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IRONY AND THE NOVEL

The aim of the present article is an attempt to investigate the phenomenon of irony as significant for the novel to assume its present shape. It is practically impossible to exhaust the list of great *eirons* among the novelists—the potential for irony has been widely actualized in the works by M. Cervantes, J. Swift, H. Fielding, L. Sterne, H. Balzac, W. Thackeray, F. Dostoevsky, G. Flaubert, H. James, J. Conrad, J. Joyce, A. Huxley, T. Mann, W. Faulkner, R. Musil, S. Beckett, M. Frisch, T. Pynchon, J. Barth.

The above collection represents different heterogeneous „kinds” of irony: starting from the pure Verbal Irony and its rhetorical variations, through numerous realizations of Situational Irony, to philosophically grounded General and Romantic Ironies. What all of them have in common might be reduced to a simple definition of irony: its mechanism is based on a discovery of incongruity or “contrast between an appearance and a reality”.¹ “Appearance” always implies subjective perception, whether it takes a form of confident unawareness or self-deception, and is exposed to confrontation with what the *iron* recognizes as the objective reality. The interplay of “appearance” and “reality”, of subjectivity and objectivity is identified from the point of view of the ironist or ironic observer. Therefore, as Muecke observes,² irony itself is vulnerable to further irony from a new vantage-ground. How ironies can be piled on ironies when placed into a new context is illustrated by Wayne C. Booth who considers the meaning of the words “Hail, King of the Jews!” first as shouted by those who crucified Christ, then as reported by Mark in his gospel account of the crucifixion (in this context the words already display a double irony), and finally as referred to by an imaginary anti-Christian who would satirically comment on Mark’s beliefs.³ Though concentric circles of expanded contexts can be multiplied, in every case the interpretation of irony is fixed within a definite circle. It is possible to speak of the reciprocal effect of irony on its context and context on the per-

¹ D. C. Muecke, *Irony*, London 1978, p. 10.

² Muecke, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

³ W. C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago 1975, pp. 91–92.

ception of irony. The inference about the context enables the reader to recognize the opposite meanings. In the neutral context a message will not be marked as ironical.

Also Cleanth Brooks in his discussion of irony as a principle of structure stresses the importance of the context and its pressure on the modification of meaning in a literary work. What he characterizes as ironical is "the *obvious* warping of a statement by the context".⁴ However, he refuses to specify to what kind of context a literary work must be referred in reconstructing its meaning.

Contexts operating in literature can be multiple: linguistic, stylistic, generic, historical, social, political, moral, ethical, etc. Duplicity is the nature of these contexts manifested in a fictional work: they are created within imaginary worlds but, at the same time, they mean "through" reality and in relation to it. Therefore it is useful to distinguish the "internal" literary context as constituted by the relationships among particular elements of the text from the extra-literary contexts in which the text was written and read, and which may be sometimes needed for interpretation. According to Booth

[...] we cannot know in advance which of many contextual matters will be relevant—other parts of the work itself, knowledge about the author's life and times, or the reader's deepest convictions about what authors are likely to say in earnest. Even those of us who believe that „the text” is always in some sense final arbiter of meanings will find ourselves using many contexts that according to some critical theories e.g. the "New Critisc" —E.C.-K. are extrinsic.⁵

Contemporary American criticism of the novel, when justifying the growth of tendencies to ironic presentation in modern fiction, tends to overrate the significance of the extra-literary contexts. It acknowledges irony as the strategy used by the writer under the pressure of absurdities of our time. The reversal of the slogan "technology for man" into "man for technology", man waging wars for the ideas he no longer believes, the breakdown of a common symbolism, the language corrupted and drained by the mass-media—the world's decadence finds its epitome in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, Joseph Heller, John Hawkes and many others. As Ihab A. Hassan writes:

Irony selects from the tragic situation the element of absurdity, the demonic vision, the sense of isolation. [...] It is pre-eminently suited to the needs of the present situation. Irony, in fact, is the basic principle of the form which dominates our fiction. It is the literary correlative of the existential ethic; it implies distance, ambiguity, the interplay of views [...] Irony is all certainty we can allow ourselves where uncertainties prevail.⁶

Irony, however, has been universally present in any „critically” oriented literature. It emerges as the art's response to the present age. The more the epoch marked with evil, fragmentation, confusion, controversy—the more immediate

⁴ C. Brooks, *Irony as a Principle of Structure*, [in:] *Literary Opinion in America*, Massachusetts 1968, cf. pp. 720–741.

