den Abdruck rechtfertigt, oder es gibt über Quellen nichts zu sagen, und dann braucht man sie auch nicht abzudrucken. Es bestätigt sich bedauerlicherweise auch in dieser erweiterten französischen Ausgabe, was Juan i Tous schon bei der Besprechung der spanischen Ausgabe monierte: Vf. sammelt zwar philologisch korrekt und detektivisch erfolgreich alle thematisch relevanten Quellen, fängt mit ihnen aber interpretatorisch zu wenig an.

Frank Baasner

Romantic Irony, ed. Frederick Garber, Budapest (Akademiai Kiado) 1988; 395 pp.

This impressive and comprehensive volume testifies to the fascination that Romantic Irony continues to exert. In the disrespectful words of the American Byronist Peter L. Thorslev[1]: "there has been much heavy academic breathing in the past few years about romantic irony — that bastard offspring of German metaphysics". This volume is the eighth in the *Comparative History of Literatures* series of the International Comparative Literature Association; clearly intended to be a reference book, it is a wide-ranging collection of commissioned essays, dealing with the familiar, for example Byron — and the unfamiliar, for example Bulgarian and Macedonian writing. The breadth of coverage is striking. (Interestingly, the weakest essay on a national literature is the one on English by Anthony Thorlby, who for instance attributes to Edward Lear what belongs to Lewis Carroll.) This book sets writer beside writer but also national literary cultures beside one another, and so is comparatist in the broadest sense. Given the extraordinary variety presented, it is remarkable how similar writers are in terms of the conventions of Romantic Irony, even as late as Ibsen's *galskaper* ("bits of mischief": Ibsen deserves more scrutiny in this volume).

The collection probes the genesis, diffusion, and evolution of Romantic Irony, attending above all to the philosophical context. There are three sections: "Tradition and Background," "National Manifestations," and "Syntheses"; Ernst Behler's *Theory of Irony in German Romanticism*, the opening essay of part two — and the most significant in the volume — establishes the book's literary-historical approach. Readers who are weary of seeing Romantic Irony treated anachronistically, as a form of post-structuralism (as in Jerome McGann's influential *Romantic Ideology* for example), will find this volume refreshing. The controlling principle is one of relating the literature to developments in philosophy that correlate with it. German philosophy, with its imaginative, literary character (so unlike English empiricism, but so close in spirit to nineteenth-century American literature) could itself be described as a form of Romantic Irony.

Irony would appear to be antithetical to Romanticism, much as Innocence, in Blake's terminology, seems antithetical to Experience; or as young Werther's emotionalism seems antithetical to the sprawling intellectual complexity of *Faust* Part II; or to take two different authors of the same nationality, the mystic commitment of Chateaubriand versus the self-conscious intellectualism of Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*. Byron embodies this paradox: Romantic Irony combines emotional excess with witty self-mockery. Ironically, it comprehends much of Romantic literature itself, linking youthful naiveté with world-weary sophistication, as if illusion and disillusion were somehow

[1] Peter Thorslev: *Post-Waterloo Liberalism*, in: *St. in Romanticism* 28 (1989), 437.

the same thing. In Ernst Behler's words (43): "More than in any other period of Western literature the ironic attitude appears as the distinctive hallmark of the Romantic generation, deeply affected as they were by the antagonism of heart and intellect, of spontaneity with reflection, of passion with calculation, and enthusiasm with scepticism". How is such a contradictory fusion possible?

