

By the author

ROMANTICISM IN PERSPECTIVE
ROMANTICISM
NATURALISM
COUNTERPARTS: The Dynamics of Franco-German Literary
Relationships, 1779-1895
THE CONTOURS OF EUROPEAN ROMANTICISM
EUROPEAN ROMANTICISM: Self-Definition

FICTIONS OF
ROMANTIC IRONY
IN EUROPEAN
NARRATIVE, 1760-1857

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Preface

This book has grown out of an essay I was asked to contribute to a volume on romantic irony. In the course of writing the piece that has since appeared under the title 'Romantic Irony and Narrative Stance', I became so aware of both the ramifications and the intrinsic importance of the topic that I eventually decided to develop my work into a more extensive study in which the questions raised by my initial research could be more fully pursued.

The questions are as intriguing as the complexities of the subject are daunting. How is romantic irony to be defined? Who coined and popularised the term itself? How valid is the common assumption that romantic irony began during the Romantic period and that Friedrich Schlegel was its 'father'? What about its earlier manifestations in the novels of Cervantes, Sterne and Diderot, which Schlegel himself recognised as models? What is specifically romantic about this type of irony? Where does its centre of gravity lie? How does it relate to the spirit of the age whose name it bears? Such questions provoke enquiries of a more fundamental nature: What is the relationship of romantic irony to traditional irony? Is romantic irony an independent, distinctive phenomenon, or is it a variant on traditional irony? Is it a generic category unto itself? If so, are its lines of demarcation primarily historical or modal? How does romantic irony fit into the larger systems of irony outlined by such critics as Northrop Frye, Douglas Muecke and Wayne Booth? These questions in turn lead to a confrontation of the basic issues of irony: What is generally meant by irony? How does it function in a literary text? What are its possibilities – and its difficulties – as a form of discourse?

This book does not purport to answer all these questions. It aims for a clearer understanding of what romantic irony denotes in theory, how it works in practice, and the extent to which

theory and practice coalesce. This entails an attempt to re-think romantic irony by envisaging the topic in a broader context, looking spatially and temporally beyond Friedrich Schlegel and German Romantic literary theory⁴ and seeing it in its wider European setting in relation to earlier and contemporaneous thought and practice. By placing romantic irony in this perspective, the philosophical and literary factors crucial to the phenomenon can be identified, and an understanding of its workings can be evolved that does not depend solely on the Romantics' own often cryptic terminology.

My primary focus is on the correlation between traditional and romantic irony. For if the term 'romantic irony' is to have any significance and usefulness in literary analysis and history, its interface with normative notions of irony must be explored. I am therefore examining the distinctions between traditional and romantic irony in both the concepts advanced by the thinkers and the practices adopted by leading fiction writers between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth century. The parameters of my study are determined by the subject itself. The mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century is the period when irony became a vital concern for philosophers and also a central force in fiction. The narrative genre is chosen for the equally obvious reason that it was the main arena for the exercise of irony. *Tristram Shandy* (1760-7) is a natural starting date in so far as its innovative manipulation of irony marks an important point in the florescence of the European novel. The other works were selected because irony is crucial to the theme and mode of each. Jane Austen, Flaubert, Byron, Jean Paul and Diderot are, alongside Sterne, acknowledged as major ironists of the period, though others could well have been included. But my aim is not comprehensiveness for I am not writing a history of irony in the century after 1760. I am trying, rather, to elucidate a problem: the denotation of 'romantic irony'. For this reason a more traditional ironist such as Austen had to be considered as well as the experimenters, Sterne, Diderot and Jean Paul. For this reason also the arrangement of the works deliberately departs from the chronological sequence in favour of an order that more clearly reveals the distinction between traditional and romantic irony. It is the inner evolution of modes of irony that I want to trace, not the outer threads of literary history. And just as I have resisted a purely historical framework, so I have eschewed an

overly systematic pattern lest the desire to fit individual works into a preordained schema foster distorted or biased readings. I have followed the demands of the subject by fusing the diachronic with the synchronic. My approach is predominantly pragmatic and inductive in attempting to deduce a prescriptive theory from a descriptive analysis of the concepts and, above all, the practices of irony.

It is a pleasure to express my gratitude to the institutions and the people who have actively helped this book along. The Stanford Humanities Center under the sagacious direction of Ian Watt provided the ideal balance of tranquillity and stimulation in which to complete and revise the manuscript. The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation bestowed the precious gift of free time. The University of Texas at Dallas gave me a grant from its organised research funds. I am greatly indebted to the curiosity of the many patient listeners I have had in the years that I have travelled with my lectures and my anxieties about irony. Among them five have been particularly instrumental in shaping this book: Martha Satz in Dallas, who first realised the potential of the topic; Hans Eichner in Toronto, who gave me decisive encouragement through his enthusiasm at its genesis, who continued to help me with suggestions and expert advice, and who checked my foolhardiness through his cautious objections; the late Eugène Vinaver in Canterbury, who extended to me, as ever, reassurance and understanding, and who so generously let me share his vast insights into literature; Walter Strauss in Cleveland, a brilliant and benevolent devil's advocate, whose probing clarified my ideas and whose confidence in the project sustained me through fits of doubt; and Anne Hendren in California, who led me towards the discovery of the title. Finally, my gratitude, as always, to my father for the invariable good humour with which he bears my exasperation at myself, for his sanguine common sense, and for his original and comforting comparison of the writing of a book to the process of distilling from wagonloads of pitch a microquantity of uranium.

