



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

On the Roots of Romantic Irony and the Pleasure of Being (Mis)understood

Hay , K.

DOI

[10.1515/humaff-2023-0084](https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2023-0084)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Human Affairs

License

CC BY

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hay , K. (2023). On the Roots of Romantic Irony and the Pleasure of Being (Mis)understood. *Human Affairs*, 33(4), 428-438. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2023-0084>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Research Article

Katia Hay*

On the Roots of Romantic Irony and the Pleasure of Being (Mis)understood

<https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2023-0084>

Received July 6, 2023; accepted September 26, 2023

Abstract: The aim of this paper is twofold. In the first instance it is an attempt to offer a new perspective from which to reflect on the meaning and philosophical presuppositions of Friedrich Schlegel's defence and use of (romantic) irony, as well as other related notions: humour, wit, and other comic devices. I propose to situate this perspective within a reevaluation of pleasure and joy. To do this *in a new way* (although not in opposition to authors such as Manfred Frank, Elizabeth Millan-Zaibert, or Gary Handwerk), I refer to one of Schlegel's earliest texts devoted to *The Aesthetic Value of Greek Comedy* from 1794. In addition, this paper questions the extent to which Schlegel's position is tenable in the aftermath of the 'death of God'. For this, I reflect briefly on the ways in which Nietzsche's writings and notion of life-affirmation respond to Schlegel's vindication of romantic irony.

Keywords: romantic irony; joy; pleasure; Schlegel; Nietzsche; Romanticism

*Joy is good in itself [...] it is the specific,
natural and original state of man's higher nature*
F. Schlegel

To Lore Hühn, with gratitude.

1 The Unconditional Value of Joy: Towards the Roots of (Romantic) Irony

In an aphorism in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche makes the astonishing remark that it is *thanks to Aristophanes* that one can "*forgive everything Hellenic for having existed [dem ganzen Griechenthum verzeiht]*", to which he adds: "provided

*Corresponding author: Katia Hay, Faculty of Humanities, Postbus 94201, 1091 GE Amsterdam, Netherlands, E-mail: k.d.hay.rodgers@uva.nl

that one has understood in its full profundity *all* that needs to be forgiven and transfigured here” (KSA, 5.47). To confirm that his insight is sound, Nietzsche recalls that a volume by Aristophanes (and no ‘Bible’) was found under the pillow of Plato’s deathbed (KSA, 5.47).¹ We will come back to this aphorism and the meaning these remarks have in the context of Nietzsche’s philosophical project. For now, what is important to note is the indisputable value that is granted to the figure of Aristophanes, and the way in which he is presented as embodying a “free, free-spirited thought,” in crass contrast to a (German) style of thinking and writing that is “ponderous, stodgy, ceremoniously clumsy, all long-winded and boring” (KSA 5.47). To be sure, this positive appreciation of Aristophanes’ works is not new. But it is also not as longstanding or self-evident as Nietzsche might be suggesting (from Plato on). In fact, as Martin Holtermann points out in his book on the reception of Aristophanes in 19th century Germany, it was a very young Friedrich Schlegel, with his groundbreaking essay *On the Aesthetic Value of Greek Comedy* from 1794,² who first re-discovered Aristophanes, and radically revised the canon (Holtermann, 2004, p. 92f.), initiating what Stephan Kraft later called a veritable “aesthetic rescue” (Kraft, 2012, p. 69). One might say, then, that this turn to Aristophanes is actually quite a ‘romantic’ move – which inevitably leads us to re-question Nietzsche’s relation to (and more specifically his fierce critique of) German Romanticism.³ One of the aims of this paper will be to look into this complex relation. But before doing so, it is important to determine what Schlegel appreciates about Aristophanes’ comedies, and how this might enable us to understand anew his own philosophical position and his vindication of romantic irony and wit. For this, I focus on Schlegel’s essay from 1794.

Contrary to the idea that, because it belongs to the so called ‘classical phase’, it is “marked by an interest in philological studies of the ancient Greeks” and therefore not yet infused by the ideas from the ‘romantic phase’ (Millán-Zaibert, 2007, p. 11), and contrary to the idea that Schlegel began writing philosophy only in the late 1790s, I read this essay as a key text for understanding the philosophical meaning of Schlegel’s ‘romantic irony’ as well as his commitment to a fragmentary and witty style. Thus, I argue that by turning to Aristophanes’ plays, by examining the mindset and socio-political circumstances that underlay and made possible such poetic

1 The first reference where we find to this comes from Olympiodorus’s biography.

2 ‘Vom aesthetischen Wert der Griechischen Komödie’ (KSA, vol 1, pp. 9–15). All translations from this essay are mine.