⁵ Booth, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁶ I. H. Hassan, *The Character of Post-War Fiction in America*, [in:] *On Contemporary Literature*, ed. R. Kostelanetz, New York 1964, p. 43.

and stronger the ironic attitude of "fighting" literature. Discontent with the social world is translated by the ironist into literary visions of comic nihilism, exhaustion, absurdity, nightmare. The clash of illusion and reality, which becomes a part of our common experience, is reflected in the wide spectrum of self-defensive, consciously-escapist or indicting-satirical fiction—all informed by the sense of irony.

To view irony in the novel as an adequate mode of expression pre-conditioned by the extra-literary determinants is one of the possible ways of approaching the problem. However, neither the extra-literary perspective nor the „internal" literary one may contribute to our better understanding of irony as a factor stimulating the generic development of the novel. The former is often used in practical and comparative criticism interested in the history of ideas and attitudes or placing a given work in the historical-literary context whereas the latter enables the critic to stay within one work in order to examine the handling of irony, its stylistic consequences, the balance among particular elements of the text. If we attempt to investigate the ironic nature of the genre, we shall have to introduce another perspective which may be called the "meta-literary" context. It must be distinguished from the historical-literary context which is objective and exists independently of the work itself. The "meta" context in a literary work refers to the participation in the historical-literary tradition not as the critics see it, but as seen by the author himself and revealed in his work. In other words, the "meta" level is constituted by reflection on the processes of literary production and communication interiorized in the novel.

What we mean by the potentially "ironical" situation of the novel is the author's awareness that his work circulates within the changeable historical-literary and communicative perspective. The "meta" textual reflection may be revealed in the moments when the characters within a work begin to comment on, or be aware of, the fiction they are in. Thus the author's ironic attitude toward the process of "making" literature becomes transparent. Since every literary work can be treated as a final product of the author's reflection about his own creative process, we can assume the presence of the "meta" level in every work. Then we could say that every novel includes its own methodology. However, the methodological reflection in the novel is very rarely presented in a discursive form. The impulse toward storytelling dominates the novel and the methodological discourse the author holds with himself and with literary tradition can be inferred from the way the story is told. Considering the status of the novel, E. Szary-Matywiecka has come to the conclusion that the "meta" level is potentially suggested within the text and can be realized due to the critical activity of the reader.⁷ At any rate, it must be remembered that it is always subordinated and regulated by the primary aspect of the novel, i.e. telling the story.

Taking into account the structure of the novel, irony at the "meta" level may be turned against each of the meaningful elements of this structure. In the com-

⁷ E. Szary-Matywiecka, *Książka—powieść—autotematyzm*, Wrocław 1979, p. 56.

municative perspective, irony may operate on the axis between the author and the implied reader. It may function as a means of selecting the readers: the author expects his reader to grasp the clues, to decipher the allusions, he requires of the reader the participation in a "secret communion".⁸ For example, the ironic mechanism in John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* is based on the recurrent rhythm of metamorphoses. The author makes the implied reader anticipate that each newly introduced character will turn out to be Burlingame or Joan Toast, each newly discovered land—Maryland, etc. Those potential readers who decipher the mechanism of the novel will share in a "secret communion" with the author. Others will be constantly surprised and may suspect the author of ridiculing them. Thus irony may have a stimulating function; it helps to manipulate the distance on the part of the reader. Irony may be also employed by the writer as a self-defensive mechanism against the presumed expectations of the reader which are restrictive to his creative freedom (a typical example of the author's ironic disregard for normative expectations of the reader is *Mein Name sei Gantenbein...* by Max Frisch, where the reader is unable to determine the characters' identity or arrange fragmentary plots, the fictional reality being systematically decomposed by the author). Finally, the author may want the reader to be conscious of the anxieties involved in the condition of writing or to remind him that the presented reality is always a fiction. It may be done by ostentatious narrators of the traditional realistic novel (e.g. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*) or, in a more sophisticated way, by incorporating reflection on the novel's composition (as in Gide's *The Counterfeiters* or Huxley's *Point Counter Point*). In all these cases irony functions as a device verifying the reader's reception of the novel.

