernism, Postmodernism and the Ironic Imagination*. This study claims to be historical, yet it does not consider the ironic relationship between literary modernism or postmodernism and history. Indeed, the chapter on the postmodernist ironic imagination might be called a tacit homage to the ahistoricity of the American Dream. For not only does Wilde consider postmodernism to be a specifically American phenomenon, but he succeeds — as his title indicates — in introducing affirmation into the very realm of negation, ambivalence, paradox, that is : into the realm of irony. Wilde calls his own position « phenomenological³. » By this he means that his approach to irony is largely descriptive. He can thus speak, in the plural, of « ironies », of ironies as expressions of the « structures of mind and art⁴. » The three ironies which he detects in 20th-century literature are, one : *mediate irony*, which can be found in pre-modernist times ; two : *disjunctive irony*, « the characteristic form of modernism⁵ » ; three : *suspensive irony*, which Wilde connects with postmodernism. These ironies represent, to him, historical movements as well as logical categories as well as different modes of consciousness. Wilde's lack of conceptual differentiation can, of course, be regarded as intentional, as the attempt to give reign to what he sees as the empirical evidence and simply to register how various modes of consciousness constitute themselves along the lines of the historical development of literature. However, if irony is regarded as a mode of

consciousness, it must be defined with regard both to its paradoxical conditions and its implied historical intentionality before its manifold historical shapes can be adequately demonstrated. To do justice to irony we may have to presuppose a development of the ironic consciousness that corresponds with an exfoliation of the internal tensions implicit in the paradox of a conscious past and future-oriented experience of the present, independently of external historical developments.

In researching his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, Soren Kierkegaard discovered to his surprise that the term irony seemed to have no history. He discovered that since Immanuel Kant, since what can be called the «transcendental crisis» («transzendente Wende»), the development of self-reflection had within a few decades precipitated revolutionary ways of thinking whose germs had lain dormant ever since the time of Socrates. This is not to say, of course, that forms and concepts of irony cannot be detected in the literature between Plato and Kant — for example in the rhetoric of Quintilian — but that those forms and concepts of irony were, strictly speaking, secondary: they all reflected an unchanging historical deep structure and thus fell short of Socrates' dialectic achievement.

Although Wilde's distinction between three forms of irony appears simply to mirror an historical development, the changing mutual interpenetration of self and world, he ultimately loses his hold on the term itself, which according to his premises would have to be a response to a changing environment that is categorically identical to itself. Suspensive irony thus becomes, for him, a negative, yet at the same time affirmative, response to the «multiplicity, randomness, contingency, and even absurdity» of the postmodernist world⁶. But irony is not both negative and affirmative; it does not, for that matter, always contain its own opposite. If that were the case, the only intentionality that could be ascribed to irony would be hypocrisy. As it happens, irony regarded as hypocrisy does indeed have a long history, going back to the ancient Greek philosopher Theophrastus. But if irony were indeed hypocrisy, Socrates would then never have employed it as a means to discover Truth, which, to him, could never be ambiguous. Wilde's strategy is bound to fail: by infusing the supposed negativity of irony with its own opposite, by turning it into «a low-keyed engagement with a world of perplexities and uncertainties⁷», Wilde not only ultimately substitutes affirmation for negation, but, more importantly, mimesis for irony. For just as the self defines its own stance as

a reaction to a multiple, uncertain, and fragmented world, so too must the self become a mirror of this very world. Thus, the postmodernist *world* might be called ironic, but not the postmodernist *self*. By implication, irony ceases to be a mode of consciousness altogether. If we followed Wilde's argument, the ironic shift from modernism to postmodernism would be one from self to world, not from one mode of consciousness to another. To phrase it more pointedly, a shift would have taken place from subjective to objective irony — the very distinction Wilde wants to avoid. In other words : if irony is a mode of consciousness, then its conditions, modes of development, and intentionality have to be described in terms other than Wilde's.