Stanford

L. F.

1 Beware of Irony

'Irony is a sharp instrument: but ill
to handle without cutting *yourself*.'
Thomas Carlyle, letter to
John Stuart Mill, 24 September 1833.

1

'Irony', Lionel Trilling tells us, 'is one of those words, like love, which are best not talked about if they are to retain any force of meaning.'¹ This is typical of the warnings issued to those approaching irony. Often the caveats resort to the imagery of a dangerous ground, pitfalls and fogs, evoking the picture of an unwary pilgrim's progress. Yet the term has become one of the key concepts of contemporary critical vocabulary, as necessary to the discussion of literature as love is to the maintenance of life. Despite Trilling's and similar warnings, we must come to grips with irony, and with romantic irony too, if we are to understand modern literature.

Before venturing into the thickets of romantic irony, we need to look into the general problems of irony, to ask why in fact it poses such severe problems. Several extensive, illuminating studies of irony have appeared in recent years, notably D. C. Muecke's *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969) and Wayne C. Booth's *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974). The purpose of this chapter therefore is merely to map the terrain and to identify the pitfalls.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives three principal meanings for 'irony': first, 'a figure of speech, in which the intended meaning is the opposite to that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt'; second, figuratively,



as 'a condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things'; and thirdly, in its etymological sense, as 'dissimulation, pretence; especially in reference to the dissimulation of ignorance practised by Socrates as a means of confuting an adversary'.¹ While these definitions clarify the connotation of the word, they stop short of explaining its common application to such writers as, say, Beckett, Kafka, or Nabokov. The second, figurative sense comes closest, except that their works show little expectation of the natural order implicit in the phrase 'fitness of things' and many signs of a paradoxical, incomprehensible dislocation. The element of contrariness so prominent in the *O.E.D.*'s definition has been attenuated, and with it the reassuring background assumption of an accepted norm. It is significant that all the examples cited in the *O.E.D.* date from before the twentieth century: the majority from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, too, stresses the innate duality of irony: 'Irony is a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsiders' incomprehension.'²

If the dictionaries are rather limiting, the manuals of literary idiom are bewildering in the profusion of possibilities they offer. *A Handbook to Literature* presents irony as 'a broad term referring to the recognition of a reality different from the masking appearance'.³ It may surface in such devices as hyperbole, understatement and sarcasm, and it may be inherent in a figure of speech, a situation, or a structure. M. H. Abrams, in his *Glossary of Literary Terms*, is more specific: 'In most of the diverse critical uses of the term "irony" there remains the root sense of dissimulation, or of a difference between what is asserted and what is actually the case'.⁴ He then goes on to survey these diverse critical uses, examining verbal irony, structural irony, Socratic irony, dramatic irony, cosmic irony, and romantic irony. He also points out that 'a number of writers associated with the new criticism use "irony" in a greatly extended sense, as a general criterion of literary value'.⁵

This 'stretching of meaning in the use of the term irony' by recent critics has not been sufficiently recognised; however, it is a

major source of the present confusion about irony. This extended meaning of 'irony' is often considered an American usage because it was most actively propagated by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, although it has its origins in two mid-Atlantic theoreticians, T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards. It dates back to a lecture entitled 'Pure and Impure Poetry' delivered at Princeton in 1942, in which Robert Penn Warren called irony a 'device of reference', the frame of reference being 'to the complexities and contradictions of experience'.⁶ If Warren's lecture laid the basis for the acceptance of irony in a far wider context, it was Cleanth Brooks who expounded the practical application of this new sense in an influential article, 'Irony and "Ironic" Poetry', first published in *College English* in 1948 (no. ix, 231-7) and expanded the following year for the anthology *Literary Opinion in America* into 'Irony as a Principle of Structure'. This revised title is a good summary of Brooks' argument that poetry is modified by 'the pressures of a context' (p. 732) and requires 'a principle in which thrust and counter-thrust become the means of stability' (p. 733). This principle is designated as 'irony', though Brooks readily concedes: 'We have doubtless stretched the term too much, but it has been almost the only term available by which to point to a general and important aspect of poetry' (p. 732). As a result of this bold extension of the meaning of 'irony', a great deal of poetry can be deemed ironic to the extent that it is governed by the dialectics of tension.⁸ Brooks' adoption of the term 'irony' to denote a structural principle led first to many investigations of such irony in the arts, and later to an intense interest in the exploration of opposites, contradictions and discontinuities.⁹ The conception of literature as essentially ironic was systematised by Northrop Frye in his renowned *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Frye not only subscribes to 'the view of many of the "new" critics that poetry is primarily (i.e. literally) an ironic structure',¹⁰ he also offers a convincing rationale for this view:

The critics who tell us that the basis of poetic expression is irony, or a pattern of words that turns away from obvious (i.e. descriptive) meaning, are much closer to the facts of literary experience, at least on a literal level. The literary structure is ironic because 'what it says' is always different in kind or degree from 'what it means'. (p. 81)

Frye's insistence on irony as a central determinant of literary structure is ultimately more important than his distinctions between the 'ironic mode', the 'ironic mythos', and the 'ironic age'. He holds 'that we are now in an ironic phase of literature' (p. 46), as does Wayne C. Booth whose *Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1963) expanded the role of irony in the criticism of fiction by linking it closely to the discourse of the 'unreliable' narrator.

