It is characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of representation. In its finished form philosophy will, it is true, assume the quality of doctrine, but it does not lie within the power of mere thought to confer such a form. Philosophical doctrine is based on historical codification. It cannot therefore be evoked more geometrico . . . Its method is essentially representation. Method is a digression.

Walter Benjamin

Any attempt at a comprehensive Phenomenology of Ironic Spirit confronts the problem of (re)presentation—on several levels. To be representable, irony, more than other objects of inquiry, requires its own re-construction as an object of study. To be sure, for the specific contents of the objects of the humanities generally can only be obtained from their historical configurations, and they require reference to their discursive formations. Yet in studying irony, which is not only a self-reflexive but also a self-effacing phenomenon, the humanities (i.e. philosophy, art history, literary studies) are especially obliged not to be content with retracing particular historical stages or manifestations of the phenomenon. The analysis presented here thus differs from historical-semantic studies in that its orientation toward a theory of history presupposes a labor of construction and definition on the phenomenon itself.

A phenomenology of ironic spirit thus has to simultaneously trace its object and constitute it in the first place. The “immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter” advocated by Walter Benjamin serves the “minute precision of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole.” Re-constructive practice thus has to be supplemented by a poietic and sculptural labor of definition that serves to sharply delineate the phenomenon. There are several reasons for this, reasons that concern the
very content and context of “spirit,” “irony,” and “phenomenology.” Hegel had determined phenomenology to be the spirit’s method of attaining the object, that is, as the method in which and by which spirit becomes its own object. On several levels, the present study divests this understanding of phenomenology’s calm progression of its limits. Hegel’s phenomenology is to be understood as a historical (not an ontological) method of describing the genesis and development of spirit. Modern ironic spirit, however, appears suddenly and as a comprehensive contradiction: as a contradiction, first, of Hegel’s absolute spirit; second, as a contradiction in itself (an ironic proposition always claims itself and something else to be true); a contradiction, third, of the principle of contradiction (A is not equal to non-A) and thus of Hegel’s fundamental principle that the developments of spirit follow a logic of rationally computable contradictions.

A Hegelian phenomenology no longer suffices to understand the sudden genesis of modern ironic spirit, which breaks with everything that came before. The path of ironic spirit is not a progression; in keeping with its ironic determination, it follows three different, irreconcilable modes of operation (affirmative, neutral, subversive) that, within the framework of modern ethics, poetics, and politics, can be found in the most diverse historical contexts. This set of three logically conclusive readings of irony applies to the entire modern episteme. This implies, simultaneously, an objection and a demand. It objects to a theoretical self-appeasement that is most salient in the incessantly repeated assertion that irony has a “Protean nature” that would render it ungraspable. Instead, the demand is for a phenomenological immersion in the various fields and historical minglings in which these three logics unfold and where their difference (which is maintained throughout modernity) becomes visible as such. An
initial philosophical (rhetorical-logical) definition of irony thus intrinsically stands in need of being supplemented by overlapping readings from ethics, literary studies, and political theory, from those fields, that is, in which the three logics have primarily unfolded.

This leads to two pragmatic acuminations in the structure of this study. First, the succession of chapters can only simulate a historical process; by the same token, the separation into chapters can only simulate a rigorous separation of fields of inquiry. What is true for the relation between the philosophical and the historical methods generally is thus true for the three historical domains of debates about irony, the moral, the aesthetic, and the political: Under the sign of irony there can be no strict separation of discourses will hold (something indignantly criticized from Hegel to Habermas).

Greek Prelude

In principle, the three ironic logics are already manifest in the diverging, at first sight even completely different and unrelated images of Socrates in Antiquity: the critical citizen in the service of the community (in Xenophanes); the maieutic lover of a wisdom he cannot attain (in Plato); the destroyer of the community’s moral values (in Aristophanes). But it is not just this ambiguity of the figure of Socrates (an ambiguity frequently remarked upon, for example by Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) that makes him the primary historical foil of many debates about irony. The contradictory ethical estimations of this original historical figure—either as eirôn (the one who understates) or, just the inverse, as alazôn (the one who overstates)—exemplarily refer to the simultaneously epistemological and ethical (or political) dimension of irony.
Rhetorologies

