

## ROMANTIC IRONY AS AN INTERNATIONAL PHENOMENON

In 1988 a remarkable volume appeared as a part of the series entitled *A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*, sponsored by the ICLA/AILC and published (this time, with noticeably few misprints) by Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest.\* Seven volumes have already been published, on Expressionism, Symbolism, Enlightenment, Avant-Garde (two volumes), on Sub-Saharan literatures, and as the latest so far the first part of the Renaissance volumes has appeared.

Frederick Garber's *Romantic Irony*, however, is somewhat different from the others inasmuch as it does not concentrate on a single trend or style or school or era but chooses as its subject an extremely complex phenomenon, sometimes taken by the authors as the very core of Romanticism itself, sometimes, in turn, as an accidental or marginal by-product. This multiplicity of the approaches may explain the unorthodox structure of the volume in the sense that the introductory essays give an insight into the "Tradition and Background", whereas after the longest chapter of "National Manifestations" is followed by "Syntheses". Chronological order is out of question; no sensible systematical structure could have been tenable either; neither in terms of influence (there is no evidence to suppose, for instance, that German theories of irony have influenced all other national manifestations of Romantic irony) nor in terms of, say, genres (at least some literatures

\* Frederick Garber, ed. *Romantic Irony* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1988), 395 p.

may lack romantic irony in some genres, let alone lacking whole genres).

For those who have not yet seen the book itself, let me run through the studies included. The first chapter contains Lowry Nelson's and Frederick Garbers's studies on two masterworks, two major point of reference, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Sterne's *Tristram Shardy*. These studies, however, cannot be regarded as simple flashbacks. Both focus on the Romantic reception of these novels, as bases or pretexts of formulating the "theory" of Romantic irony (which, in fact, is not a theory at all but, at best, a series of witty and profound aphorisms). Had Borges' Pierre Menard lived in the age of Romanticism, these studies suggest, he would undoubtedly have written a work of Romantic irony. The question, then, is not direct influence or absorption.

Some merits of this volume can be formulated according to the topics it does not touch upon. One of these is Pre-Romanticism, a dubious term. Pre-Romanticism is not mentioned practically anywhere in the book. I take it as a very fruitful absence; so that now we can see if we can manage without this term. Sterne, for Garber, is not simply a forerunner of the Romantic movement, and Nelson's study is much more about F. and A. W. Schlegel than about the great Spanish writer. The intricate relationship between the Romantics, Sterne and Cervantes is treated in the closing passages of Garber's study.

The part "National Manifestations" starts with two longer essays on German Romanticism. In Ernst Behler's extremely well documented presentation, the theory of irony is treated as a terminological historical problem, showing the shifts and changes in the concept of irony, culminating in what Behler calls "the general irony of the world". Raymond Immerwahr, in turn, deals with the "practice" of irony, that is, with some texts of Tieck, Jean Paul and Brentano. The following eleven studies, 10 to 25 pages in length, highlight the main figures and works of the Romantic trend, ranging from French, through Portuguese, English, Dutch, Scandinavian, Romanian, Hun-

garian, Polish, Russian, and Southern Slav to American English literature. Some of them are not more than rather commonplace historical recapitulations of a period, from a particular point of view; some, however, provide tools to generalize the statements referring to specific national cases. For instance, René Bourgeois, in his very well structured essay, devotes a part to "The principal techniques of Romantic irony", including framing techniques, interventions of the author and structural irony. Vera Calin's interesting piece on Eminescu is the only one centered on one single writer. Roman S. Struc chose three great Russian writers, but most of the others have also confined themselves to treating a few outstanding figures. The average professional reader who is not familiar with the Romantic literatures of the minor European languages can be grateful for the contributors to this part who provide surprisingly fresh, exciting examples, miniature analyses of literary works hitherto hidden from the uninitiated eyes. He must regret, however, the lack of individual studies on great Romantic ironists like Kierkegaard or Byron, although both are widely cited and referred to throughout the volume.