These recent usages of 'irony' in literary criticism, though related to the dictionary definitions of the term, nevertheless represent momentous expansions of the meanings accepted before this century. It is essential to be aware of this development and of the term's aptitude for change. In talking of irony, one is not referring to a stylistic phenomenon: the term itself is protean in character. Because of its strange, featureless, even demonic flexibility,¹¹ irony as a critical idiom tends towards diffuseness rather towards sharp focus.

The popularity of the concept in post-war criticism and the proliferation of its significations have led to a number of attempts to organise it into a systematic schema. Instead of straining for a comprehensive definition to cover all its manifestations, the newer attempts to obviate the difficulties inherent in irony aim at distinguishing and characterising different kinds of irony into a manageable order. The pluralism of irony has long been tacitly acknowledged in the plethora of descriptive tags current in critical vocabulary: verbal irony, rhetorical irony, dramatic irony, tragic irony, comic irony, satiric irony, irony of situation, structural irony, Socratic irony, cosmic irony, general irony, romantic irony, irony of fate, irony of character, metaphysical irony, self-irony, etc. These familiar labels have their usefulness in the pragmatic identification of heterogeneous uses of irony, but their worth is diminished by want of a common rationale. Some are named from the effect, some from the medium, or from the technique, or the function, or the object, or the practitioner, or the implicit attitude.

Foremost among the more systematic recent classifications are those of D. C. Muecke and Wayne C. Booth. Muecke, in *The Compass of Irony*, advocates a division into three grades: overt, covert, and private; and four modes: impersonal, self-disparaging, ingénu, and dramatised. In a review article¹² on the

Compass of Irony, Norman Knox suggests other criteria for classifying ironies. His four variable significant factors are: the field of observation; the degree of conflict between appearance and reality; a dramatic structure containing three roles - victim, audience, author; and the philosophical-emotional aspect. However, the five categories that this approach yields (tragic, satiric, comic, nihilistic, and paradoxical) are less original than Muecke's. In his monograph, *Irony* (London: Methuen, and New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), Muecke separates verbal irony from situational irony: 'the former is the irony of an ironist being ironical; the latter is the irony of a state of affairs or an event seen as ironic'.¹³ He adds that verbal irony 'raises questions that come under the headings of rhetoric, stylistics, narrative and satiric forms, satiric strategies' whereas situational irony, 'while raising fewer formal points, tends to raise historical and ideological questions' (pp. 50-1). The same broad discrimination was made earlier by A. E. Dyson in *The Crazy Fabric* where he concludes that there is on the one hand 'irony as a rhetorical technique' and on the other 'irony as a vision of the universe itself'.¹⁴ The stylistic technique, the primary sense of the term for Dyson, consists of the 'creative manipulation of words' to conjure up 'the traps and surprises, the intellectual gymnastics, the virtuoso exuberance, the intrinsic delights' of weaving the 'crazy fabric' of literary irony. The other type of irony, which is 'more a feeling about the universe', stems from the perception of cross-purposes, of absurdity, of tragic suffering, the enigma of events that happen to us, and reproduces the 'crazy fabric of human nature itself'. The most ambitious taxonomy of ironies is offered in *A Rhetoric of Irony* where Booth draws a basic distinction between stable, readily reconstructible ironies and unstable ironies that elude reasonably definitive interpretation. On this fundamental dichotomy Booth superimposes two further opposing pairs: overt/covert, and local/infinite. These categories then admit the following permutations: stable-covert-local; stable-overt-local; unstable-overt-local; unstable-covert-local; unstable-overt-infinite; unstable-covert-infinite; and stable-covert-infinite. Booth gives no serious consideration to the position of romantic irony in his system nor to its relationship to other types of irony. Muecke devotes a whole chapter to romantic irony which he regards as an adjunct of General Irony, concerned 'principally with the ironic contradictions of art'.¹⁵ He

Booth

Muecke

underscores its source in late eighteenth-century Germany theory by maintaining that:

The first discovery one makes about Romantic Irony, if one starts out with a concept of Romanticism derived from a reading of the French or English Romantics and a concept of irony derived from the corrective ironies of La Rochefoucauld and Swift, Voltaire and Fielding, is that it has nothing to do with any simple conventional concept of Romanticism or with ordinary satiric or comic irony. (p. 181)

In the newest terminological complex, introduced by Alan Wilde in *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*, various stages in a scale of irony are associated with differing phases of the modernist mentality. Thus 'mediate irony', which serves to mediate a fundamentally satiric vision, imagines a world lapsed from a recoverable (and in the twentieth century, generally a primitivist) norm; 'by contrast, *disjunctive irony* (the characteristic form of modernism) strives, however reluctantly, towards a condition of paradox; and 'finally, suspensive irony (which I connect with postmodernism), with its yet more radical vision of multiplicity, randomness, contingency, and even absurdity, abandons the quest for paradise altogether - the world in all its disorder is simply (or not so simply) accepted'.¹⁶ Both the rather arcane formulae and the attempted diachronic gradation have too little specificity to cast much light on the problem of irony.