The ironic awareness of the writer may be also revealed in the historical-literary perspective. Here irony may apply to the past modes of relationship with the reader (the choice of the appropriate type of narrator) or the traditional conventions of writing (certain narrative schemes, characterization, setting). An example may be *The Sot-Weed Factor* exaggerating the formula of the 18th-century English novel or *The Lime Twig* by John Hawkes employing the conventional scheme of the detective story in order to discredit fictional realism. Irony may refer directly to particular writers or works representative of past literature (e.g. in the form of "idiographic" parody as in Joyce's *Ulysses*). The realization of the power of traditions and conventions existing in history may produce in the author an ironic sense that everything he writes is "second-hand" literature. The critical function of irony, which is always based on the conscious recognition of the limits of the genre, leads to the problems of innovation and, consequently, to the development of the novel's form. Thus in irony we can see an element of self-interpretation by the writer offered within the text.

⁸ Cf W. C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago 1973, p. 304 "Whenever an author conveys to his reader an unspoken point, he creates a sense of collusion against all those [...] who do not get that point. Irony is always thus in part a device for excluding as well as for including, and those who are included, those who happen to have the necessary information to grasp the irony, cannot but derive at least part of their pleasure from a sense that others are excluded".

From its very beginnings, the novel has been disposed to become the genre *par excellence* ironic. Certain factors determining its development could be seen as responsible for the escalation of the ironic attitude of the novel toward its own status. The whole history of the novel: its coming to greater awareness of itself, unmasking of inherent contradictions, growing reflectiveness at the "meta" level—all these can be treated as the manifestation of ontological irony of the novel. Among the conditions contributing to it the following can be mentioned:

1) The very nature of the novel is ambiguous: it is a concrete physical "phenomenon" (static and finite) and, at the same time, it is a "process" (dynamic), a passage of experience, its form is gradually exposed to us. It is the thing communicated and the communication itself.

2) The intricate nature of the novel results from the conflict between its narrative indirectness and the immediacy of experience to which it often aspires. Modern novel tends to eliminate the fallacy of directness and gives unequivocal signals of the mediated narrative.

3) In the historical-literary process it developed out of *epos* which belonged to the culture of oral transmission. The novel, especially in its earlier forms, inherited a tendency to simulate the oral communication. It was incompatible with the actual "writing-reading" situation. Paradoxically, the novel's early efforts to imitate the situation of "telling" in a realistic way resulted in anachronisms and artificiality of presentation. Later development can be seen as giving up a "phonematic" nature and revealing a "graphemic" nature of the novel (E. Szary-Matywiecka).⁹

4) The novel is always a mystification: it creates an illusion of life. Its ambitions are mimetic but, simultaneously, it is aware of its limitations (a literal transcript of life is impossible). The case of the novel is the best illustration of the conflict between life and art.

5) The first novelists were aware of the "lower" status of the novel among other literary forms. They were more like „makers" of the narrative—inspiration and enthusiasm were cooled by the industrious process of composition. It implied a greater distance of the author toward his work.

6) The ambivalent relationship between the author and the reader may lead to a potential conflict between the author's expectations and their realization on the part of the reader. The reader may misunderstand the author's intentions or totally escape his control. The seeds of such conflict are already visible in Cervantes's *Don Quixote* where the protagonist may be interpreted either as a fool or a hero. The subjective position of the author and the reader may be incongruous when the author tries to reinforce norms and values on which the reader's judgement should be based. On the other hand, the author may tend to escape his being classified by the reader and deliberately confuse him.