This study as a whole addresses a four-fold problem. The first aspect is the localization of a historical and systematic interface in the work of Friedrich Schlegel, who is responsible for the modern rediscovery of irony. The second point of interest is the way in which early Romanticism invents irony, namely in a way that already prepares the extension and transformation of irony into a more general cultural phenomenon. This can be traced thanks to a linguistic and philosophical reconstruction of the ambiguous disposition attained by the rhetorical *topos* of irony in its modern recapitulation. This indicates a third point, namely the consistent parallelism between the concrete unfolding of the systematic approach of this book and the historical development of the thesis that *the modern spirit is ironically constituted*. The large number of very precise descriptions of the phenomenon of irony entails the danger that the presentation as a whole becomes unclear. For the material presented here to remain clear and coherent—and this is the fourth aspect—this systematic chapter, beginning with its title, insists that the rhetorical logic of irony comes in three variants that remain historically constant and are not reducible to one another.4

After a look at the “beginning” of irony with Socrates, the first and for a long time the only ironist, and at the almost complete (rhetorical) neutralization of irony in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the concern will be to distill three modes of ironic speech from the over-boarding discourses of early Romanticism: affirmative, neutral, and subversive irony. These are not variations on *one* theme; instead, they make it possible to discern three rhetorical logics of irony that can serve as a matrix for understanding later forms in which irony appears and changes in the fields of ethics, poetics, and politics. The task of the chapter entitled “rhetorologies” is to break three paths into the
corpus of early Romantic texts; three possibilities of articulating an evaluation of the construct *irony* anchored in early Romantic theory;⁵ three different readings that are repeated in judgments about Romanticism to this day and that continue to differ completely;⁶ but above all, three reflections of nascent modernity on itself, of a modernity that even today has not settled on any single self-appraisal. One of the working hypotheses of this study is that the problem of the contradictory self-reflections of the Romantics and of the appraisals of their interpreters can be made fruitful since the obvious contradictions are also symptomatic indications of the way in which the project of modernity as a whole cannot be concluded.

Before answering the question of the various influences the social, cultural, and epistemic (post-, alter-, or simple) modernity has exercised since 1800 over the changing phenomenon of irony, then, the following preliminary question concerning the theory of modernity has to be dealt with: Why is irony reinvented at the specific moment of an epistemic break? The reactivation of irony takes place at a particular point in time, whose central coordinates are to be found in one of Friedrich Schlegel’s fragments: “The French Revolution, Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* and Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* are the greatest tendencies of the age,” as Schlegel cites himself in the 1800 essay “Über die Unverständlichkeit [On Incomprehensibility],” only to go on to aggravate the commentary’s provocation of his contemporaries: “That I consider art to be the core of humanity and the French Revolution to be an exquisite allegory of the system of transcendental idealism, these indeed are but my highly subjective opinions.”⁷ The programmatic equality, perhaps even primacy of aesthetic events over philosophical or political facts may very well be the most important methodological starting point of Friedrich Schlegel’s theorization of irony. At the same time, the quote provides a
historically concrete localization of Schlegel’s Romantic thought: political modernity, post-Kantian philosophy, and the self-reflexive novel as tendencies of his own time—Schlegel will address them ironically. His role in the rise of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, a new emphasis on the significance of rhetoric, and the rediscovery of irony are Schlegel’s contributions to an understanding of modernity. Only in modernity, only thanks to modernity and its radicalized awareness of contingency (in language, art, and everyday life) does this new irony—which is still our irony—make sense.

There are thus four phenomena—irony and modernity, rhetoric and aesthetics—and the following question: Why and how do certain phenomena (re)surface at a certain moment, around 1800? This is the first time that “aesthetics” emerges as an independent discipline; for the first time in centuries, “irony” is considered to be a phenomenon worth investigating (to be something more than merely a pretty form of speech); finally, in early Romanticism’s theory of language, “rhetoric” acquires a whole new meaning. Not the least of concerns of this study will therefore be the search for a necessary connection between these three theoretical elements and the redefinition of the discussion about the heritage of antiquity and modernity (as a fourth element).

There are both entirely theoretical and historical reasons for Schlegel’s annulment of a rhetorical understanding of irony. For the ironic spirit of modernity, the attempt prevalent in the rhetorical tradition to give unambiguous interpretations and explanations of ironic propositions can no longer be of any use. If a “true critique of philosophy,” according to Schlegel, is a “philosophy of rhetoric,” then this also means that every reflection about irony in modernity has to leave the narrow tracks of traditional textbook rhetoric. It is only in the context of poetology, therefore, that the present study inquires into the how of ironic writing—otherwise, questions of the why
and what for of ironic speech and propositions, which naturally do not have a place in linguistic studies, are the main concern. They are “questions about the accident, the event, the manifold” and not least about “the difference” of irony to itself in its various forms.