3 Clear instances of Nietzsche’s criticism of Romanticism can be found in *Gay Science* 370, and in his *Attempt at Self-Criticism* in the late preface to the *Birth of Tragedy* (both written around the time he was writing *Beyond Good and Evil*). However, Nietzsche’s relation to Romanticism, including to Early German Romanticism is not straightforward, and has been object of much debate. Some works addressing this include (Behler, 1975; Norman, 2002). Although both address the relation between Nietzsche and Schlegel through irony, neither of them focus on joy and pleasure.

creation, Schlegel was not *only* revealing or reconstructing aspects of the Ancient Greek ‘worldview’, so as to help readers appreciate a beauty that their moral and aesthetic sensibilities had not previously allowed them to see.⁴ And he was also not *only* trying to extract from it the necessary *ingredients* required to produce a ‘proper’ and ‘pure’ comedy, as Kraft has emphasized (2012). But rather, similar to Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, in this short essay, Schlegel was presenting and, in a way, laying the ground for the development of his own particular philosophical position. Underlying this position is a critique of the present (its taste and its values) in the form of an open declaration of the unconditional value of joy and what he calls the *Lebenskraft* or vital-force, both of which he associates here with the figure of *Bacchus* celebrated in Attic Comedy.

In this sense, I agree with Dalia Nassar who, following Manfred Frank, problematizes postmodern readings of Schlegel’s texts, but also emphasizes that Schlegel must be read ‘beyond’ his critique of systematic knowledge, and must be understood “in relation to his emphasis on history and historical knowledge, and his claim that philosophy must emerge from and in relation to life” (Nassar, 2015, p. 69). My claim, however, is that what we find in this particular text is essential for understanding the horizon from which Schlegel will develop his critical thought and style of writing. The question is, thus, not so much *whether* Schlegel uses irony to deny the possibility of attaining absolute knowledge in the form of a logico-centric, closed system (this, I do not question), but rather, my question is why irony, why wit, and not some other device? Are there perhaps different reasons for this? I believe that there are, and that taking seriously what Schlegel has to say in this early text on Attic Comedy about joy and pleasure, can help us bring new light to this.⁵

After briefly sketching how comedies have become unfree, burdened with shame and cautious of being offensive; after briefly presenting Old Greek Comedy as the only form of comedy that is ‘pure’, affirmative and not blemished with ‘tragic energy’; and after explaining how it must be understood in the context of the religious festivities devoted to *Bacchus* (“an image of vital-force [*Lebenskraft*] and

4 Schlegel’s argument is clear: “It is difficult not to do injustice to it [i.e. old Greek Comedy]; a complete knowledge of the Greeks is necessary only to understand it; and to separate its actual misdeeds [*Vergehungen*] from what offends only us requires a taste that is above all external influences and is directed to the Beautiful only” (KASA, vol. 1, p. 9). In his introduction to Aristophanes’ plays, Stephen Halliwell finds it necessary to explain how what ‘for us’ might seem rude or obscene needs to be seen as being part of the entire purpose of the festival: comedy was “an escape from the norms of shame and inhibition [...] a kind of collective psychological regression, breaking boundaries and inhibitions on sexual language and correctness in the public sphere [...]” (Halliwell, 1998, XIX).

5 In this sense, I am perhaps also closer to Maurice Blanchot who at least mentions the joyous element of irony (1983).

pleasure [*Genuss*]”, KASA, I, p. 9), Schlegel presents a number of thoughts that are no longer interpretative or philological, but instead are more like the sketch of a manifesto of his own philosophical starting point. One of the most significant statements that Schlegel makes here is that joy (*Freude*) is a “symbol of the good, and a beauty of nature” (KASA, I, p. 9). This is significant, because in saying this, Schlegel is asserting that joy is not only related to sensuality, to nature or the vital-force (*Lebenskraft*); but also to spirit, i.e. to ‘man’s higher nature’. As he later puts it: “Joy not only announces [*verkündigen*] life, but also soul” (KASA, I, p. 9). In fact, his claim is that, although on a purely animal or sensual level, pleasure is secondary to pain (“pure sensual joy is nothing but appeased pain” (KASA, I, p. 9)) in the case of the human soul, joy is prior to and more fundamental than pain. He writes: “[Joy] is the authentic, natural and original state of man’s higher nature” (KASA, I, p. 9). In this way Schlegel is clearly problematizing, if not contesting, the dominant modern view that understands pleasure as being derivative, i.e. as the absence of pain.⁶ And he also is polemicizing against the general Christian belief that it is through suffering (and not joy) that we come closer to God and His eternal grace.⁷ But what is more relevant for our analysis is to see how this informs Schlegel’s interest in Attic Comedy and comedy in general, and how it translates into his thought and writings.