7) Moreover, the flourishing of the novel coincided with the spread of mass-culture. The print has facilitated the access to the novel and accelerated its

⁹ Szary-Matywiecka, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–76.

development to a degree never seen before in the history of literature. The novelist becomes ironically aware of his role as a contemporary mythographer for the anonymous mass-reader.

The progressive movement toward greater self-consciousness of the artist has become visible since the early Romantic period. Irony emerges as a part of the Romantic protest and individual rebellion against society and its conventionalized art. It is a rejection of narrow ideals of the Enlightenment's "finished and completed" art. The Romantic artist's isolation and the problems of his creative freedom have found their theoretical reflection in the concept of Romantic irony.

Working under the influence of Fichte's subjective idealism, Friedrich Schlegel in his early writings makes a transposition of irony as a philosophical category into aesthetic grounds. In the 42. *Lyceum Fragment* he identifies irony with the "transcendental buffoonery" of the artist who deliberately violates the illusion in a literary work of art. Referring to the Italian *commedia dell' arte*, he sees in irony the manifestation of the artist's free fancy in breaking up the established literary order so as to express his "subjective I".¹⁰ Irony is recognized here as the basic principle of artistic creativity. In the 108. *Lyceum Fragment* Schlegel enumerates the inner components and characteristics of irony: the dialectic of playfulness and seriousness, the unity of truthfulness and pretence, the reconciliation of that which is relative with that which is definite.¹¹ To Schlegel, irony means the recognition of the fundamental incongruities of art and life, of the form and the matter, of the artist's necessity and inability to fully express his mind.¹² The sphere of paradox, the sphere of coincidence of insoluble contradictions is where irony can operate in the realm of art.¹³ Irony is the only way for the individual to triumph over the contradictions inherent in the very fact of being an artist.¹⁴ It reveals an intimate link between the writer and his work in which he desires to express his unrestrained subjectivity being conscious, at the same time, of his limitations. Thus Schlegel postulates self-restraint resulting from the ironic awareness of the artist whose activity is understood in terms of the dialectic of self-destruction and self-creation.¹⁵

¹⁰ All quotations from Schlegel after I. Strohschneider-Kohrs, *Die romantische Ironie in Theorie und Gestaltung*, Tübingen 1960, p. 18.

¹¹ "...in der Ironie soll 'alles Scherz und alles Ernst seyn' ...in der Ironie soll 'alles treuherzig offen, und alles tief verstellt' sein. 'Sie entspringt aus der Vereinigung von Lebenskunstsinn und wissenschaftlichen Geist, aus dem Zusammentreffen vollendeter Naturphilosophie und vollendeter Kunstphilosophie'" (Strohschneider-Kohrs, *op. cit.*, p. 21).

¹² "...sie [die Ironie] enthält und erregt ein Gefühl der Unmöglichkeit und Nothwendigkeit einer vollständigen Mittheilung." Strohschneider-Kohrs, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹³ Strohschneider-Kohrs, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹⁴ "Sie [die Ironie] ist die freyeste aller Lizenzen, denn durch sie setzt man sich über sich selbst weg." Strohschneider-Kohrs, *op. cit.* p. 22.

¹⁵ "Sinn ist Selbstbeschränkung also ein Resultat von Selbstschöpfung und Selbstvernichtung." Strohschneider-Kohrs, *op. cit.*, p. 28, *

The speculations of Schlegel are highly subjectivist concepts of irony. On the other hand, Jean Paul and Schelling emphasize the importance of objectivity in irony. In *Vorschule der Ästhetik* Jean Paul defines irony as serious pretence requiring the reason, continuous restraint and objectification.¹⁶ It implies a cool, bitter, dispassionate attitude on the part of the writer. According to Jean Paul, Swift is the master of this type of irony. Similarly, Schelling sees in irony the elevation of the artist, his reasonable selfrestraint and detachment from his own work. He regards *epos* and the novel—due to their potential objectivity—as the most appropriate forms for irony. The novelist's distance, or even his "indifference" to his characters, can be transformed into an ironic attitude toward his own work.¹⁷ Similar concepts of Romantic irony are echoed in artistic theory and practice of Flaubert, Henry James, Joyce and, particularly, Thomas Mann to whom „objectivity is irony and the spirit of epic art is the spirit of irony”.¹⁸

The significance of Romantic irony lies in the fact that the author's consciousness at the "meta-literary" level has been awakened and, consequently, absorbed into the work itself. The results of this process are discernible in the novel's search for the new techniques and modes of expression. The novel inherits the view of irony as a dialectic interplay of subjectivity and objectivity, which seems to illustrate the very nature of the novel.