Nonetheless it is useful for rhetorological systematization to always also think about the speech act of the ironic proposition, that is, for example, to try to approach various philosophical readings of (modern) early Romantic irony and rhetorical interpretations. The atemporal (within modernity, that is) logic of irony makes it possible that these approaches can include, beside the traditional rhetorical ones, approaches inspired by contemporary linguistics and speech act theory. As already indicated, this leads first of all to a rhetorological tripartition of three ironies irreducible to one another. First, arguing from its everyday rhetorical use as well as from the philosophies of Kant and Fichte, an irony of successful reconciliation can be epistemologically discerned. In irony thus understood, something else may be said—most often, the opposite of what is meant—but this does not lead to a fundamental distrust of the communicative capacities of language. As indirect communication, the second rhetorical logic of irony distilled here, too, aims for intelligibility. Yet, aware that it can no longer directly say anything authentic, it functions only under paradoxical conditions. Going beyond its inventor, potentiated reflection, which is the distinctive mark of Romantic irony discerned by Walter Benjamin, can be shown to be evident in a third procedure of the rhetoric figure irony: in an irony of unintelligibility. In the continued reflexive potentiation of its thoughts this irony, which could be called indirect-mimetic irony, can no longer recover these very thoughts. It is thus a form of unruly irony, in which irony is precisely no longer an arbitrarily deployable instrument of communication but is instead at the
service of unintelligibility and sometimes, in its artistic manifestations, even of nonsense.

The working hypothesis and the basis of all the chapters that follow is that establishing these three modes of irony, sketched here only in their rough outlines, makes it possible to understand the pertinent social and cultural phenomena in all their forms with sufficient clarity and to precisely identify them as ironic. This latter denomination has often been absent in the literature. All too often, resistant ironic phenomena escaped attention either by chance or they were ignored as allegedly false or antiquated forms of irony by authors whose own definitions of irony suited their particular purposes.

Before sketching the various developments and effects of irony, a methodological remark on the relation between the logic proper to rhetoric on the one hand and the influence of historical processes on conceptions of irony and their representation on the other is in order. The question of what drives the corresponding historical processes, what kind of causality triggers them, and what role the socio-historical changes of (bourgeois) society play in this context is directly relevant to the question of irony. Even if the present study does not look at social processes of modernization one by one, it does not for all that analyze aesthetic modernity as an isolated phenomenon. Developments studied in detail in the literature on modernity such as social mobility, urbanization, secularization, etc. will again and again turn out simultaneously (this double logic is always to be kept in mind) to be breeding ground and effect of ironic phenomena. A systematic understanding of irony thus depends above all on the following mediation: on the one hand to bring out irony's background in a theory of modernity, on the other hand to understand irony as a self-reflexive phenomenon (to the
second power). And this understanding also always implies that modern irony generates itself and functions as the catalyst of its own development.

The œuvre of Friedrich Schlegel, in Hegel’s view the “ringleader” of irony, is paradigmatic in this respect, both historically and systematically. The essay “Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie [On the Study of Greek Poetry],” begun in 1794, occupies a key position as it testifies to a fundamental change of mind on the part of the author. While in the querelle des anciens et des modernes, Schlegel takes a view critical of modernity at least on the artistic level, he changes his position at the latest when he finishes the introduction in 1797. Significant not only from the point of philology is that simultaneously, mainly in the “Critical Fragments” (Lyceum fragments), he rediscovers irony. The period to be examined in the second, rhetorological chapter covers about three years. In these few years, his much-discussed, unparalleled radicalization of early Romantic theory takes place. The later, “reactionary” relapse of most Romantics (a relapse fatal for the later reception of Schlegel in particular) already takes place in the nineteenth century.

The task in that chapter then is to analyze three rhetorical interpretations of “irony,” three conceptions of “rhetoric” and “aesthetics” mainly by way of Schlegel’s writings from this period between 1797 and 1800 but also with reference to Novalis as well as to Solger and Tieck. The fundamental thesis is that only a linguistic and philosophical reconstruction of the ambiguous disposition the rhetorical topos irony attains in its modern recapitulation in early Romanticism can make the early Romantic invention of irony, its expansion and transformation into a more general cultural phenomenon plausible. Yet this also holds for the historical development of the ironically constituted spirit of modernity: one’s understanding of irony, even of aesthetics itself, varies
according to the significance one grants to language and rhetoric. From the
rhetorological perspective (matters are different when it comes to the ethical, literary, or
political effects of irony), none of the three constructed readings of irony is to be
preferred. Instead, irony is to be conceptualized philosophically in its ambiguity.
Properly understood, there can therefore no longer be talk of a single or even of the
“Romantic Irony”—an attribution that, furthermore, is practically nowhere to be found
in Romantic theories of irony themselves.