One of the targets of the studies, or sometimes their by-products is the problematizing of literary historical methodology. These are not all surprising for the literary historian, one could even say that they are repetitions of some well-known and often recapitulated issues; still, in the present, very concrete, context they regain their genuine exciting nature. Since the use of the term "irony" itself cannot be regarded as general in the age of Romanticism, and is even missing in some cases (that is, in the context of some national literatures), the old problem of the continuity of the subject matter and its relation to its corresponding terminology arises. This is a dilemma similar to that of the genre theories of literature itself: can there be, for instance, lyrical poetry without a firm confrontation between lyric and prose, or can there be literature without a clear cut system of what counts as literature and what does not?

Accordingly, the issue which haunts some authors of this volume is whether we can speak of Romantic irony even in those cases where the writers themselves do not use the word and may not even be aware of its use. As I have mentioned, in the center of Behler's study there is just this terminological problem, and others reflect on it; Edward Mozejko and Milan V. Dimić, writing on Polish and Southern Slave literature and criticism respectively, find that Slavic Romantic writers "were not even aware" of the term. And Struc expresses his surprise to see that "in a recently published anthology of contemporary critical writings on Russian Romanticism, neither irony nor its derivatives are mentioned even once". Antony Thorlby, on the other hand, admits that he must turn away from the sense Coleridge attributes to the word Irony, and "take a broader view", thus diverging from the terminology of the age itself. Similarly, neither Bisztray nor Szegedy-Maszák speculate too much about the absence of the term itself in Scandinavian and Hungarian critical literature, they turn, instead, to the Romantic irony these national literatures in fact exhibit.

Another interesting problem—perhaps interesting primarily for the students of Central and East European literatures—is the reluctance in some critical traditions to admit the role of irony in Romanticism (and elsewhere). The studies by Mozejko and Dimić and by Struc deal with this problem. Both suggest that in these critical contexts irony has counted as a destructive or subversive power, attacking the system of eternal and national values the defence of which is the principal task of both literature and criticism. Thus, this aspect of Romanticism should be taken as a marginal one and, finally, suppressed.

Paradoxically, some essays raising interesting methodological problems fail to expound their subject matter proper. For instance, Struc's study on Pushkin, Lermontov and Gogol is disappointingly unsatisfactory. Even for those unfamiliar with the enormous literature on Pushkin, it is evident that much more could be said of his achievement in terms of Romantic irony. (Dimić's study on the Southern Slavs, on the other hand,

offers quite a number of further readings on Pushkin's Romantic irony.)

The closing part of the volume, entitled "Syntheses", includes five essays of a rather general (or one could say, a more theoretical) nature. Jean-Pierre Barricelli disserts on "Musical Forms of Romantic Irony". At least half of Barricelli's study contains doubts, speculations and hesitations about this problem; his negative (or let us call it "ironical") attitude might be sympathetic, but the study as a whole will leave the reader somewhat unsatisfied. In spite of his problematizing about methodological issue which seem to pose an obstacle for him, the author proceeds to list a number of cases where there are traces of irony in music: these include citations, self-quotations, parodies. A series of these cases are rejected as not ironical, and, at one point, he formulates the distinction between "wit" and parody on the one hand, and irony on the other. "Parody as stylistic criticism . . . displays an incongruity typical of Romantic irony". Then he goes on listing composers and works by Mozart, Debussy, Mahler and Prokofjev. It is evident that for him Romantic irony is not at all a historical category and loses much of its explanatory force.

There are four more fundamental studies in this chapter. In "Romantic Irony and Narrative Stance", Lilian R. Furst, putting aside strictly historical considerations as well as terminological problems, concentrates on the ways the narrator of a narrative presents his/her story; starting from the "impersonal" irony of Austen, George Eliot and Flaubert to the direct interventions of Diderot and Byron. One is tempted to argue, as Professor Furst does at one point in her essay, that Romantic irony lies in the "total freedom" of the artist, thus, it corresponds to the "prominence" of the narrator "in his narrative". However, Furst herself realizes that the issue is much more complicated. Instead of imposing a simple but superficial one to one correspondance upon the typology of the narrator/narrated and the historical types of irony, she

goes on to explore the subtleties of the former relationship, confronting it with several historical manifestations of irony.