As Artur Sandauer points, the rapid evolution of the narrative art taking place in the nineteenth and in the twentieth century can be associated with the assimilation of the spirit of Romantic irony.¹⁹ The writer becomes aware of his ironic position of a fully-conscious fabulator and gradually incorporates this awareness into the novel. The first signals of such awareness can be found as early as in Fielding's or Thackeray's works, with the author deliberately destroying the illusion of objectivity, making ironic comments on characters and digressing from the story. The revelation of the act of inventing the story, the unmasking of its fictional character shifted the main interest from the story itself to the process of its telling. The omniscient author gives up his privileges and relinquishes his hold of the story for the benefit of the fictional narrator. Thus "fictionalization" enters into the sphere of narration. The novel renounces its first naive notions of *mimesis* and exposes its fictional structure. Nevertheless, by promoting the narrator whose knowledge is limited and the presentation subjective, the novel approaches psychological truths about human imperfect perception. In this respect, it has moved closer to realism and life than was ever managed by illusory

¹⁶ Strohschneider-Kohrs, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

¹⁷ „... der Dichter darf sich daher nicht zu streng an den Helden binden, und noch viel weniger alles in Buch ihm gleichsam unterwerfen. Die Gleichgütigkeit darf so weit gehen, dass sie sogar in Ironie gegen den Helden übergehen kann, da Ironie die einzige Form ist, in der das, was vom Subjekt ausgeht oder ausgehen muss, sich am Bestimmtesten wieder von ihm ablöst und objektiv wird” form *Schriften zur Philosophie der Kunst* [in:] Strohschneider-Kohrs, *op. cit.*, pp. 95—96.

¹⁸ T. Mann, *Sztuka powieści*, [in:] *Eseje*, Warszawa 1960, p. 371.

¹⁹ A. Sandauer, *O ewolucji sztuki narracyjnej w XX wieku*, [in:] *Liryka i logika*, Warszawa 1969, p. 67.

and pictorial realism of earlier fiction. The author attempts to render the genuine narration rather than a genuine story. The focus of his attention is on bringing the process of telling into concrete existence, on making it complex and psychologically accurate. At the same time, the inauthenticity of the story becomes more and more explicit.

In *Madame Bovary* Flaubert openly admits fictitiousness of his story and preserves a cool, impassionate distance to it. Henry James's stories are always told from the point of view of one or even more characters whom he calls "reflectors". Dostoevsky chooses for his narrators such men whose knowledge about the story being conveyed is fallible and fragmentary. The author withdraws his voice from the novel and ironically stands apart. However, keeping himself aloof and detached, he develops the power to manipulate his reader, demanding from him constant cooperation in the course of reading. Creating the so-called "unreliable" narrators (the term we owe to W. C. Booth),²⁰ the novelists exhibit their ironic awareness of the relative nature of any fictional account.

After the first attempts to reject the conventional illusionistic devices, the novel puts forth its energies to develop a kind of epistemological realism. It explores the possibilities of recording the individual's way of perception. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is a reassessment of the novel's means of articulation. Starting from the concept of the point of view, the novelists work out the methods of interior monologue and stream of consciousness, which separate the novel from an externally defined world and from preterite narration. Conrad, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Faulkner or even the French writers of *roman nouveau* convey consciousness with greater fidelity to the processes of knowing and perception. The formal techniques are not simply a means of handling the content, but to some extent the form *becomes* the content. Thus realization of the contradictions undermining the 19th-century narrative techniques has provoked the novel's self-verification.