Ethics

Historically, the phenomenological development or unraveling of rhetorical logics of
irony in ethics, poetics, and politics of modernity investigated in the central chapters
follows, to cite Walter Benjamin once more, the “great categories which determine not
only the shape of the systems, but also philosophical terminology – logic, ethics, and
aesthetics.” These categories, extended here to include politics, are conceived of less as
“names of special disciplines” than “as monuments in the discontinuous structure” of
cultural phenomena. These discontinuous unfoldings have a correlate in
transvaluations of irony wherever the epistemological question of its (un)intelligibility
is no longer the only question asked. For if the abstract philosophical question is left
behind in favor of concrete examples or applications, the changing phenomenon entails
a changing problem. In concrete everyday situations, hermeneutic-epistemological
questions necessarily become ethical and subsequently (both logically and historically),
political questions. In principle, however, the three ways in which irony functions that
rhetorology reveals remain valid and continuously form the field of coordinates which is
the only place in which the ethical, poetological, and political actualizations of irony can
be laid out systematically. But the three ironic logics always follow the practices proper to the field in which they manifest themselves according to different procedures.

To give just one example of the effects exercised by the ethical field on the three rhetorical-logical vectors of irony: We see that the three logics derived from rhetoric are valid if we take the question of the objective givenness of the good in moral philosophy to be the ethical analogue of the hermeneutic question of intelligibility. The three logics are transformed, first, into the positive claim that the morally good exists, second, into the melancholic simulation of the good, and, third, into its dismissal once and for all. Moral self-confidence likes to identify this dismissal as a typical manifestation of evil. Yet by the same token—and at the latest with this reflection we encounter the difficulty of any ethical engagement with irony—the fundamentalist insistence on a substantial good can appear as an ignorant and exclusionary position. Or, taking yet another ironic turn: it obviously makes all the difference whether a (defensive) ironic proposition is made for lack of a better expression or whether it is freely (and thus offensively) chosen. And is it even possible to speak of a free choice of irony where in the face of external coercion, emphatic truth can only be affirmed by way of an ironic distortion of the false? Could not an elitist application of irony in the service of an arrogant exclusion of the ignorant be understood as an ethical application of the successful reconciliation (speaking rhetorically in the sense mentioned earlier) and, simultaneously, as the opposite of morally good behavior (speaking ethically)? There is thus a methodological imperative to allow for the various positions to criticize one another in view of the model of three ironic logics developed previously. Compared to the usual procedure, namely negatively to affirm the arguments of critiques of Romanticism (or of the critics of modernity), this yields additional reflective insights.
The criticism of an understanding of “aesthetization” that sees in it a post-facto ironization or fictionalization of a reality that would in itself not be aesthetic, i.e. of an ethically and politically autonomous reality, is one of the key points of the argument of the third chapter. Jacques Rancière’s description of an “aesthetic regime of thinking” (not just about art) makes it possible to juxtapose another understanding of aesthetization, namely as a possible interruption of discursive practices. The correlate thesis that aesthetic processes play a constitutive role in our thinking shifts the significance of the otherwise correct description of (post-rhetorical) irony as a catalyst of phenomena of aesthetization. Irony, so the larger thesis, is not just a manifestation and accelerant of phenomena of aesthetization, it also always acts as their pharmakon:\footnote{12} The modern spirit of irony emerges from the narrow confines of rhetoric under the sign of aesthetization. That is also why (as long as it is not blamed for all the ills of modernity, as often happens from Hegel to Carl Schmitt) irony’s expertise is incessantly called on whenever a correction or at least attenuation of the paradoxes of modernity is at issue.

The thesis of a general ironic dispositif of modernity is by no means meant to propagate an ahistorical atemporality of a Romantic (post-) modernity. The third chapter especially, which is dedicated to ethical formations of irony, seeks to oppose such a simplification with historical and methodological differentiations. This is salient in different cultural manifestations of the self-referential and allegedly "self-indulgent" aesthetics of Romanticism. Thus it is in their different ways of taking up the heritage of the ironist that the differences between, say, Kierkegaard's "aestheticist," Benjamin’s "flaneur," or a specific economy of "dandyism" (as a resuscitation of "primitive" cults of extravagance) can be precisely traced. Similarly, we have to distinguish between "Romantic longing," "mourning," and "despair" as well as later concepts of
"melancholia." The concepts "metaphor" and "metonymy," significant for the rhetorological definition of irony, find their ethical correlates in "wit" and "melancholia." It is these latter, for example in Benjamin and especially in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, that furnish the formulas that make the thesis plausible that the self arises ironically from the spirit of melancholic imitation and a failure to attain the self.