2

In the case of irony its semantic history¹⁷ - often a path of access to the ultimate signification of a confusing term - is no great help either for it reveals above all its innate shiftiness. In contrast to the high esteem in which irony is held today, its original connotation was distinctly pejorative. An *eirōnē* denoted in Greek a wily, cunning person versed in every sort of unscrupulous trickery, often symbolised as a sly fox. From this was formed *eirōneia* which was, in its early phases, synonymous with mocking pretence and deception. As Trilling has pointed out, 'the etymology of the world associates it directly with the idea of the mask, for it derives

from the Greek word for a dissembler'.¹⁸ This association with the mask raises two of the crucial, recurrent questions about irony. First, is it essentially a figure of speech, manifest in such devices as understatement, blame-by-praise, i.e. saying one thing and meaning the contrary, or is it a pervasive habit of discourse and, by extension, a general mode of behaviour marked by sustained pretence of ignorance and self-deprecation? Is Socratic irony, for instance, a means of argumentation or an expression of an ontological vision? Taking it to its utmost extremes, is irony a rhetorical trope, or is it a philosophical stance? The second problem arising out of the notion of the mask concerns communication: if irony is a form of dissembling, how is the listener/reader to perceive it? How does one see through the mask and distinguish it from the persona? How does one know that it is a mask, and that the opposite is being said to what is meant? There are no definitive answers to such questions. What is worth noting here is that as far back as the Ancient Greeks irony was already a slippery concept.

The Latin *ironia* of Quintilian and the medieval rhetoricians and lexicographers was translated into English as 'yroye' which first appeared in *Thorndyke's of Crysten men* in 1502. For the next two hundred and fifty years or so, as Norman Knox¹⁹ has fully illustrated, it was used in England almost exclusively as a rhetorical device. Its two major strategies were either blame-by-praise or mockery by ironic concession which held up an opponent's views to clear light by echoing them with feigned and exaggerated approval. As a tool of ridicule during the Restoration it was so closely allied to 'raillery' as to be virtually interchangeable, 'raillery' being the common popular word for persiflage, while irony remained a relatively technical term. It was considered useful for indirect attack 'as a brief, whiplash kind of thing - a nipping taunt' (p. 177) unburdened by philosophical implications. Because it was not regarded as a weighty element of style, it was conspicuously absent from aesthetic treatises until after the mid-eighteenth century: 'throughout the entire period' (i.e. 1500-1755) 'there appeared not a single full-dress serious critical essay on the artistic principles involved in irony' (p. 141). This protracted neglect of irony as an aesthetic factor is all the more striking in contrast to the amount of attention it was to receive from the late eighteenth century onwards.

The growth of interest in irony towards the middle of the

century is a concomitant of the increasing prominence and complexity of satire. The notion of irony had become naturalised into literary discussion between about 1720 and 1730, and as satire itself evolved from the cruder methods of scoffing invective and burlesque, the subtle possibilities of irony began to be recognised as a device – still, however, as a *device* – capable of sophisticated manipulation. In such works as Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Arbuthnot's *History of John Bull* (1727), Fielding's *Jonathan Wild* (1743), Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721) and Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), satiric fictional structures serve as a vehicle for irony, exploring its potential further than ever before.

Where then does satire leave off and irony take over, or is it vice versa? The relationship between the two is by no means as straightforward as it is generally made to seem. Any attempt to establish hard and fast lines of demarcation soon produces another graphic example of the problems encountered in containing irony within circumscribed limits and assigning it to any categoric place. Often irony is subsumed into satire, particularly by students of satire: 'irony is a form of criticism, and all irony is satirical, though not all satire is ironical'.²⁰ Like most generalisations, this is in need of some qualification. It would be more correct to say that in many ironies there is a streak of satire, but its extent and function is subject to large variations. Byron's *Don Juan* and Flaubert's *Bourvard et Pécuchet* are strongly satirical in thrust, aiming sharp attacks against specific, clearly visible targets and harnessing irony as a means to an end. In the novels of Jane Austen social satire, though present, is much less prominent, the acerbity of satire being dissipated by the geniality of comedy. And in Kafka's *The Castle* the element of satire against the bureaucracy, undeniably one strand of the novel, is quite subsidiary to its central import.