Although her argumentation is overwhelmingly lucid and convincing, her ahistorical stance poses the problem of the *differentia specifica* of Romantic irony. Is it Romantic only because it appears in the age of Romanticism? In fact Professor Furst contradicts one of the hidden protagonists of this volume, Ingrid Strohschneider-Kohrs, challenging the latter's idea that Romantic irony is "ein historisches Phänomen" — she wishes, instead, to untie Romantic irony from the emergence of its (Schlegelian) theory. "There is clearly a line of continuity from Romantic irony to the 'new irony' ", she suggests. The problem of historical continuity/discontinuity is, again, a serious methodological issue, probably irresolvable, destined to stay with students of literature forever. While Behler meticulously differentiates between sorts, modes, types and uses of irony within a short period of a single language, Furst, in this respect, seems to get closer to the other extreme.

In a somewhat similar vein, Gerald Gillespie, in his "Romantic Irony and the Modern Anti-Theater" links twentieth century dramaturgy to its anticipations in the Romantic age. Just as in his other study in this part, the title of which offers a summary of the problem of Romantic irony and the grotesque, Gillespie wanders freely in time and in (European) space, to present a very convincing web of influences, striking similarities and developments. An interesting characteristic of both essays is the close connection of drama and narrative, opening up new (mutual) perspectives, but still preserving the spirit of historical investigations, for, as he demonstrates, there has been an actual inter-reference between these genres. Besides, Gillespie's handling of his examples is fascinating; he passes to and fro not only between genres, but also between languages (from Spanish to French and from German to English) and even between arts (via his references to visual arts).

On a certain, higher, level, Gillespie's analysis seems to be a reinforcement of Furst's; translating their difference in simple

(perhaps too simple) terms, while Gillespie focuses on connections, Furst concentrates on structure; while for Gillespie it is history which explains some recurring phenomena, Furst chooses the approach poetics to unfold them.

Instead of simply summarizing the main points of the previous essays, in his "Coda: Ironies, Domestic and Cosmopolitan", the editor of the volume, Frederick Garber relies on some main points in an attempt to re-orientate the reader to further consequences. Naturally, he emphasizes the unity of the volume, in terms of placing Romantic irony on the "romantic map". The leading motives of his study are mirror (mirroring) and world/word relationship; his approach is seriously historical, though; apart from references to Diderot, Sterne and Cervantes, he sticks to the age from which Romantic irony got its name. Curiously enough, it is the first time that Hölderlin's name is mentioned in the volume, and the (relatively) subordinated role of lyrical poetry in the studies is somewhat counterbalanced. In fact, Garber centers his study on the greatest achievements of Romantic ironical poetry, including Heine, and referring to Shelley, Wordsworth and Blake. It is worth mentioning that Garber does not to any further readings, in footnotes or elsewhere; he elevates, rather, his subtle and sensitive analyses to a philosophical level, reflecting on concrete text analyses from a theoretical point of view. Thus, his historical approach is paralleled by a daring and, to be sure, successful, theoretical ambition.

If, having read this excellent book, the reader were asked, "What is Romantic irony anyway?", I doubt if a coherent, simple and, at the same time, satisfactory answer could be given. The objective of this volume was not, of course, to furnish a concise definition, even if one can meet here some *en passant* rudimentary delimitations. Much more important, however, is the extensive and thorough survey of the history, national manifestations, generic and aesthetic relationships of something one can subsume under the label "Romantic irony". If this volume does not — of course — offer a concise definition of what it is

about and sometimes even contains contradictory approaches, if the points of view are so different and, as a whole, it embodies the literary historical style of our age which can be called Eclecticism, what is it good for? One certainly would not assess it as "a first step", since there has been a lot of valuable literature written on Romantic irony; but neither is it a crowning of hitherto harmonizing researches. This volume, instead, represents a mediating stage (while one must be aware of the fact that there will not be any final solution), creating a possibility to proceed. For instance, the so-called empirical material gathered here is more than enough to ponder over for a lifetime; and if we put this achievement into a historical perspective, it is certain that twenty years later this volume will remain a fundamental sourcebook. It contributes to the creation of a tradition, that of taking Romantic irony as a substantial trait of the age as well as taking a comparative approach to this phenomenon seriously. Today, it seems to be indispensable to adopt this tradition.

Evidently, all further studies in this field cannot ignore this volume, either as far as its presented literary material, or as far as its choice of arsenal are concerned.