The extent to which the three rhetorological forms of irony stand up against other discursive shifts within modernity is apparent, finally, in the theme of seduction or of the seducer, whose premodern figure as scheming courtier and then as hypocritical courtier simultaneously allows for a detailed description of the nineteenth century ironist. Whether ironic seduction rests on the paradoxical resolution to relinquish (self-) control, whether it serves a fearful attempt at compensating for inferiority, or whether it aims at controlling others: these are important ethical differences a purely rhetorical analysis would not come across. There is a direct connection between Kierkegaard’s “good,” controlled irony and his compulsive *Seducer’s Diary*. At the other pole, Baudrillard’s uncontrolled seduction is the systematic analogue of an uncontrollably-potentiating, i.e., rhetorologically speaking: incomprehensible irony.

Poetics

There are analogous shifts on the poetological level as well. In somewhat simplified terms: Epistemologically good (because comprehensible) irony can, as a poetic mode, abet obvious conservative tendencies in writing. And conversely, the most outstanding novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are often the most difficult to interpret. Without making any value judgment it can be noted that—to name but just one comparable example familiar in this context—the clearly comprehensible irony (an irony
of opposition) of naïve narrator-subjects in Thomas Mann’s work has not necessarily produced better novels than Musil’s irony, which is sometimes resolved only with great difficulty. And no matter whether what one appreciates in Kafka’s novels, for example, that they ironically arrange conventional plot strategies one more time or that they at least indirectly express the longing for a higher law one more time or even that their aesthetic subversion does not stop at this higher law’s gates—two things become clear. First, the three rhetorically differentiated complexes can be shown to be at work in literature as well; but second, their investigation works completely differently than in the ethical domain (good, neutral, evil) and thus also has to take be undertaken according to completely different, artistic criteria (conventional, burdened by tradition, innovative).

On the poetological level as well we therefore observe the shifts already encountered in the ethical manifestations or translations of rhetorical irony. These shifts, however, can only be judged according to the concrete material and only after the thesis (often merely postulated) of the novelistic genre’s specific ironicity has been demonstrated. The fourth chapter, entitled “Novel – Modernity – Irony,” cannot be satisfied with a simple application of some previously worked-out theses (modern irony as inheritor of a Bakhtinian oxymoronic carnival laughter; a critical engagement with Lukács’s thesis according to which “the writer’ irony is the negative mysticism of godless times;” irony as “permanent parecbasis” (Schlegel) qua consistently-structural breaking of illusion, that is, as play between reality and illusion; Bildungsroman and autobiography as applications of the ironic procedures of mask-like constitutions of the self). Going beyond these themes, the task is to elaborate the functioning of the novel both in its micro- and its macrostructures. The relation between irony and quotation (in Proust,
Musil, and Joyce), pastiche, parody, and grotesque also calls for a theoretical elucidation.

Besides the genre-theoretical definition of the specifically ironic logic of the novel, three different positions of the narrator in the novel and three structures of narrative irony as such need to be elucidated: (a) between authorial narrator and reader, (b) between narrator and hero, and (c) novelistic irony as contextual irony. Both the historical preferences of these novelistic ironies and their relation one to the other derive from the particularities of the novel. The novel is not just to be distinguished for its essential irony from epic, drama, and poetry. Rather, the novel’s irony, so much discussed, needs to be differentiated not just in terms of genre but historically as well. Both the different narrative ironies we find in novels and their way of deploying pastiche, quotation, and parody thus leads to a differentiation between (a) the eighteenth-century English novel, (b) the novels of Stendhal and Flaubert, and (c) contemporary “post-modern” variants of the novel. Once again, just one example: Whether a quotation characterizes figures, constitutes narrative patterns, or structures an entire plot-network; whether the narrator’s irony comes up between narrator and reader or between narrator and hero, or whether it uncontrollably pervades the entire novel—all this requires a historical differentiation without, however, being made to conform a teleological development scheme. And this is the function of the rhetorological schema: systematically fixed and yet historically elastic, it serves throughout the investigation as a matrix.

The amount of material is immense, and an accumulation of individual studies would necessarily have to be infinite. For this reason, and in the interest of providing a theoretical explanation of the functions of irony, this study opts for short entries and exits of the most varied authors and for interpretations of short scenes taken from
novels. Nonetheless, it seemed to be necessary to dedicate a detailed analysis to at least one text well-known for its irony; here, this text is Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*. Concepts developed with the help of Russian formalism and its successors (*skaz*, estrangement) as well particular detailed narratological and metaphorological analyses make it possible to show both the scope and the material limits of discursive and literary irony.