Apart from these quantitative reservations to the contention that 'all irony is satirical', qualitative distinctions must also be drawn between the approach of the satirist and that of the ironist. These are of cardinal importance since the differing stances reflect the divergence between the nature of satire and that of irony. Satire stems from a firm allegiance to a set of convictions; from the security of that entrenched position the satirist weighs the failings and follies of human beings. He diminishes the object of his attack by a ridicule that conveys contempt, indignation, scorn

and derision, and that is often vented in forthright sarcasm. His attack is grounded in ethical standards, in a conscious discrimination between what is desirable in human conduct and what is not. In that sense the satirist is a moralist for he takes it upon himself to sit in judgement on the world without concealing his likes and dislikes. It is his self-assurance that forms the basis of his militancy. In antithesis to these trenchant value systems that prevail in satire, irony is governed by relativities. Like the satirist, the ironist often sees beyond the surface of human behaviour the grotesque and absurd forces that motivate conduct. But unlike the satirist, he does not set himself up in the authoritative pre-eminence of the judge. He does not have the absolute certainty to do that: his attitude is always ambivalent because he does not see the world in the stark colouring typical of the satirist's vision; instead he tends to admit the good *and* the bad in every alternative. Yet if satire is the harsher of the two, it is also the more buoyant in so far as its censure of human failings is balanced by an underlying faith in the potential for betterment in pessimistic satirist without that faith would not bother to make his attack). What is more, satire yields a consistent and fairly explicit picture of the 'true' as against the 'false'. By contrast, the less immediately abrasive art of irony may ultimately be the more disturbing because its upshot is a series of open ends and contradictions. It is an inquiring mode that exploits discrepancies, challenges assumptions and reflects equivocations, but that does not presume to hold out answers.

Such indefinability permeates every aspect of irony. Even the distinction just outlined between satire and irony turns out to be more enigmatic in practice than in theory. That supreme satirist, Swift, reminds us of the precariousness of any attempt at a radical divorce between the two modes. Much of his writing – *A Tale of a Tub*, *A Modest Proposal*, and the first three books of *Gulliver's Travels* – is overtly satirical, directing its barbs at contemporary political abuses in a well-defined, highly coded context. As a weapon of attack Swift uses an irony that is purposeful, refined and constant, and that nearly always remains transparent and easily reconstructible. Only a reader of the utmost naivety, ignorance and inexperience could mistake *A Modest Proposal* for a serious programme of reform. The very title, through its clever use of understatement, holds out a clue to that reversal of

meaning that the reader is invited to make. For Swift's so-called 'modest' proposal for preventing the children of poor people in Ireland from being a burden to their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the public' by slaughtering them at exactly one year when they provide 'a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled'; this proposal is not merely *not* modest, it is monstrous to the point of obscenity. Under the mask of the commonsensical philanthropist Swift presents his plan with a straight face and such a wealth of elaborate details and financial computations as to underscore the enormity of his proposition by giving it concrete reality. Exaggeration, over- and understatement, *reductio ad absurdum*, hyperbole of every kind is handled with virtuoso control. Swift is savaging the indifference of government policies to the starvation of the poor; he does so by proposing the opposite to what he believes. His irony is a means to his end, satire. The alliance of satire and irony is equally obvious in the first three books of *Gulliver's Travels* and so are the objectives of the onslaught. The diminutive physical stature of the Lilliputians in Book One is a pointer to their spiritual and moral pettiness. In Book Two the giant Brobdingnagians show their vanity by their disdain of the glories of European civilisation as described by the dwarf-sized Gulliver. The excursion to Laputa in Book Three displays, in its ingenious exploration of a variety of scientific activities, the follies of an intellectualism adrift from common sense and feeling. Book Four, however, brings a change in character; it becomes difficult to follow the direction of the satire as the irony shifts from its subservient role as a rhetorical tool of satire into the dominant mode. Here the irony 'ceases to be a functional technique serving a moral purpose, and becomes the embodiment of an attitude to life'.²⁹ And that attitude is deeply ambivalent. The choice is no longer between the dismal world as it is and the ideal world as it should be, but between two equally unattractive options. The Yahoos appear as bestial creatures, antipathetic at first sight, while the Houyhnhnms, for all their alleged virtues, bear those moral and intellectual limitations that are revealed in their rejection of Gulliver. Their failings become apparent only obliquely, through a kind of blame-by-praise. But, though veiled, it is blame; Gulliver emerges perplexed, embittered, and alienated from both sides, as indeed do we. He has learned that man is not amenable to improvement, and we

that satire and irony are less readily distinguishable than is commonly assumed.

The more closely one examines irony, the more intractable it proves to be. For its resistance to definition it fully deserves its Ancient Greek connotation of 'sly fox'. The normal scholarly procedures – dictionaries, handbooks, the term's semantic history, delineation by comparison to neighbouring modes such as satire – lead more to an appreciation of the problem than to its solution. From whichever angle irony is approached, it is always its elusiveness that emerges as its primary characteristic. However disconcerting, this has to be accepted as pivotal to the nature of irony. If we are unable to pin down its meaning, it is because irony sets out to evade specificity.