Most importantly, the concept of irony can never be severed from the category of time. Irony depends on time as its unalterable condition, yet it does so quite independently of its ever becoming historically operative. This implies that although irony as a mode of consciousness can be defined by laws or, better : rules of the same degree of universality that govern the constitution of any mental topology, it will never be all-pervading — as the notion of an ironic world would suggest. Also, any objectively ironic world has to have been that way all along. The term «absurd», which the existentialist philosophers employed to describe the self's paradoxical situation between the search for meaning and the experience of a meaningless world, would indeed better describe such a state of affairs. The problem that evolves, however, if we see time as the necessary condition of irony, seems to be that, in spite of being a mode of consciousness, irony is never actually concerned with the present, but only with the past and the future. No existential crisis, for instance, if it is experienced as such, can be met with an ironic spirit, because self-reflection as an integral part of irony presupposes a distance from one's own spontaneous impulses. This distance is a distance in time, not simply metaphorically as de Man would have it⁸ ; it is the experienced approximation of the pure paradox of an ironic present that constantly loses its presentness to the past and to the future. But one of the main features of the existential crisis is precisely its commitment to a present defined by apparent «timelessness.»

In trying to analyse the implications of irony's being conditioned by time it is important to understand Johann Gottlieb Fichte's interpretation of Kant's transcendentalism, because Fichte's philosophy became the source of Friedrich Schlegel's subsequent concept of transcendental poetry,

which he equated with irony and from which all modern concepts of irony ultimately derive. Fichte's concept of transcendental reflection presupposes that the ego is the center of every philosophical analysis, because all experience is dependent on the possibility of subjective perception. Experience he defines as the process in which, through a kind of centrifugal impulse, the ego transcends its own limits only in order to return, this time through a kind of centripetal impulse, to itself. This dual activity is the necessary precondition for the development of consciousness as such. What Fichte calls the «ideal activity» («reine Tätigkeit») of the ego is an underived impulse by means of which — to use Fichte's terminology — the ego «posits» itself, defining everything else as a part of itself. This ideal activity is the centrifugal impulse and it is absolute. But in order to become conscious of itself, the ego has to limit the range of its own ideal activity by positing a non-ego, which turns the ideal activity back upon the ego as its source. This centripetal process is called self-reflection. Self-reflection is, therefore, equivalent to the ego's awareness of definition and finitude and is, in itself, painful. However, in thus setting or positing a range for its own activity, the ego has in fact limited *itself* and can, in reflecting upon the self-imposed nature of its own definition and finitude, assert its freedom⁹.

Thus Fichte's ideal activity, the absolute impulse of the ego, cannot be interpreted as an impulse directed towards an ideal, but as an ideal impulse whose ideality can nevertheless only be discovered in the process of self-reflection — when the ego's activity is turned back upon itself as upon its own source. Fichte's transcendental reflection therefore becomes identical with the experience of inauthenticity at any given moment of the present. Hence its irony. For the status of authenticity comes to belong either to an irretrievable past or to an unattainable future. In the case of a lost golden age, importance must be attached to the idea of the *beginning*, regarded less as a simple reference to a point of departure than as a fall from grace ; in the case of a utopian future, the ironic *series* must become paramount, because the series as a form of repetition will allow not only for «new» beginnings but, at the same time, for the possibility of directing these beginnings towards a goal.