In the first instance, what this means for Schlegel is that sensual joy is a manifestation, an expression of a deeper form of joy that we can only ever *aspire* to comprehend or attain. Schlegel relates this deeper joy to the utter pleasure (*völliger Genuss*) of the infinite Being. And hence, our ‘highest joy is’, according to Schlegel, ‘an image of the pleasure of the infinite Being [*des unendlichen Wesens*]’ (KASA, I, p. 10). In other words, Schlegel totally re-signifies the notion of joy and pleasure by making them point towards the unique mode of being of what we might call the absolute, the divine essence or as he puts it here the ‘infinite Being’ (similar perhaps to the idea that Schelling will develop in his *Ages of the World* regarding *Lauterkeit*, as a will that is completely satisfied). The feeling or experience of joy brings us closer to (the pleasure of) this being, it brings us closer to experiencing the unity and pure freedom

6 A common view among modern philosophers is that pain and pleasure are relative to each other. Kant famously argues in his *Anthropology* that ‘pain must always precede every enjoyment; pain is always first’ (Anth §60). (*Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* was first published in 1798, but the thought is arguably present in earlier works). For Kant, life is a constant antagonistic interplay between pain and pleasure, and pleasure is always related to overcoming pain. On the other hand, the idea that there is a connection between sensuous and inner or spiritual pleasure is also found in an early text by Friedrich Schiller, *Ueber den Zusammenhang der thierischen Natur des Menschen mit seiner geistigen* (1780), where he argues that bodily pleasure or health mirrors inner pleasure, and seems to suggest that certain spiritual attitudes can heal more than many medicines.

7 ‘For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory’ (King James Bible, Corinthians 4:17).

of this totality, this essence, where all differences are dissolved. Indeed, Schlegel stresses in different ways (anticipating also important themes in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*)⁸ how joy transcends all boundaries between individuals, how it brings us together and leads us to envision an infinite bond among all spirits (*Geister*). Joy is hence connected to total freedom and love ('Life and unrestricted joy mean love' (KASA, I, p. 9)). And most importantly, joy is not a privilege for the rich and educated, says Schlegel, but a 'holy attribute [*Eigentum*] of humanity' (KASA, I, p. 10).

This certainly explains the absolute and unique value that Schlegel places on joy, and why he says that the Greeks had touched upon a 'great truth' when they conceived of joy as being holy. But it also explains why it is that Schlegel places such emphasis on the fact that the joy that we derive from a work of art, such as a comedy, be 'pure', namely not because of some rigid idea about the need to maintain genres clearly distinct, but rather because it is in its purity and simplicity that (sensual) joy is closest to the absolute joy or utter pleasure (of the eternal being): "Pain may be a great effective medium for [expressing, KH] beauty, but joy is beautiful in itself. Beautiful joy is the highest object of the arts" (KASA, I, p. 10).⁹ From this point of view, it is not surprising that Attic Comedy is so important for Schlegel, for here he finds a representation that, in its sheer boldness, spontaneity and cheekiness, is 'naturally' beautiful and free, and hence is unique in its ability to express or transmit this 'beautiful joy'. But it is also because of this that Schlegel's text needs to be read not only as rescuing Attic Comedy, but as a manifesto for Comedy (and joy) *tout court*. Or as he would write later in his notes from 1799: "Every poem, every novel should be a *festive extravagance* [*festliche Verschwendung*], an Aristophanic comedy, and a game of chance [*Glücksspiel*] like tragedy" (KASA, V, p. 252, *Fragmente zur Literatur und Poesie* [155]).