3

This intrinsic elusiveness is a direct consequence and a reflection of the perspectivalistic multiplicity of the ironist's perception of the universe. In its simple forms, irony springs from an awareness of the discrepancy between reality and appearance. But frequently the processes of irony are more complicated. For the ironist is often conscious of a choice between several possibilities, none of which has complete validity and all of which are exposed to question. After exploring every possibility, he may well find himself (and, incidentally, place us) in a labyrinth of doubts. Unlike the satirist, who lives among black and white images, the natural habitat of the ironist is in the many shades of greyness that make up the spectrum of ambivalence. To his questioning mind there are no clear and lasting answers, no serene certainties: the existence of other paths in itself undermines the authority of any one of them. Thus elusiveness, reserve, deviousness and contradiction are the hallmarks of the ironic mode. It has been claimed that: 'Whenever an ironist acquires a genuine faith and a genuine desire to establish it, he stops being an ironist and preaches'.³⁰ This is an overstatement, for an ironist may on occasion emerge from his ambivalences into the security of a belief without beginning to preach. But the opposition is a legitimate one in that the preacher has made a choice and publicly committed himself to a cause, whereas the ironist cannot take such a single-minded stand because he perceives alternative

possibilities, any one of which might prove to encompass the truth. As a result, his philosophical vision is of contingencies, incongruities and relativities; and the linguistic medium consonant with that vision is ambiguity. Ambiguity is the very crux of irony:

l'ironie ne se justifie que dans la mesure où elle reste au moins partiellement ambiguë: quel intérêt y aurait-il à parler ironiquement, si c'est pour immédiatement rectifier le tir en spécifiant ce que l'on veut vraiment dire?²³

(irony is justified only in so far as it remains at least partly ambiguous: what would be the point of speaking ironically if the sally were immediately rectified by the specification of what one really wants to say?)

The ironist therefore exists and expresses himself in ambiguities; his position, like his utterance, is perilous but exciting.

That then is the basis of the notorious elusiveness of irony. Its effect is prismatic: through hints and suggestions it arouses in the reader an inkling of latent layers of signification. As a means of literary expression its potential far exceeds the elementary reversal of meaning on which most definitions hinge. Such emphasis on reversal, on an opposite, is misleading since the subtler forms of irony draw on the art of insinuation. In place of straightforward inversion, irony prefers oblique refraction. It says not so much the *opposite* to what is meant as something *other than* is stated. There is a crucial difference between 'opposite' and 'other than': 'opposite' is limited and limiting, not least in its overtones of wanton concealment, while the modification into 'other than' opens up that latitude,²⁴ that spiritual freedom of movement in which irony thrives. It is 'a technique of saying as little and meaning as much as possible, or, in a more general way, a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning'.²⁵ Although elusiveness is the cost of turning away from direct statement, the gain is the capacity to imply other and more than is actually said. In this respect irony represents a tremendous enrichment of literary expression, a subtle internal energy that gives access to new dimensions by extending the range of a text's referentiality. That is one of the main reasons for its attractiveness to writers and readers alike.

But if elusiveness can be exploited imaginatively as a prism of allusion, it can also become a source of danger. For ambiguity is open to misapprehension even when carefully controlled. To speak of ambiguity and control is to touch delicate concepts again. Almost any phrase can be deemed ambiguous, as Empson has taught us: 'In a sufficiently extended sense any prose statement could be called ambiguous'.²⁶ As an example Empson takes the apparently simple sentence, 'the brown cat sat on the red mat', and proceeds to point to the manifold difficulties of interpretation it could present. What is a 'cat'? What are the anatomical mechanisms involved in a cat's sitting? What are the laws of gravitation contained in 'on'? What is meant by 'brown' and 'red'? Empson's arguments are convincing; nevertheless, they remain in the realm of the hypothetical, as he himself concedes in his cautious phraseology: 'In a sufficiently extended sense any prose statement could be called ambiguous'. Theoretically, 'the brown cat sat on the red mat' could be ambiguous; in practice it probably is not because most readers grasp it without hesitation and without thought about the nature of cats and colours or the laws of gravitation and feline anatomy. The ambiguity may be instilled into it from outside by the ratiocinations of a reader with a particularly analytic mind. More likely, if it strikes a reader as ambiguous, it is because of the context in which it occurs. Context is of paramount importance in any act of literary interpretation, and nowhere more so than with a possibly ambiguous, ironic utterance. So while no single element of the sentence, 'the brown cat sat on the red mat' is ambiguous taken either in itself or in relation to the other words, it may become or appear ambiguous when placed in a context that signals dubiousness to the reader.

The primacy of ambiguity in irony poses major problems for both the ironist and the reader. The ironist must control the ambiguity and establish the context without, however, prejudicing the freedom of ambivalence. While eschewing direct statement, he must phrase his oblique formulation in such a way that his deviousness does not produce mere obtusation. His is the art of the tight-rope²⁷ acrobat, poised dangerously between explicitness and impenetrability. Like the tight-rope acrobat in his every move, the ironist must be in control of every nuance. That control is a measure of his artistry, and also an outcome of his own ironic detachment. His ability to see beyond surface

appearances presupposes disengagement, a dissociation between himself as critical observer and the objects of his observation. This detachment is the foundation of that aesthetic distance that underlies all artistic control. The extent of the aesthetic distance and the degree of artistic control may fluctuate, but the control as such remains a vital prerequisite for the practice of irony.