Both forms of irony, the backward-looking and the forward-looking, have found unsurpassed philosophical representatives in Kierkegaard and Schlegel, respectively ; and although Schlegel's concept of irony seems to be, on the whole, more important for an understanding of postmodernist literature than Kierkegaard's, there are, of course, postmodernist fictions

which are more Kierkegaardian. Foremost among these seem to be those of Donald Barthelme. Barthelme is deeply influenced by Kierkegaard's work, especially by *The Concept of Irony*; yet in one of his short fictions, in the collection *City Life*, entitled « Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel », Barthelme seems to take a stand for Schlegel. Kierkegaard, in disapproving of Schlegel's novel *Lucinde* (which actually he seems to have disliked mainly for moral reasons), stated that with his poetry Schlegel created a new and higher actuality than the historical actuality, in other words : that he created a distance between poetry and the world which in the end would produce animosity, not the reconciliation poetry should. Kierkegaard does not, of course, equate poetry and irony, as Schlegel does, and as Barthelme would like to do. Kierkegaard's irony is anything but reconciliatory. Irony, for him, is a means for the self to become negatively free, to avoid any relationship between the self and the world. In other words : since the ironic stance consists in a constant refusal of the self to commit itself to the things of the world, it cannot help but define itself negatively as that which is not the world. Thus, the ironic self remains purely subjective. Barthelme protests against this negative form of ironic subjectivity (he complains that Kierkegaard disregards the « objecthood¹⁰ » of Schlegel's novel), but his protest leaves him exhausted and all the more indebted to Kierkegaard, because Barthelme does not believe in objective values. He would, however, like to believe in positive subjective values. As these also fail him time after time, he is forced to believe in nothing more than constant beginnings. Thus his admiration for Kierkegaard is certain to grow, since Kierkegaard's stance of absolute negativity, which, after the fall from grace, disclaims any further chance of recovery of grace, has never failed him : « Because of course Kierkegaard was "fair" to Schlegel. In making a statement to the contrary... I am trying to annihilate Kierkegaard in order to deal with his disapproval¹¹. »

Kierkegaard's concept of irony refuses to take into account any development in time ; yet even the absolute negativity of ironic subjectivity can no more deny the existence of time than of the things of the world. For Schlegel, on the other hand, irony was, basically, a movement in time. In his essay « On the Study of Greek Poetry » (« Uber das Studium der Griechischen Poesie ») Schlegel contrasts ancient and modern times and asserts on the basis of their connection, which is really their disjunction, the possibility of a future utopian condition of humanity. For him, the accent on nature in ancient times is supplanted by an accent on culture in modern times. The ancient will to meet the demands of the instinct gives way to the

modern predilection to comply with the laws of reason. Thus, culture will always belong to a « later » historical period, although no specific historical period can lay sole claim to it. Culture produces the ironic attitude, which in turn constitutes the decisive feature of modern times.

Schlegel's concept no longer partakes in the ideas of the Enlightenment. He does not claim a necessary progress of humanity for the better, only the hope of development. Modern times are tantamount to the antithesis of antiquity, which presented a kind of thesis for humanity. This contrast between ancient and modern times alone leads Schlegel to the assumption of a future synthesis which he hopes will develop organically from the spiritual center of the modern mind. The interesting feature of Schlegel's argument is, of course, not the all too common notion of three successive realms or stages in the development of the human mind — represented by past, present and future. The crucial point is rather that Schlegel seems to believe that the ironic age, in spite of having had to incorporate the conditions of its predecessor in order to become ironic in the first place, can grow into its own synthesis. This paradox seems to have been the reason why Schlegel postulated an « objective poetry » as the goal of the ironic age. He believed that on an aesthetic level would be possible what on a speculative philosophical level remained impossible : the objectification of the radical subjectivity of the ironic self. Schlegel's equation of irony with transcendental poetry thus implies no limitation of the scope of irony, since the transcendental poetry of modern times would progressively become universal in scope. Subjective irony would accumulatively achieve its own objectification through the growing self-reflection of fictional language in the course of a series of poetic renderings over time¹².

According to Schlegel, the ironic series has the advantage of being a continuous thrust into the future while allowing, at the same time, for new beginnings. As the further development of the ironic mode of consciousness has shown, the ironic series has the disadvantage that the possibility of new beginnings will eventually become a necessity and thus prevent both the recovery and the attainment of any, even the most tentative, state of grace. An ironic fiction can never be anything but a fragment in the presumed realm of objective poetry. It must, in fact, be conceived as a fragment ; it must reflect upon its very limitations as its epistemological condition in order to turn the impossibility of a consummate ending into an asset. Yet, in

concentrating on its own conditionality, which reveals its fictionality, ironic fiction is bound to lose even the appearance of referentiality. The tension, therefore, in ironic fiction, is not between fact and fiction, as in mimetic literature, but within fiction itself.