A section toward the end of the fourth chapter is dedicated to investigating the ironic treatment of the boundaries of reality and illusion. Obviously, there is a wide range here, from Cervantes via the Romantic *Tomcat Murr* to the “postmodern” destroyed protagonists of Calvino, Kundera, and Pynchon. Last but not least, the categories differentiated in the “Ethica” chapter (inauthentic becoming—oneself, melancholia, and dandyistic pretending) facilitate a discussion of the *Bildungsroman* and the autobiographical novel. An investigation of biographical de-construction in Thomas Bernhard’s novel *Woodcutters* from the point of view of language aesthetics, finally, follows a discussion of the functioning of ironic constitutions of protagonists and authors. For in the poetological context, too, a personifying quality constitutive of selves comes to the fore. In speaking of “masks,” the nineteenth century remanifests the concept of *dissimulatio*—that is, nothing but the Latin translation of Greek *eironeia*.

**Politics**

A comprehensive phenomenology of ironic formations of thought and practice conceived in the fields of modern ethics and poetics finds itself referred to the transformation of ethics and poetics in the field of politics. Here, too, irony can be understood as a reaction to modern imponderables, which can, in Claude Lefort’s sense, be put in parallel with
the imponderables of democracy. Thus the (ironical) early German Romantics, among others, had to include the fact of the French Revolution in their political reflections on democracy very early on. The occasion and justification of this chapter, furthermore, is the observation that even the political theorist most untouched by early Romantic theories necessarily drew on an ironical pool of arguments that was first and most lucidly—despite or precisely because of all its contradictions—formulated by those very Romantics.

What has been said so far for the domains of the ethical and the poetic is equally valid for the field of the political. A fair part of the lack of clarity in the evaluations and judgments of irony can be explained by the confusion that arises from the transfer of metaphors from an epistemological context (maieutics, search for sense, non-sense) onto other terrains. It is impossible, even meaningless, to try abstractly to judge (productive, compensatory, destructive) irony on the political terrain. Judging in each situation whether irony has reactionary, conservative-compensatory, or subversive effects always requires an analysis of the concrete historical context in which the various ironic attitudes, procedures, and strategies arise. In addition, the thesis postulated here that (post-Romantic) modernity never freed itself politically, either, from its genuinely ironic disposition makes a clear decision for or against political irony more complicated. Hence the two central aims of the chapter: on the one hand to show that many of the reflections on politics that are currently influential explicitly or implicitly obey ironic logics (“Three political reflections around irony”). This is the purpose of rereading system-theoretical state irony (Willke), post-modernist Marxism that makes use of deconstructive methods (Laclau and Mouffe), (post-) pragmatist liberalism (Rawls, Rorty), and, finally, Carl Schmitt’s desperate invectives against democratic
Irony

parliamentarism from whose Romantic roots he does not for all that manage to free himself. The larger thesis here is that the often misleading, often violent debates between advocates of the various theoretical strands rely on a shared (Romantic-modern) reservoir of issues, concepts but also paradoxes and unanswered questions. It is important to see that the discursive knots partly unravel if their common ironic disposition is taken into account. Against the backdrop of the (potentiated) concept of reflection that we find in the radial Enlightener Kant, often-astonishing parallels between competing, even hostile theoreticians appear; according to Ingeborg Maus’ reading, for example, a parallel between Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory and the consensus theory of a Jürgen Habermas skeptical of Luhmann. An excursus dedicated to the aesthetic potential repressed in Habermas’s political reflection attempts to shed light on this repression by way of the aesthetic-political dimension of Jacques Rancière’s concept of different “partitions of the sensible.”

In its analysis of otherwise very differently oriented theoreticians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the second part of the chapter ("Thesis and antithesis") is once more concerned with giving a theoretical account of the way irony functions, this time in the field of the political. In the field of ironic possibilities outlined by attempts at a maeutic production of clear power structures, by infinite longing for such structures, and their anarchistic dismissal, the abstract alternative of conservative or progressive political irony must remain an antinomy. Political irony operates in a field that is marked by the two poles of sovereignty (the transparent capacity to decide) and (powerless) apathy. What is to be questioned here is the doxa—usually chosen arbitrarily, i.e. according to political taste— that irony is either progressive (as allegedly observed in and proven by the debates about gender and queerness) or conservative (as
allegedly observed in and proven by Catholic Romanticism, the “non-political” Thomas Mann, or the “uncritically conformist post-modernists”). Only a differentiated analysis of the positions of speakers can provide the basis for a conclusive explanation of how and why Romantic irony can be simultaneously criticized (for example by Carl Schmitt) as the first incarnation of the modern democratic spirit and hailed (by Thomas Mann) as an elitist apolitical attitude. This is not to say that Schmitt’s decisionist criticism of political Romanticism’s ironic occasionalism or leftist criticism of the Romantics’ political impotence were wrong. Yet the concrete political effects of irony can, once again, only be judged for each particular case.