On this matter of control, one further distinction must be made. Artistic control of the medium is often confused with, or considered inseparable from control over the moral vision. That is not so. The aesthetic coherence which is the product of artistic control does not exclude the portrayal of an uncontrollable universe, as is shown by the works of Dostoyevsky, Kafka, and Beckett. The want of 'a secure pedestal'²⁸ in the metaphysical domain by no means entails the same kind of insecurity in artistic execution, although the presentation may be such as to echo the ontological disarray. Conversely, novels like those of Jane Austen and Fielding that do achieve moral clarity must not *a priori* be denied irony. Writers who uphold a particular social and moral ethos may none the less be aware of the questionability of that ethos and find an outlet for their dualistic attitude in irony. Nor is irony necessarily equivocal in its moral stance; in making discriminations between appearance and reality, false and true values, it too derives from moral and social judgements, though not with the wholehearted assertiveness of satire. Morally the ironist is conscious simultaneously of standards and of their shortcomings. But artistically he must neither flatter nor waver; he must have the control to embody his binary vision in the appropriate aesthetic form.

While the ironist's task is the control of ambiguity, the reader's is that of rightly comprehending it, of correctly 'reconstructing' the latent meaning, to use Wayne Booth's phraseology. For in its elusiveness irony places insidious obstacles along the path of communication. In ironic discourse the desire for communication is paradoxically allied to a strong urge to concealment. The tension between these dual, conflicting drives is one of the mainsprings of irony. Balancing transparency and opacity, irony is like a game of hide and seek in which the object should not be too readily spotted nor so thoroughly hidden as to be irretrievable. Part of the attraction of irony lies in this playful aspect; it is an intellectual sport in which the seeking reader must take an active role, his astuteness being eventually rewarded in

the triumph of understanding. A well-arranged game succeeds in establishing an indirect system of communication between narrator and reader. Irony can therefore be regarded as a secret language, a channel of communication between the initiated. Only on the surface is there that 'disconnection between the speaker and his interlocutor'²⁹ that Trilling singles out as a salient feature of irony. At a deeper level, beneath the apparent disconnection, there must also be a connection if the irony is to be caught. The overt information is accompanied by signals that negate it,³⁰ and the speaker must present both codes in such a way that his interlocutor is able to decipher them in their contradictory conjunction. For the ironist wants to try the reader's ingenuity, but not to the point of thwarting him by totally blocking access. Here again tension between dissimulation and revelation is fundamental to the processes of irony.

If, however, irony is a secret language, how are we to learn it? How can we be among the initiated? That is one of the paramount problems in dealing with irony. It is worth recalling Fowler's definition of irony as 'a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsiders' incomprehension'. Using different terminology, the question remains the same: How are we to be of that other party that does catch the undertones? Is it mainly a matter of intelligence, so that irony should be proclaimed the sport of an intellectual elite? Or is the perception of irony purely subjective, as is often maintained? How do we know when 'more is meant than meets the ear'? And just as important, how much more? How far should we go in interpreting irony, and how can we forestall the temptation of overinterpretation? How are radical mistakes to be avoided? To take a concrete example, when an Irishman on a grey, cool, drizzly morning comments that it is 'a soft day', is he being ironical? Probably not, but it may well seem so to the tourist who had hoped for blue skies and sunshine. The day is literally 'soft' in that the traveller will not be assaulted by extremes of heat or cold, but the drizzle may prevent him from enjoying the view. This might be ironic if the tourist had come from afar specially to see that view.

In this particular instance the key to correct understanding lies in the cultural context. Our perception of irony depends on a

series of cultural norms shared by the speaker and his interlocutor. Since no sentence is in itself ironic, and conversely any sentence can be ironic, the cultural context often plays a vital role in making us decide whether irony is present, and if so, to what extent. Though the context may comprise idiosyncratic factors (such as the Irishman's assessment of his climate and the meaning he gives to the word 'soft'), tentative guidelines for the detection of irony can be formulated from a pragmatic analysis of texts deemed by common consensus to be ironic. Such an approach shows that the perception of irony is not just a subjective caprice. Texts contain coded directions for reading; it is incumbent on the reader to discover the most appropriate, i.e. that most closely in consonance with the text's own intentionality. This requires intelligence in the sense of an ear open to the undertones of a discourse. But those undertones are demonstrably woven into the text, and generally they are presented in such a form as to invite discovery. For in order to fulfill the ironist's purpose, they must be recognisable. So the ironic counter-meaning beneath the surface statement may be indicated by a variety of signals that beckon the reader to probe what is hidden. Clues of differing kinds are held out to the alert ear as hints of the presence of a subtext. These clues are so placed by a consummate ironist as to be sufficiently discreet to uphold his cover and at the same time sufficiently manifest to be elicited.