The 20th-century novel shows the new concern with artistic consciousness. Its obsessions with the complexities of its own form grow. A tendency to self-analytical presentation leads to creating forms which turn in upon themselves and show the process of making of the work in hand. This type of novel is called "autothematic" by Artur Sandauer.²¹ Romantic irony, understood as a degree of the writer's self-consciousness of his creative power, here is translated into the method of composition. Apart from the themes offered by the story, the novel suggests to explore the theme of the art of the novel itself.

The Counterfeiters (*Les Faux-Monnayeurs*) by André Gide is the novel deliberately playing on its own composition. It has a Chinese box structure: it contains a story about a group of boys and the problems of their adolescence, which is accompanied by a diary concurrently kept by one of the characters, a novelist called Eduard. He is writing a novel and puts in his diary the samples of his materials and his reflections on the nature of fiction. Eduard's novel parallels

²⁰ Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Cf Chapters VII, X, XII.

²¹ Sandauer, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

the main story, even its title is identical. But it may be also read as a metaphor reflecting the novel's making by Gide who, additionally, published in the same volume the fragments of his own journal connected with *The Counterfeiters*. So, the reader is involved in a double process: he can see how the novel creates its world but, at the same time, how the novel itself is being created. Such novels as Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, Butor's *La Modification* or Nabokov's *Pale Fire* can be included in the same "autothematic" category.

The "autothematic" novel carries on the aesthetic and philosophical debate initiated by the great classics of the ironic literary self-consciousness—Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Thomas Mann. They brought into their works the great theme of "the portrait of the artist", the theme which has become recurrent ever since. Its different aspects and variations have been realized by such writers as Aldous Huxley in *Point Counter Point*, Evelyn Waugh in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* or John Barth in *The Sot-Weed Factor*.

The "autothematic" poetics may be seen as one of many symptoms of the novel's transition from the mimetic to the autotelic model of literature. It gradually abandons the ideals of imitating and representing life and more often emphasizes itself as a meaningful structure drawing attention to its self-assertive rights. The irony inspiring this type of novel is very perverse and sophisticated. It resembles the intellectual game carefully planned by the writer-ironist who exposes his fictive machinery and, simultaneously, tries to catch his reader in a trap. The reader-ironist must keep a distance in order to re-create the structure according to the rules imposed by the novelist. Otherwise he will be mystified and confused by the writer's tricks. The naive reader cannot be a partner in this game.

In case of the "autothematic" novel, the "meta" level is consciously actualized within a literary work and constitutes another contextual circle in which the whole novel is embedded. The reflection on the creative process occurs simultaneously with the emergence of the fictional world. It is unequivocally suggested by the novel's stratified structure. The reader is encouraged to enter into the very heart of the dilemma encountered by the writer trying to transform his concepts into concrete shape. Thus he participates in a dialogue the writer holds with himself, in which the ambiguous status of the fictional world is revealed. Objectivity, whether desired by the writer or pursued by the reader who tends to read the novel in terms of his life experience, is discredited as unattainable when confronted with constant working of the writer's subjectivity which animates that world. This juxtaposition communicated within the text produces the effect of ironic self-awareness.

Actually, the "autothematic" novel may be called the anatomy of novel and its making. It unveils the contradictions underlying the writing of fiction and integrates them into its structure. The situation of the "autothematic" novel epitomizes the conflict in which the novel has always been involved. Viewed from the wide historical-literary perspective, the novel's development can be characterized as the dialectic struggle of two antagonistic but, at the same time, complementary impulses: to express the objective and the subjective. Permanent

dissatisfaction with the attempts to reconcile these two contradictory tendencies leads to the negation of either of them. It seems possible to draw a line of the novel's expansion as it bifurcates in two opposite directions: on the one hand, the novel tends to eliminate the author's subjectivity and to present fragments of reality in a cool, detached manner; on the other hand, the novel aims at presenting the immanent worlds of the author. The former orientation is more or less consequently realized in the naturalistic literature and, derived from it, behaviouristic novel, or in the "novel of fact" which is so popular nowadays. The latter trend is exemplified by different forms, varying from the symbolic visions of the subconscious and the surrealist poetics to the "pure" fiction where the author's imagination travels to mythical or fairy lands or creates its own, seemingly ahistorical, worlds.