This is what, third, the non-synthetic discussion of Kafka’s literary reflection on modernity’s state of exception aims at. The concluding part of the chapter (“Kafka’s logic of the law”) builds on the preceding two. First of all, Kafka’s ironic depictions of “bureaucracy” and “law” frustrate Carl Schmitt’s political theories on these questions. Kafka already had the literary insight that, in Deleuze’s later articulation, the law can only ever be thought by way of irony and humor makes it such that the decision for either progressive or conservative irony is no longer a necessary one. Kafka’s literary ironicization of the law aims at a “bourgeoisization [Verbürgerlichung] of the Nothing” that nothingness for whose continued existence irony was blamed for two centuries.

**Essayism**

With the political theory of the socio-historical uncertainties and insecurities that crystallize in the phenomenon of irony this study reaches its historical and systematic limits. The short chapter that follows simply attempts to connect characteristic traits of the “essay” genre with elements of a genuinely ironic method. Always considering failure
to be a possibility, making “non-method a method” (Adorno), turning oneself into the experimental protagonist of one’s theoretical problems, elaborating theoretical results to a large part from out of the particularities of historical phenomenon, and so on—all this has always been at issue in essayistic self-reflection.

First of all (albeit indirectly), the sixth chapter (“Is there an essay method?”) is also a methodical (auto-)reflection on the possibilities of a study on an essentially ambivalent phenomenon such as irony. Whether the in part paradoxical arrangement of the material, the necessary breaks in structure and style make sense is left to the reader’s judgment; the same is true of the repeated attempts at mobilizing the resources of different disciplines (such as psychoanalysis and ethnology) and, in some cases, of earlier epochs for a genealogy of ironic modernity.

Different adaptations of Schlegel’s theories about ironic forms of thought, primarily by Lukács and Musil, are the occasion for asking if and to what extent the essay is the genuine genre of an ironic production of knowledge. [If so,] various determinations from ironic theories can then be inscribed post facto in the early modern inventor of the essay (Montaigne) and allow for the definition of the genre as a fundamentally ironic one.

**Metaphysical de-limitations**

In parallel with the (threefold) systematic logic of the rhetorical figure, the three chapters on ethical, poetological, and political phenomena of irony also trace a historical development. Once this has been done, all that is left to do is to attempt to recapitulate definitions of irony as if from the outside, from the beyond of its outer limits. Such a recapitulation requires a summarizing examination of the, explicitly no longer ironic, surpluses of some of the phenomena discussed, an examination of what, in Lacanian
terms, can no longer be grasped symbolically (in language, in rhetoric). Such is the case, for example the (no longer ironic) libidinous aspects of seduction, the mystical dimensions of Musil’s poetics, or the (necessary?) violent aspects of political events, to name but one example for each of the fields studied in more detail here.

The necessary conclusion to a phenomenology of ironic spirit must therefore include, first, a speculative recapitulation of the study’s central concepts and, second, the sounding of metaphysical problems that could not be raised as such in the course of discussing various partial aspects. The title “Metaphysical de-limitations” indicates not just an extension of speculation. For in the research and composition of this book, philosophical problems arose that can no longer be claimed to have been reflected, never mind resolved, by any irony. De-limitation thus also names a concluding transgression of the symbolic discursive phenomenon irony itself. While the conflict between Schlegel and Hegel (not least a conflict over how far a rhetorical trope may go) precisely dates the beginning of ironic modernity, the end of this historical constellation can only be a matter of speculation. The analogy with the ontosemiological auto-possibilization of irony—the sprawling career of the previously rhetorical trope is only made possible by the thesis that world and spirit are entirely constituted by language—requires us to look for the limits of the ironical universe, which stretches from the early Romantics to the post-structuralists, in theoretical positions that seek to find a different relation to their (un)thinkable material outside. The best entry into an exploration of the beginning of the end (of the present history) of irony thus turns out to be an analysis of the difference of the philosophies of language articulated by Derrida and Deleuze.

Some of the themes that impose themselves in the context of the linguistic qualities of Musil’s ironic novel are rather of an ontological kind and can eventually no longer be
recuperated by a theory of language. They are questions about the relation between body and language and about a materialism of drives beyond any determined and determinable limits. In general terms, one of the chapter’s main philosophical questions is the question of irony’s logic of de-limitation—of irony as such in both an objective and subjective sense--, the question of the possibility of a material de-limitation of concepts that, in the preceding chapters, were conceived no longer simply rhetorically but nevertheless still purely discursively. A concept previously mobilized for the theory of politics, where formal procedures to produce progressive effects on a material-social level are at issue, the concept of “formateriality,” is to help to reveal this to be an affliction of philosophical thinking generally. A “hanthology” or theory of affliction will trace it in four steps from Derrida’s “ghost” (fantôme) via Michel Serres’ and J. L. Austin’s speech-act-theoretical “parasite” and Hegel’s “porosity” to the “vampire,” charged with both sexual and ontological significance. In the sphere of the vampire, (ironic) bodies evade even the distinction, which goes back to Aristotle, between active form and passive matter.