In sum: we cannot understand Schlegel's writings without taking into consideration the way in which he is re-signifying pleasure and joy and why he does so. Not only his *Lucinde*, where Schlegel famously writes about the pleasure of pleasure,¹⁰ but also his use of irony in his more philosophical and critical texts, and in general his playful, fragmentary and witty style of writing (which is part and parcel of his reflections on art, poetry and philosophy) needs to be read in the light of this. Namely, as an attempt *also* to connect and re-instantiate that original, unconditional joy – which for Schlegel in any case is a signature of a spiritual, infinite, harmonious and total being.

⁸ In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche, still very much influenced by Schopenhauer, also relates the Dionysian to the idea of an absolute unity or dissolution of all beings, i.e. to the loss of individuality.

⁹ Schlegel's views on the purity of genres changes over time. Even in this same essay, which begins by stressing how comedy must be free from tragic energy, he writes: "[...] to give a definite answer to the question, as to whether or not the purity of the tragic and the comic is a condition for their perfection: that is a purely theoretical task and lies beyond the limits of this essay." (KASA, I, p. 150).

¹⁰ 'I didn't simply enjoy but felt and enjoyed the enjoyment itself.' (Schlegel, 1799, p. 44).

2 Romantic Irony and the Pleasure of Communication

Reading Schlegel's essay on Aristophanes as the effort to establish a starting point from which to develop a 'theory' of comedy,¹¹ however, is not as straightforward as it may seem. What Schlegel says that we must learn from Aristophanes' plays (e.g. 'beautiful joyfulness' and unrestricted, 'sublime freedom' (KASA, I, p. 11))¹² is not necessarily easy to translate into concrete writing techniques or stylistic devices. In fact, it is only when Schlegel discusses – not without irony – the “exquisite flaws [*vorzügliche Fehler*]” attributed to Aristophanes' comedies, that we get a more tangible idea of the traits and techniques that he has in mind as being constitutive of the new aesthetic ideal he is envisaging. There is one 'flaw' attributed to Aristophanes' plays that Schlegel unambiguously praises and re-evaluates as a quality; and this is the way in which Aristophanes “often interrupts the illusion [*Täuschung*]” of the play (KASA, I, p. 14). Schlegel mentions the *parabasis*, or intermezzos where the chorus directly addresses the public, but includes other forms of interruptions that bring the author or public in the spotlight, i.e. what we would now call the 'breaking of the fourth wall'. And against the idea that these interruptions 'destroy' the illusion of the play, he argues that these ruptures are able to bring the illusion itself to a

11 “Theatre [*Schauspiel*] must unify [*vereinigen*] dramatic perfection [*Vollkommenheit*] with the old joyfulness [*Fröhlichkeit*]; it must return to naturalness [*Natürlichkeit*] and come closer to freedom. If only some steps have been made in this direction, there is still hope for everything; and in this way there is no better guide [*Wegweiser*], no model is more accomplished than Old Greek Comedy” (KASA, I, p. 14). But Schlegel's text is not straightforward. In a sense, Schlegel ascribes an achievement to Aristophanes, which he then revokes, or re-assesses. He points towards an ideal in the past, which never really existed. As Kraft has pointed out, in his analysis of Greek Comedy Schlegel “postulates a time” in which comedies had not yet lost their “autonomy”, but this is a time *prior* to Aristophanes “for which there is no textual evidence” (Kraft, 2012, p. 74). Likewise, Schlegel also claims that the necessary ‘good taste’ for true comedy to flourish would only develop *after* Aristophanes' time. In other words: the propitious conditions for the conception of a beautiful comedy never existed.

12 In this text, Schlegel ascribes different meanings to the principle that art (and especially comedy) must be ‘free’. When he writes that “beautiful joy must be free, unconditionally free” (KASA, I, p. 11), he does so in the context of a discussion regarding how joy must be spontaneous and ‘natural’ in order to be truly beautiful. But he also describes freedom as the absence or dissolution of all “restraints [*Schranken*]”, so that freedom is related to the carnivalesque or the Dionysian festivals, and the task of comedy is to represent this freedom absolutely. But most significantly, freedom is related to the autonomy of art; i.e. to the idea that ‘beauty’, as he puts it, cannot depend on anything external to beauty. For sure, in the context of comedy especially, this also has political implications. For the relation between Romanticism and principle of the autonomy of art see Luhmann (1996).

higher level;¹³ they do not destroy but *stimulate*. Schlegel sees these techniques as being the result “of a lucid intention”, and the “bubbling fullness of life [*überschäumende Lebensfülle*]” (KASA, I, p. 14), and perhaps more significantly claims that this kind of stimulation is characteristic of life and of joy. So, in stimulating the audience, one could say, it awakens life and joy itself.