In an essay entitled «Representation and The War For Reality» William H. Gass says, «In fiction, the war... is fought within the word¹³.» And the newly published section from Gass's novel in progress, *The Tunnel*, appears to demonstrate this point. Alvin Rosenfeld, in his response to *The Tunnel*, which is published along with Gass's texts in the Winter 1982 issue of the journal *Salmagundi*, misses the irony of the novel precisely by dealing with it on mimetic grounds. The narrator of *The Tunnel*, the author William Frederick Kohler, an American historian who has written a book entitled *Guilt and Innocence in Nazi Germany*, cannot find the peace he sought by writing the book ; for his conscientious research into the circumstances of the Holocaust, his sifting of the evidence and his compilation of facts «contain everything except the sufferings they number¹⁴.» Kohler's experience illustrates the fictional word's ironic loss of referentiality, because «however we choose to think about it, the fact remains that a word is closer to its sense than to its reference¹⁵.» Kohler's inability to get close either to reality or to his own inner self, the other side of the same coin, mounts to despair over language — which is forever in his way, which stares back at him as his own writing whenever, sitting permanently at his desk, he lowers his eyes. At the end of *The Tunnel* the lines of the text are interspersed with three words which recur like columns : *shot, hang, gas*, an ironic triad that symbolically seems to condense the Holocaust to its quintessence. This is the only passage in *The Tunnel* that affords Rosenfeld some slight relief of his distress over Gass's playful and hence «morally questionable» text : «As counterweight to the narrator's insurgent imaginings, which become especially strong at the close of "The Tunnel", Gass interjects the lethal nouns of annihilation — *gas gas gas, shot shot shot, hang hang hang* — the latter lined up as heavy columns of history against the rhetorical leap into ecstasy¹⁶.» But Rosenfeld's relief is ill-placed. The three words *shot, hang, gas*, fall like droppings, so to speak, out of the words "upshot", "hangings" (referring to window hangings), and "gastriloquist". This means that they are *not* «heavy columns of history» which inject themselves into the narrator's text against his will, but that they become, on the contrary, the concentrated expression of the narrator's ineluctable obsession with words. In the narrator's mind words war against

words, as the struggle of meanings, especially in *gas* and *gastriloquist*, signifies. (There's probably a pun on the author's name at work too.) The narrator loses the war for reality. His desperate question at the end of the text, « Where, after all, *is* Germany¹⁷ ? », is another expression of his search for an ever-receding self, worse : for a self that is already irretrievably lost. For just as the narrator could never hope to recapture the reality of the Germany he has written about, he loses himself once and forever after a moment of love.

The problematical relation of irony is precisely to history as an intractable past. If, in accordance with Fichte's theory, the ego were to posit the world as its non-ego and thereby ultimately assert its freedom, then this world would not, in the last instance, be alien to the ego. The narrator in *The Tunnel* cannot deal with the Holocaust because he cannot make sense of it. This is illustrated by his puns, his limericks (one of them on « a camp called Auschwitz »), his arrangement of Hebrew and Yiddish names into an emblem of the six-pointed star, and by his musings on whether the Jews could have met their fate differently. Indeed, he cannot deal with Germany's past unless he were ultimately to identify with Adolf Hitler himself, who succeeded in turning the history of a Germany which to him represented the world into a mirror of his own psycho-history, who succeeded, that is, in positing the world as an extension of his ego. This paradoxical need on the part of the narrator to identify with Germany's, and hence his own, unmaker has the feeling, if not the objectivity of tragedy.