Thus the contemporary novel is polarized between the two narrative extremes: it ranges from a documentary record (as can be found in Truman Capote, Mary McCarthy, Norman Mailer or in various types of autobiography) to a play on imagination (as in Tolkien's fabulous cycles or in the kind of narrative represented by Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth or Thomas Pynchon, which Robert Scholes calls "fabulation"²²). Of these two trends, "fabulation" seems to be the most challenging departure from the traditional path of realistic fiction. It demonstrates new assumptions concerning the novel's status as recognized by the generation of novelists in the 60th and in the 70th. Their activity is marked by the ironic awareness of "exhaustion" of certain possibilities of the novel. In order to escape the limitations imposed by the history of the genre, they incorporate a mixture of various modes: mythic, allegorical, romantic; they exhibit a great ingeniousness in plotting and manipulating the meanings, which amounts to self-indulgent excess and displays of stylistic and technical virtuosity; finally, they show a tendency to draw inspiration from second-rate literary sources, like science-fiction, sensational stories or pornography.

This iconoclastic attitude may be justified by the present-day situation of culture which has become a conglomerate of radically diversified artistic forms and values. On the one hand, the writer is influenced by mass-media (film, television, press) distributing improbable quantities of information and making a competition difficult for the novel. Moreover, he lives surrounded by redundancy of artifacts. It is a "tragic flaw" of our times in which technology enables man to have access and to easily store works of art produced in all different epochs and cultures. There are too many stimuli affecting contemporary writers, too many models imprinted in their consciousness. No wonder then, that to be able to cope with this historical burden many of them assume the ironic distance toward history and often resort to parody.

It is worth mentioning, that the problem of parody and pastiche occupies an important place in the history of fiction. It may throw some additional light on our presentation of the novel's development as inspired by the spirit of irony.

²² Cf R. Scholes, *The Fabulators*, Oxford 1967.

Existing in a given historical-literary context, the novel has frequently responded to its traditions in a critical way. It has been engaged in a dialogue of "styles" and "conventions" since the early stage. Cervantes parodying the chivalric romances in *Don Quixote*, Fielding parodying Richardson in *Joseph Andrews*, Jane Austen mocking the gothic novel in *Northanger Abbey* the novel seems to be pre-eminently suited to adopt the parodic mode. This feature may partially account for the novel's constant revival and generic transformations. As Victor Shklovsky observes formulating the concept which he calls *ostranienije* ("defamiliarization"), the novelist, by means of different techniques and styles, deliberately makes familiar things seem strange so as to abolish the automatization of perception.²³ These devices of defamiliarization gradually turn into conventions, which are then exaggerated and parodied by other writers displaying their fictive character. Thus the techniques of defamiliarization are applied to art itself and, to use Robert Scholes's commentary on Shklovsky's concept,

Fiction in particular can be seen as a dialectic of defamiliarization in which new techniques of representation ultimately generate countertechniques which expose them to ridicule. And this dialectic is at the centre of the history of fiction.²⁴

Similarly, Boris Eichenbaum interpretes degeneration of genres into comic and parodic forms as an evolutionary law: serious attitudes give way to irony, pleasantry, pastiche.²⁵ It should not be treated as a kind of autodestructive mechanism but, on the contrary, it produces the regeneration of the genre which finds new possibilities and new forms.

Both parody and irony originate from the writer's intercourse with the literary tradition. However, if earlier they were used as satirical tools against the exploited conventions, it seems that nowadays the novel advances into the ironic position for more complex reasons. Again, it is necessary to allude to our all-inclusive culture which finds itself in a distorted and indiscriminate state. The accumulation of factual and theoretical information makes it more and more difficult to cherish any fixed views on history. The world of reality and history itself is often identified with a collection of many fictions. These changed attitudes to history may be best illustrated by a new formula of historical novel which creates fantastic histories of people and worlds that have never existed. D'Ormeson, Borges and Parnicki can be mentioned among the creators of this kind of historical fiction.