For sure, Schlegel’s notion of romantic irony can be easily related to his analysis of parabasis and other ‘interruptions’ in Attic Comedy (cf. Kraft, 2012, p. 76f.). The connection is made explicitly by Schlegel himself, who in his *Philosophical Fragments* writes that ‘[i]rony is a permanent parabasis’ (KASA, V, p. 28, [668]). Also, the idea of irony as ‘continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction’ (AF, p. 51), or the way Schlegel presents romantic poetry in the *Athenaeum Fragment* 116 as a constant hovering between creator and creation, and locates in this very movement or fluctuation the emergence of a myriad of new possibilities and connections.¹⁴ All these aspects of romantic poetry and irony are very close to what he has described and praised in Aristophanes’ “interruptions”. But, for the connection between (pure) comedy, and (romantic) irony to be truly significant, and not merely formal, we must take into account what is arguably most important for Schlegel about (pure) comedy. And this is not simply the fact that it creates a hovering or playful movement between illusion and reality, but more importantly it is about the pleasure and joy it evokes; the sense of unity and wholeness that the use of these techniques allows us to experience. For, as we have seen, this joy is what brings us closer to a higher form of joy that is directly bound up with what we have referred to as the absolute, and Schlegel calls the infinite being, and which involves the dissolution of all differences. It is about connecting with a sense of totality that is in itself a source of pleasure and joy.¹⁵

From this point of view, if, as Manfred Frank (1997) or Elizabet Millan-Zaibert (2007) have argued at length, romantic irony is a means to *hint* or point towards the absolute, to bring us closer to it, it is not only because it is able to say and un-say, claim and un-claim, possess and dis-possess and in doing this remains true to the unattainability of the absolute, but *also* because it enables us – through writing and reflection – to come closer to a sense of totality and connectedness of everything with

13 Ludwig Tieck’s *Puss in Boots*, where the constant disruptions of the illusion intensify the illusion itself, would seem to be a great example, but Schlegel himself apparently thought “it was not rich enough, not cheeky enough and not poetic enough” –quoted in Zeydel (1928, p. 22).

14 “[Romantic poetry can, KH] more than any other form, hover [*schweben*] at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer, free of all real and ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors” (KASA, II, p. 114f., [AF p. 116]).

15 Cf. Ideas p. 48: “Every thinking part of an organization should not feel its limits without at the same time feeling its unity in relation to the whole”.

everything. It is about recreating that utter pleasure of the absolute being, by producing a fluid form of thought that bonds and unites those who engage in the process of thinking and communicating (*symphilosophieren*). It is hence not only about thematizing the impossibility of possessing the absolute so as to fit it into a system of knowledge, or the inevitable contradictions that come from creating a discourse that is aware of its own conditions of possibility. And it is not only about making the case that philosophy cannot be grounded in solid unshakable principles. Irony, wit, fragmentary thinking, interruptions, all these enable the author to create a movement and a connection, a hovering *hin und her* between the reader and the text that not only brings them together, but more importantly brings them closer to experiencing that overarching unity, totality, infinite being, as well as the infinite pleasure of realizing precisely this.

It is not, to put it in other words, merely about developing an anti-foundationalist philosophy, but rather about the joy and pleasure of creating and sharing something with the reader. Thus, it would not really make sense to say that if Schlegel had perhaps used less irony, he would have been able to make his point more clearly (Millan-Zaibert, 2007, p. 20), because it is not only about communicating a content, but about creating and sharing an experience.¹⁶ In a way, this is also at the centre of an essay from 1800 *On Incomprehensibility*, where Schlegel reflects upon the fact that his fragmentary and ironic style has been badly misunderstood. Here Schlegel argues that those who misunderstand him are lacking irony, precisely the irony that would enable them to enter into a different order of communication, one that is above and beyond the actual, factual ‘content’ or argument. Likewise, I do not read this text as reflecting on the impossibility of communication, but rather as an expression of gratitude for the fact that communication is possible in spite of it being almost impossible.