This contention can be corroborated by comparing Gass's fiction with Walter Abish's novel *How German Is It*, which presents a complementary problem. The protagonist, Ulrich Hargenau, is also a writer, although not an historian, but a novelist. His relationship to language appears to be more tranquil than that of the historian, since fictional language allows for the metaphorical thematization of his ironic predicament : the unbridgeable gulf between the past and the present. Indubitably German, Ulrich is presumed to be the son of Ulrich von Hargenau, who was executed for his involvement in the 1944 plot against Hitler. Ulrich is haunted not only by the image of the heroic father, but by the repressed doubt that he may not be his father's son after all, but the son of the waiter Franz, who was a servant in the house of the von Hargenaus at the time of Ulrich's birth. Franz is an eternal fascist who in his spare time works on a model of the concentration

camp which once stood on the site of the new town of Brumholdstein. Brumholdstein is named after the philosopher Brumhold, a cryptonym for Heidegger. His uncertain heritage forces Ulrich to shun history and to depend on fictional language in order to form an image of himself. But the linguistic freedom ultimately means the self-denial of the writer as subject. It is not without cause that Ulrich shares his first name with Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities*. Although Ulrich is the writer of the family, it is nevertheless his older brother Helmuth, a well-known architect, who is asked to give a speech in Brumholdstein at a memorial service in commemoration of Brumhold's death.

In speaking of Brumhold, said Helmuth. In speaking of a man I greatly admire, I am also, to a degree, explaining or attempting to explain Germany... Each year, several hundred thousand foreigners come to explore, and also enjoy, Germany... But how can they possibly understand Germany without appreciating the richness of its language, for only the language will enable them to comprehend the nature of that German restlessness and that intrinsic German striving for order and for tranquillity as well as for perfection... While on the one hand we cannot very well separate our understanding of existence from our understanding of history, from the specificity of historical events, we can comprehend with Brumhold that his search for meaning, this metaphysical quest for *Dasein* is not linked to this or that event, to one year or another (after all, we are not more or less German because of the events of 1914 or 1945, to take two years more or less at random), but to a universal history, a history of human awareness... Whatever the outcome, Brumhold has enabled us to see ourselves as we truly are¹⁸.

Helmuth historicizes Heidegger's philosophy in an attempt less to understand it than to effect its general acceptance. His logically false, but rhetorically valid assumption is that, since Brumhold's philosophy deals with general matters in a specific national language, this specific language in turn can be claimed to yield universal truths to those initiated into its intricacies. The obvious irony of Helmuth's speech consists in the fact that any specific national language will be influenced by the specific history and the specific character traits of a people (if we concede that there are character traits common to all members of a people), just as language will, in turn, influence national history and national character. Thus any language's claim to express universal truths is in itself dubious. Yet the final

— and probably unwitting — irony of Helmuth's statements consists in the fact that Heidegger did indeed aspire to universal truth through an historical language and that his appraisal of the historical events of his time therefore became as undifferentiated and as questionable as Helmuth's own. Still, Ulrich can never succeed in trying to escape from history into fictional language, since his language happens to be German. He hopes that the self-sufficiency of fictional language will prove a defense against the past or, for that matter, against national character traits. However, he has already become entangled in a national language which, constantly made to serve ideologies posing as ideas, claimed this self-sufficiency as its historical birthright ; and far from overcoming its historical past through integration into « a history of human awareness », the present language reveals nothing but its own forgetfulness, the impossibility of that « new » awareness whose main trait would have to be the same ambivalence represented in Ulrich's ambivalent heritage. Instead of succeeding, through his role as a writer, in breaking free from his own history as well as from that of his people, Ulrich appears as their present ironic representative. As a consequence he experiences a similar feeling of tragic inevitability as the narrator of Gass's fiction.