Finally, a philosophical understanding of the ironical ethics, poetics, and politics of modernity require a reflective recuperation of what was and is philosophically at stake in Schlegel’s irony and its condemnation by Hegel. As for Hegel—easily the most influential and most infamous critic of irony—it must be observed that irony cannot simply be reduced to a cultural or intellectual skandalon. Instead, ironic procedures and phenomenon transform the sublations of various polarities (form/matter, activity/passivity, etc.) onto the level of no longer self-conscious spirit that Hegel’s great logic performed on the level of perception. Even Hegel’s basic methodological operation, his dialectic, does not remain untouched by this. In contrast to Hegel’s reflection on
reflection, ironic reflection is to be defined as potentiated. Unlike a Hegelian dialectics of
determinate reflection or dialectical referencing and elevation of contents, ironic
dialectics, as a disjunctive dialectics, is to be de-limited. Going beyond Hegel, a critical
transformation of his Science of Logic (of its conception of “disjunction into extremes,”
its concept of the “also,” etc.) makes it possible to conceive of an understanding of
disjunctive dialectics as a material dialectic, as a power-charged collision of extremes.
For since it is continually potentiated, (ironic) reflection can also function as the
operator of an intensification and increasing tension—which means precisely not in the
service of a synthetic solution.
The de-limitation of irony analyzed in conclusion, of course, also leaves irony behind.
Irony is over. That’s it for irony. Irony is gone—in the double sense: it has left and it has
come to an end. Modern irony was this irony that left itself. This also means it is no
longer what previously it has been. Ultimately, then, a rhetorical theory of irony that is
more than a thousand years old turns out to be true: Isidore of Seville had determined
irony to be antiphrasis. In the sense of the “countersense of the original words:” Irony
is over—incipit ironia.

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2 ibid 29.
Most commonly, Otto Ribbeck’s essay “Über den Begriff des ‘Eiron’” (Rheinisches Museum für Philologie, N. F. 31, 1876, 381–400) serves as the main reference for such attributions.

This systematic context distinguishes the tripartition used in this study from distinctions motivated by particular conceptions of history that are often based on moral value judgments. This is true, for example, in the case of Wayne Booth, who distinguishes between stable, covert and unstable irony (Wayne C. Booth, A Rhetoric of Irony [Chicago: ..., 1974]), or of Alan Wilde, who distinguishes between a premodern “mediate irony . . . to mediate a fundamentally satiric vision,” a modernist “disjunctive irony” that “strives . . . toward a condition of paradox,” and a postmodern “suspensive irony . . . with its yet more radical vision of multiplicity, randomness, contingency and even absurdity” (Horizons of Assent [Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981], 9-10).

Kierkegaard already goes so far as to say, “Throughout this exposition, I use the expression ‘irony and the ironicist;’ I might just as well say ‘Romanticism and the Romantic.’ . . . Both ways of expression mean essentially the same.” „Ich benütze in dieser ganzen Darstellung die Ausdrücke ,die Ironie und der Ironiker‘; ebenso gut könnte ich ,die Romantik und der Romantiker‘ sagen. [...] Beide Ausdrucksweisen besagen wesentlich das Gleiche.“ (Kierkegaard, Sören, Über den Begriff der Ironie. Mit ständiger Rücksicht auf Sokrates, München, 1991, S. 281.)

This differentiation also comes with a refusal to give in to the tendency in research on Romanticism, particularly pronounced when it comes to irony, to rush to a judgment on Schlegel’s theories.

8 In Novalis, too, there is a prophecy about Fichte’s significance for art: “Wonderful works of art can be created—when people will begin to Fichticize artistically” „Es können wunderbare Kunstwerke entstehen – wenn man das Fichtisiren erst artistisch zu treiben beginnt.“ (Schriften, hrsg. v. Paul Kluckhohn und Richard Samuel, Bd. 2, Stuttgart, 1981, S. 524)

9 Schlegel, Friedrich, Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe (KA), hrsg. v. Ernst Behler, Paderborn u. a., 1958 ff., Bd. 18, S. 75.

10 Deleuze, Gilles, Differenz und Wiederholung, München, 1992, S. 240.

11 33