3 Irony After the Death of ‘the Absolute’

If we consider that Schlegel’s fragmentary and witty style, as well as his use of irony is only part of a more complex philosophical commitment to the re-evaluation and affirmation of joy and pleasure, it is difficult not to see connections with Nietzsche’s philosophy, and his sharp and witty style of writing. For in Nietzsche, too, the commitment to life and life-affirmation goes hand in hand with a turn to laughter

¹⁶ Cf. AF, p. 120: “They have so little regard for wit because its expressions aren’t long and wide enough, since their sensitivity is only a darkly imagined mathematics; and because wit makes them laugh, which would be disrespectful if wit had real dignity. Wit is like someone who is supposed to behave in a manner representative of his station, but instead simply does something [*bloss handelt*]”.

and joy.¹⁷ Arguably the very notion of ‘gay science’ is inevitably connected to Schlegel’s *Lucinde*, where the expression ‘froehliche Wissenschaft’ first occurs in connection with a homage to idleness. And even the idea that joy should be sanctified, is present in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where Nietzsche presents Zarathustra as the one who pronounces laughter holy.¹⁸

On the other hand, though, as has been argued in the sections above, for Schlegel, this affirmation of joy is unthinkable without the presupposition of (or a trust in) an absolute, a wholeness and totality, which is ultimately the *home* of this joy that we can only indirectly share. Thus, we can understand when Nietzsche, in his ‘Attempt at a Self-Criticism’ from 1886 refers to his Zarathustra and his project of making laughter holy, precisely in order to distance himself from and position himself *against* the ‘Romantics’. For Nietzsche then, laughter is something we must learn anew, as we learn “the art of comfort *in this world*”, and as we learn to “send all attempts at metaphysical solace to hell – with metaphysics the first to go!” (KSA, I, p. 22).¹⁹ In other words, Nietzsche’s laughter is only conceivable in relation to his project of life-affirmation in the wake of the death of God and the total rejection of metaphysics (of the absolute).

Indeed, going back to aphorism §28 from *Beyond Good and Evil* that we referred to earlier, we could say that by presenting Aristophanes as an antidote to Plato, Nietzsche is quite consciously distancing himself from figures such as Schlegel, who does not see this contrast. In fact, Schlegel seems to be quoting Plato (without mentioning him), when he says that “according to their beliefs, also the Gods loved a joke” (KASA, I, p. 9).²⁰ In other words: for Schlegel there is no serious opposition between Plato and Aristophanes, between Platonism and Romanticism or between Socratic irony and Romantic irony, and his philosophical position is not developed as a critique of Socrates or Platonism in general.²¹ Similarly, we could interpret what Nietzsche says in §223 (also from *Beyond Good and Evil*), as being directed at thinkers such as Schlegel. Although his position here is perhaps more ambivalent, in the sense that the message seems to be that we must take their ‘initiative’ further:

17 Cf. for instance GS 334, where Nietzsche writes: “‘Life as a means to knowledge’ – with this principle in one’s heart one can not only live bravely but also *live gaily and laugh gaily!*” (KSA, III, p. 553).

18 “This crown of the laughing one, this rose-wreath crown – I myself put on this crown, I myself pronounced my laughter holy” (KSA, IV, p.366).

19 For a more elaborate overview of some of the main issues at stake in Nietzsche’s uses of laughter see Hay (2022).

20 It is at the end of *Cratylus* that Plato says this.

21 In his article on ‘Romantic Irony’, Gary Handwerk convincingly shows how Schlegel’s notion of irony needs to be understood in relation to Socratic irony and that it is not at odds with it in any way (2008).

[...] we are prepared as no other age has ever been for a carnival in the grand style, for the most spiritual festival-laughter and arrogance, for the transcendental height of supreme folly and Aristophanic ridicule of the world. Perhaps we are still discovering the domain of our invention just here, the domain where even we can still be original, probably as parodists of the world's history and as God's clowns [*Hanswürste Gottes*],—perhaps, though nothing else of the present have a future, our laughter itself may have a future!

Indeed, it does not seem to be the case that there is space in Schlegel's corpus to laugh at God or at the absolute. But this is precisely what Nietzsche suggests that we do. From this point of view, the differences between both thinkers seem to be unsurmountable. And yet, I would like to end this paper with the suggestion that in a number of aphorisms from *Beyond Good and Evil*, and in a delicately implicit way, Nietzsche acknowledges their similarities and offers Schlegel something like his spiritual friendship. These aphorisms belong to chapter 2: 'The Free Spirit', and include the one we have discussed above. A detailed analysis that could ground this suggestion and make it more tangible goes beyond the scope of this paper, but I would like to advance the thought that perhaps one could argue that when Nietzsche says that it is *thanks to Aristophanes* that one can "*forgive everything Hellenic for having existed*" (KSA, V, p. 47), he is not really talking about Aristophanes and Greek culture, but about Schlegel, and that we can forgive Schlegel for falling into Platonism and bad metaphysics, because of his 'Aristophanic' side, so to say. It is not a coincidence that this aphorism begins as a reflection on translation and a critique of the rigidity of German language.