Tragedy had to become ironic in postmodernist times. Todd Andrews, in John Barth's novel *LETTERS*, writes in a letter to the Author, who is one of the characters of the novel : « Only the Tragic View will do, and it not very satisfactorily. Must one take the tragic view of the Tragic View¹⁹ ? » And the Author concurs in his reply : « When I have a view of things at all, it is just your sort of tragic view — of history, of civilizations and institutions, of personal destinies²⁰. » Two details appear to be particularly noteworthy in this exchange of opinions. One : there is a striking parallel between what Schlegel calls, in his essay « On Incomprehensibility » (« Über die Unverständlichkeit »), the « irony of irony²¹ », by which he means irony taken even as irony, and Andrews's « tragic view of the Tragic View. » Two : Andrews and the Author do not talk about tragedy, but about the *Tragic View*, that is : a mode of consciousness. Since the tragic has ceased to document, as it did particularly for Georg W.F. Hegel, the insurmountable chasm between objective and subjective values — that is : since the tragic self has learned to reflect upon its own conditionality as a tragic disposition —, tragedy has become an ironic dilemma. The irresolvable double bind between equally acknowledged yet conflicting values, which according to Hegel mark the tragic situation for the tragic hero, has resolved into the

experience of the ironic series as the aggravated experience of the insufficiency of both self-assertion and self-denial. Taking the tragic view of the Tragic View means that the hero, instead of dying in the hope to reconcile subjective and objective values, must learn to accept tragedy as a paradoxical principle. The new beginnings which constitute the possibility of the ironic series are not truly « new » in the sense of « original » ; instead they mean the repeated approach of the ironic self towards history as the tragically elusive past, towards irretrievable « civilizations and institutions » as well as « personal destinies. » Yet although each approach will be necessarily abortive and therefore leave the self with a greater sense of inauthenticity, rekindling the desire for what might have been the authentic experience, the struggle with history will nevertheless assume the status of a ritual which must be enacted again and again in the attempt to absorb the past into the realm of experience. Thus the ironic self seeks to achieve a paradoxical fusion of objective tradition and subjective spontaneity, whose ultimate tragedy consists in the experience of time as an ironic principle.

This irony of irony is at the heart of *LETTERS*. « In the late afternoon of our century if not of our civilization²² » the novel's « seven fictitious drolls and dreamers each of which imagines himself factual » consciously reenact the former stages of their lives. Their ambitious aim is to transcend tradition through spontaneity. But this goal can only be achieved by those who ultimately posit fiction as an expression of the imagination's freedom in the face of fact : Lady Amherst, whose child, conceived against all odds, will in a sense be the novel *LETTERS* itself ; Ambrose Mensch, who is the « author » of the child ; and John Barth, who is the author of both Lady Amherst and Ambrose Mensch. Ambrose, obsessed with reenacting every detail of his former life, represents the past, Lady Amherst the future, and Barth the present. But as Author with a capital « A », that is : as a character within the novel, John Barth shuns the present. He evades communication with the other two characters, who represent the author-reader-relationship as a love affair : he remains aloof from Ambrose Mensch almost throughout the book and he only writes to Lady Amherst in the beginning. Comparably, the present is only evoked in the beginning and at the very end of the book, in two letters from « The Author to the Reader » : « *LETTERS* is “now” begun » and *LETTERS* is “now” ended. » The second letter is dated « “Sunday, September 14, 1969” » and it reads : « *LETTERS* reaches herewith and “now” the end. » The word *now* is modified by a two-

page parenthesis which refers to the dates when Barth first outlined this last letter (« Tuesday, July 4, 1978 ») ; when he drafted it in longhand (« Monday, July 10, 1978 ») ; when he typed it (« October 5, 1978 ») ; and when the reader reads it (« [supply date²³] »). Each of these authorial presents is thus modified by the past as represented by the official date of the letter, which relates to the action described in the course of *LETTERS*, and by the future as represented by the reader's reading of the novel. Fictional authorial presence is always ironic ; it disappears into either the life of the characters or the life of the reader, into the past or into the future.