As Romanticism evolves from its inception in the eighteenth century, Romantic Irony begins to assume a pessimistic, even nihilistic cast: a reflection of the meaninglessness of existence. The fragmentation that earlier suggested play and process as determinants of reality now signifies alienation. One can see this process unfolding even within a single text, for example Melville's *Pierre, or The Ambiguities*, which begins in an idyllic countryside with the revolt of innocence and desire against a tyrannic, frustrating structure — and ends in America's own version of the *fourmillante cité*, New York, with despair and multiple suicide: a reworking of a pattern already implicit in *Faust* Part I. Indeed one would suppose that Goethe would merit more analysis in a volume of this type, especially *Faust* Part II with its extraordinary structure, variety of mood, and range of thought. Goethe is the Romantic poet who, above all the others, bridges, self-consciously, classical enlightenment and Romantic sensibility, and hence links the culture that produced eighteenth century satire with the more dramatic range of Romantic perceptions. One also needs an essay on Nietzsche, not merely on the Schlegels, crucial as they (notably Friedrich) are to this topic. As the editor points out in the preface, many writers should be dealt with in the volume — yet are not. I can only agree.

But what is most needed is some interdisciplinary discussion — analysis for example by a historian of the cultural matrix that enabled Romantic Irony to appear, with such impact, when it does; and especially to explicate the extraordinary burst of creative activity one sees in Germany. Romantic Irony fuses different facets of literature — and of culture: one is pleased to find Jean-Pierre Barricelli's essay on *Musical Forms of Romantic Irony*; but useful as it is, this essay is too tentative. Is not Beethoven's juxtaposition of funeral march and scherzo in the Eroica Symphony precisely the sort of phenomenon that Romantic Irony involves? A direct line connects Mozart's character Don Giovanni, Byron's Manfred (and his Don Juan), Goethe's Faust, Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Strauss's Zarathustra (and his Till Eulenspiegel): music, drama, poetry, philosophy — and music again. *Romantic Irony* shows that this topic is an essentially comparatist one: it cannot be viewed in the context of a single national literature — or even literature itself, as the volume's use of philosophy makes clear. Unfortunately, what the book implies is that the proper perspective for the topic is not simply literature or philosophy — but something larger, some interdisciplinary context. One looks to the last section "Syntheses" for such context, but is disappointed, not because the essays are not good, but because they do not grapple with the theoretical implications of the foregoing essays.

Many possibilities could be explored, but are not. For example, Romantic Irony coincides with the discovery of personality as an object of poetic analysis. Personality, with all its contradictions, its quirks, and its mysteries, becomes legitimated as having an authority of its own in Goethe, Rousseau, Sterne and Wordsworth — and personality constituted as a complex of contradictions is, precisely, a perception of Romantic Irony. Yet this is the kind of observation that is absent from the present volume. *Romantic Irony* raises questions that it seems unaware of having raised.

The question what is Romantic Irony? never gets answered, of course, outside of the various formulations produced by the original writers themselves, especially the Schlegels. Here we return to the anachronism referred to above, what Christopher

Norris calls "an obvious elective affinity between postmodernism and Romantic irony, in that both make a point of systematically subverting all [...] commonplace or normative ideas"[2]. Whatever Romantic Irony is, it is peculiarly modern and even relevant to contemporary theory. Thus it is disintegrative, not amenable to a unified or totalizing order; it is critical, in the sense that it questions rather than affirms established values and orders; and it has what we may call both optimistic and pessimistic phases. That is, Romantic Irony begins, if we take Schlegel's *Unverständlichkeit* for an essential starting point, as a playful, eclectic, dialogic mode of writing which sees variety and contradiction as desirable. For if life itself cannot be reduced to system, then literature, which reflects life, also cannot be reduced to system. Historically, Romantic Irony arises as the obverse of the alienation and meaninglessness which became cultural problems beginning in the Romantic period — at the time of the Schlegels. Hence it has both optimistic and pessimistic phases — it implies the very feelings it resists: alienation and psychic fragmentation. It is perhaps fitting, then, that *Romantic Irony* is limited by its virtues: it is excellent as a reference volume, as a survey of national literatures. But as a volume that explicates its subject — that offers significant new insight — it is disappointing.

Mervyn Nicholson

[2] Christopher Norris: *The Ethics of Reading and the Limits of Irony: Kierkegaard among the Postmodernists*, in: *Southern Humanities Rev.* 23 (1989), 2.