Likewise, one might also argue that it is Friedrich Schlegel who Nietzsche has in mind, when he writes that:

It is difficult to be understood, especially when one thinks and lives gangasrotogati among those only who think and live otherwise—namely, kurmagati, or at best "froglike," mandeikagati (I do everything to be "difficultly understood" myself!) (KSA, V, p. 45)

I take the combination of introducing Sanskrit terms (Schlegel studied and wrote about Sanskrit) with the idea that one would do everything possible to be *misunderstood*, to be a direct reference to Friedrich Schlegel. The aphorism ends in an ambiguous way: Nietzsche seems to be suggesting, like Schlegel in his essay *On Incomprehensibility*, that to understand his writings one has to engage with it on a different level, on one that is able to 'get the jokes', so to say. And, moreover, that this already creates a distinction between those who can and those who cannot understand the text. He also says that this is particularly important with those readers who assume they understand, just because they are 'friends'. To be sure, both Schlegel and Nietzsche consider that part of the exercise of writing is to 'create' their readers, their communities of friends, with the implicit promise that to understand in this way offers us first and foremost a very special form of pleasure, a joy. I take it that in this

instance Nietzsche is in some way making a gesture of acknowledgment to Schlegel, bathing for an instant in the pleasure of playful recognition and mutual understanding.

References

- Behler, E. (1975). Nietzsches Auffassung der Ironie. *Nietzsche-Studien*, 4, 1–35.
- Blanchot, M., Esch, D., & Balfour, I. (1983). The Athenaeum. *Studies in Romanticism*, 22, 163–172.
- Frank, M. (1997). 'Unendliche Annaehrung': Doe Anfaenge der philosophischen Fruehromantik. Suhrkamp.
- Halliwell, S. (1998). *Introduction to Aristophanes: Birds – Lysistrata – Assembly-Women – Wealth*. Oxford University Press.
- Handwerk, G. (2008). Romantic irony. In M., Brown (Ed.), *The Cambridge history of literary criticism vol 5: Romanticism* (pp. 203–225). Cambridge University Press.
- Hay, K. (2022). On Nietzsche's 'teachings' about learning to laugh at oneself – A critical approach. In P. E. Kirkland & M. J. McNeal (Eds.), *Joy and Laughter in Nietzsche's Philosophy* (pp. 161–178). Bloomsbury.
- Holtermann, M. (2004). *Der deutsche Aristophanes: Die Rezeption eines politischen Dichters im 19. Jahrhundert*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Kant, I. (1798). *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*. Reclams. [= Anth].
- Kraft, S. (2012). Eine Theorie der Romantik aus dem Geist der Komödie. Friedrich und August Wilhelm Schlegel im produktiven Dialog über das komische Theater. In *Athenäum Jahrbuch der Friedrich Schlegel-Gesellschaft* (Vol. 22, pp. 65–102). Brill.
- Luhmann, N. (1996). A redescription of 'Romantic Art'. *Modern Language Notes*, 111(3), 506–522.
- Millan-Zaibert, E. (2007). *Friedrich Schlegel and the emergence of romantic philosophy*. SUNY Press.
- Nassar, D. (2015). Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829). In M. N. Forster & K. Gjesdal (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of German philosophy in the nineteenth century* (pp. 68–87). Oxford University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1980). In G. Colli & M. Montinari (Eds.), *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 vols.* Walter de Gruyter. [= KSA].
- Norman, J. (2002). Nietzsche and early romanticism. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 63(3), 501–519.
- Schlegel, F. (1799/1971). *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and Other Fragments*. trans. By Peter Firchow. University of Minnesota Press. [= Lucinde].
- Schlegel, F. (1988). In E. Behler & H. Eichner (Eds.), *Kritische Schriften und Fragmente. Studienausgabe in 6 vols.* Ferdinand Schöningh [= KASA].
- Zeydel, E. H. (1928). Die Ersten Beziehungen Ludwig Tiecks zu den Brüdern Schlegel. *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 27, 16–41.