Yet the author's imagination determines the logical and aesthetic rules according to which the novel is to be understood ; and this understanding constitutes the loving response of the reader. Gass says in « Representation and The War For Reality » : « Had God had the wit of Henry James or Alfred North Whitehead, He would have done better by us²⁴. » The world of the word is to be preferred to the world of facts. This view becomes the theme of Stanley Elkin's novel *The Living End*. Here God Himself assumes the role of ultimate artist, creating the world as a place of hope and despair because it would make for a better story. And He annihilates this very world in the end « because I never found My audience²⁵. » God's main concern, however, is with power, not with love. His overwhelming desire to be understood is the paradoxical expression of divine loneliness that results from a contempt for His own creatures, who are dependent upon His will. Of course we know that God breathed His own spirit into Adam, but Gass's remark seems to imply that some human beings have improved upon that divine spirit beyond God's possible expectations. For God the world's time will remain an unchangeable present unless it is abolished as such ; while the human ironic spirit is always oriented towards a past and a future. Understanding, then, does not mean the ability to decipher signals which are being transmitted — an erroneous opinion Omnipotence would be inclined to hold. *The Living End* is a comic *tour de force* to prove that human beings are only too well equipped not only to decipher, but to interpret God's signals. Instead, understanding means the mutual acknowledgement of the logical and aesthetic rules by which the ironic self transforms the implications of the past into the conditions of the future. This understanding can only be momentary, because the ironic self ultimately always returns to the ego as its source. Yet, just as two parallels extending infinitely into space will finally meet, the ironic self approaches understanding as its objective, albeit infinitely removed goal, because to the ironic mind each act of self-reflection also serves to clarify its further course of action.

NOTES

- (1) Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight : Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Oxford University Press : New York, 1971), p. 144.
- (2) *Ib.*, p. 150.
- (3) Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent : Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (The Johns Hopkins University Press : Baltimore and London, 1981), p. 3.
- (4) *Ib.*, p. 9.
- (5) *Ib.*, p. 10.
- (6) *Ib.*
- (7) *Ib.*
- (8) Cf. de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 159.
- (9) Cf. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, «Grundlage der gesammten Wissenschaftslehre» [«Elements of a General Science of Knowledge»], *Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe I : *Werke* 1-5, edd. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Gliwitzky (Friedrich Fromman [Günther Holzboog] : Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1962-) : I,2 (1965), pp. 173-451.
- (10) Donald Barthelme, *City Life* (Pocket Books : New York, 1976 [1970]), pp. 96f.
- (11) *Ib.*, p. 97.
- (12) Fictional language, therefore, holds a position between history and science. Cf. Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, I-XXII, ed. Ernst Behler with the co-operation of Jean-Jacques Anstett and Hans Eichner (Ferdinand Schöningh and Thomas : München, Paderborn, Wien and Zürich, 1958-1979) : XVIII (1963) p. 76 [575].
- (13) William H. Gass, «Representation and The War For Reality», *Salmagundi* 55 (1982), 84.
- (14) William H. Gass, «The Tunnel», *Salmagundi* 55 (1982), 20.
- (15) Gass, «Representation and The War For Reality», 86.
- (16) Alvin H. Rosenfeld, «The Virtuoso and The Gravity of History», *Salmagundi* 55 (1982), 108.
- (17) Gass, «The Tunnel», 60.
- (18) Walter Abish, *How German Is It* (New Directions : New York, 1980), pp. 169ff.
- (19) John Barth, *LETTERS* (G.P. Putnam's Sons : New York, 1979), p. 94.
- (20) *Ib.*, p. 191.
- (21) Cf. Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, II (1967), p. 369.
- (22) Barth, *LETTERS*, pp. 405f.
- (23) Cf. *ib.*, pp. 771f.
- (24) Gass, «Representation and The War For Reality», 98.
- (25) Stanley Elkin, *The Living End* (E.P. Dutton : New York, 1979), p. 148.