



Renate Bertlmann

IRONY

In the introduction to the trilogy AMO ERGO SUM I indicate that for me UTOPIA is not a matter of visions of the future but rather a journey into the unknown. It is thus about progression, a state of permanent movement, change and transformation. On these travels I have learned that there are many different ways to confront so-called "travel experiences". I can embrace them or stamp them into dust, I can swallow them, digest them and spit them out again, I can let myself be led or be dragged by them. Since I tend towards regarding a peaceful state of being to be a kind of stagnation, a standstill of growth, I have developed a way of coping with experiences in a way which I call "ironic". Somehow I seemed to sense that IRONY – and only IRONY – would protect me from losing myself within the world: DISCORDO ERGO SUM!

No sooner do the "lower, middle and upper worlds" appear to gain stability, I let IRONY uncompromisingly in on them as a disruptive factor – they begin to distort, to crumble and to lose that validity which gives them a dangerously false sense of security. A battle begins to rage, the flames start to blaze – what remains for me but to throw myself into the rescuing, cooling sea of IRONY, with the hope of being washed onto the shore of a newly found identity?!

The fear of entirely losing my own reality however made me recognise that this thoroughly ironic behaviour would have to be reined in to a certain degree. At least one area of life should be treated with proper dignity and seriousness. And what comes to mind more forcefully than – LOVE?

I therefore gave my life plan and work concept the title AMO ERGO SUM and promised myself that I would treat LOVE, this most holy aspect of life, as a contra-ironic taboo. And yet how much I have fooled myself, failed to recognise myself and misunderstood LOVE. For what is LOVE but a constant alternation between self creation and self destruction, between finding oneself and losing oneself, and is not this very oscillation between birth and death an expression of IRONY? Of an IRONY which, in the tension between these two poles, creates and destroys itself by creating and destroying distance.

It became clear to me that in fact LOVE itself is the very own and most happy hunting ground of IRONY, for it is after all through love that human absurdities and contradictions are most impressively revealed. One moment we are floating in a rose-coloured whirl of emotions, the next we are sinking once again in bottomless despair. Today we fill our pores with love goo, tomorrow we laboriously scrape it away again because it is threatening to suffocate us.

And so it happens that LOVE, unifying, infinitely exhilarating LOVE, can all of a sudden become the playground of vanities, of pathos, of obscenities and the most cruel injuries.

Learning to occasionally "watch" yourself in the process, from a distance, you learn the fear – and the laughter! IRONY thus becomes the harbinger of times of upheaval, awakening, even rebellion – and can become a ride on a knife's edge. Whether we skip light-footedly over the razor-sharp edge or are cut in two depends on how much courage we have.

And that is what is ironic about IRONY: everywhere where I am subject to dangers and painful realisations, irony is both weapon and shield. It leads me to despair – and leads me out again – as long as I can make use of it.

Making use of IRONY correctly is however no easy matter, since it has many faces, it makes a fool of the fooler, understands and misunderstands, unifies and divides. Ironic behaviour is thus deeply subversive, it is Wordplay (“An-Spielen” – allusion, insinuation), Foreplay (“Vor-Spielen” – also meaning performance), Downplay (“Unter-Spielen”), and Playing the Game (“Mit-Spielen” – going along with something). It is attack and defence, self assertion (“Selbst-Behauptung”) and self beheading (“Selbst-Enthauptung”): carrying my own head in front of me by the hair I can observe the world from the necessary distance and from varied viewpoints. The traces of blood show me the way, and with a painful, wistful smile on my pale lips I convince myself that IRONY just is a dangerous game with extremes – and a dialectic act which ultimately joins together what has been separated.

Translation: Larissa Cox