As it was stated above, the process of intensifying the fictive aspect of literature is especially visible in the novel of fabulation. The accomplishment of John Barth bears witness to the recent tendencies to increase the novel's ironic selfawareness. *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Giles Goat-Boy* and *Letters* are creations of a modern

²³ After K. Pomorska, *Russian Formalist Theory and Its Poetic Ambience*, Mouton 1968, pp. 35—36.

²⁴ R. Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature*, London 1979, p. 85.

²⁵ Cf B. Eichenbaum, *O Henry and the Theory of Short Story*, after Scholes, *op. cit.*, pp. 87—88.

demiurge trying to get to grips with the whole historical, literary, mythological knowledge which constitutes to him an exciting but somewhat burdensome heritage. He confronts the problem of escalation of the novel's self-consciousness and must find a way to avoid being paralysed by his own knowledge.²⁶ Barth inclines to the thesis that literature has exhausted certain possibilities and accepts "the tradition of rebelling against Tradition".²⁷ It seems that erudition can become a prison, that it can impede the writer's efforts to produce any new senses. The only escape from it is through irony and parody. However, he does not aim at reproducing and satirizing overused fictional conventions but makes the ironic comment on the genre and history of the novel and on the institution of the author whose predicament is to "know too much". Thus he characterizes *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy* as "novels which imitate the form of Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author".²⁸ Following Borges, whom he greatly admires, Barth is not bound to any tradition but *creates* his own tradition: everything seems to come in quotation marks with its own built-in ironies. His attitude to history might be called "ironic neo-historicism": he lavishly employs various stylistics and mythologies, parodies old-fashioned devices of the picaresque fiction, absurdly uses the elements and patterns traditionally marked with significance. This type of creative activity brings back to mind the rebellious spirit of Romantic irony. Barth is the artist assuming the absolute freedom of choice. He grants himself full potentiality of doing the most improbable juggling with his work. He plays with the story transforming it into a puzzle or an anecdote and often creates a story within a story, so that they function like a system of mirrors. The example of Barth explains how fiction climbs up to the higher levels of sophistication and becomes an aesthetic game pleasurable for those who can grasp its ironies.

IRONIA A POWIEŚĆ

STRESZCZENIE

Narodziny każdej powieści można traktować jako podjęcie przez twórcę na nowo dialogu z historią i możliwościami gatunku. Refleksja autora nad problemami produkcji i komunikacji literackiej zawarta w samym dziele pozwala mówić o ujawnianiu się w nim kontekstu metaliterackiego. Operowanie ironią na poziomie meta odgrywa stymulującą rolę w rozwoju powieści. Eskalacja ironicznego stosunku wobec przeszłości i konwencji gatunkowych jest wyrazem rosnącej samoświadomości powieściopisarza. W tym sensie powieść wykazuje związek z tradycją ironii romantycznej jako uświadomienie sobie elementarnych sprzeczności leżących u podstaw każdego zamierzenia twórczego, każdej próby „obiektywizacji tego, co subiektywne”.

²⁶ J. Barth interviewed by J. D. Bellamy, [in:] *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers*, Univ. of Illinois 1975, p. 13.

²⁷ J. Barth, *Literature of Exhaustion*, [in:] *The Novel Today*, Fontana Books 1977, p. 70.

²⁸ Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

Dialektyka obiektywności i subiektywności wskazuje na ironię statusu ontologicznego powieści, względność samej jej natury. Cały rozwój powieści można przedstawić jako kolejne próby przezwycięzania sprzeczności wynikających ze sztuczności stosowanych technik pisarskich i ograniczeń konwencji. Dążenie do innowacji i eksperymentów formalnych, świadomą eksploatację pojemności gatunku, poszukiwanie samowiedzy można więc naświetlić jako ironiczną postawę pisarza wobec uprawianego gatunku.

Przerost samoświadomości prowadzi do sformułowania tezy o wyczerpaniu możliwości gatunku (John Barth). Jest to jednak przewrotne twierdzenie inspirowane duchem ironii — podobnie jak cała powieść postmodernistyczna, która oferuje ogromne bogactwo form i stylistyk.