The stealthy but perspicuous strategies of an ironic narrator can be seen in the handling of Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. This is the record of his feelings during his betrothal to Dorothea:

Mr. Casaubon, as might be expected, spent a great deal of his time at the Grange in these weeks, and the hindrance which courtship occasioned to the progress of his great work – the Key to all Mythologies – naturally made him look forward the more eagerly to the happy termination of courtship. But he had deliberately incurred the hindrance, having made up his mind that it was now time for him to adorn his life with the graces of female companionship, to irradiate the gloom which fatigue was apt to hand over the intervals of studious labour with the play of female fancy, and to secure in this, his culminating age, the solace of female tendance for his declining years. Hence he determined to abandon himself to the stream of feeling, and

perhaps was surprised to find what an exceedingly shallow rill it was. As in droughly regions baptism by immersion could only be performed symbolically, so Mr. Casaubon found that sprinkling was the utmost approach to a plunge which his stream would afford him; and he concluded that the poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion. Nevertheless, he observed with pleasure that Miss Brooke showed an ardent submissive affection which promised to fulfill his most agreeable previsions of marriage. It had only once or twice crossed his mind that possibly there was some deficiency in Dorothea to account for the moderation of his abandonment; but he was unable to discern the deficiency, or to figure to himself a woman who would have pleased him better; so that there was clearly no reason to fall back upon but the exaggerations of human tradition. (Book 1, chapter 7)

This could be read as an account of the situation from Casaubon's angle. The stilted language recalls his customary pretentious speech, suggesting his voice and his point of view. Yet its turbid extravagance encourages a critical disengagement on the reader's part. While Casaubon speculates on the possibility of 'some deficiency' in Dorothea, it does not cross his mind that the deficiency might lie in him. But that does strike the reader because the narrator has carefully prepared us for the implicit irony. In the preceding twenty pages the reader has been given ample warning of Casaubon's dry, sterile nature before the 'shallow rill' imagery of this passage. Brooke, speaking to his niece of her suitor, bluntly declares: 'I never got anything out of him – any ideas, you know' (chapter 4); Mrs Cadwallader and Celia are scathingly sceptical of the 'great soul' with which Dorothea credits her future husband (chapter 6); and his letter of proposal (chapter 5) with its insistence on the 'need in my own life' and 'your eminent and perhaps exclusive fitness to supply that need' is a skilfully managed revelation of Casaubon's immense egotism. When the narrator adds: 'How can it occur to her to examine the letter, to look at it critically as a profession of love?', she in fact spurs us as readers to do just that. So by the time we come to that description of Casaubon's feelings, we have the insight into his personality to appreciate its hidden irony. We can reconstruct the implied meaning, i.e. the deficiency in



Casaubon, behind the voiced words, i.e. the putative deficiency in Dorothea.

This example from *Middlemarch* uses both the leading methods of providing clues: the textual and the contextual. The most common textual devices are such rhetorical figures as exaggeration, hyperbole followed by anti-climax, repetition to the verge of parody, symbolic imagery, dialogue at cross-purposes, and verbal inflation. These readily spotted means, by bringing out the incongruity between matter and manner, point to the presence of an ironic subtext. Such signals tend to be most transparent when the narrative situation is relatively simple, with an assured and consistent voice firmly conducting the narration, as in *Middlemarch*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, or Fontane's *Effi Briest*. The reader, trustful of the narrating voice, enters into agreeing collusion with him, sharing his perspective, privy to his knowledge, and acquiescing in his implied judgements. The irony is perceived and interpreted without difficulty. When the narrator is less reliable, the reconstruction of the intended meaning becomes increasingly vexing. The clues offered to the reader by the narrating voice in Byron's *Don Juan*, Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*, or Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* in direct addresses, epigraphs or titles may or may not be fallacious. Once the narrating voice itself becomes suspect, the game of irony grows more complicated. These teasing narrators, however, issue their own warnings, often in serio-comic vein, of their untrustworthiness. With an unreliable narrator certain elements of the discourse assume added importance as clues to irony: tone, gesture, emphasis, proportion, pace, imagery, internal contradictions. These may furnish an evaluative commentary that enables the reader to establish the ironic perspective. In first person narratives such as *Tristram Shandy*, Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, or Camus' *La Chute*, which let us hear only the narrating persona's voice, internal factors have to be assessed with scrupulous care. Self-betrays, disparities, extravagant claims, conflicting signals, paradoxes, and gaps can lead the reader to surmise an underlying equivocation and to uncover an ironic countermeaning. Such clues within the fabric of the text are 'as it were, stylistic winks' ('das gleichsam stilistische Augenzwinkern')³¹ directing the reader's attention towards the ironic subtext.

Context is almost equally important in the determination of

irony. Context may refer to the microcosm within a specific work. To return to the example of Casaubon, we read the record of his feelings within the context of what we already know about his character and situation as well as about the values of the society in which he and Dorothea live. This contextual knowledge confirms that our ironic perception of him is indeed justified. In addition to this inner cadre, there is an outer one which E. D. Hirsch calls the 'generic context' or the 'intrinsic genre' in which a work is cast. He defines 'intrinsic genre' as 'that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand any part in its indelimitacy'.³² A valid interpretation devolves from a reader's accurate recognition of the 'genre' in which a work is written, i.e. whether it is primarily comic, satirical, ironic, etc. Since the interpretation of meaning follows largely from an overall generic expectations, once the context has been ascertained, the meaning of the parts will fall into place. This is an attractive theory, but it still leaves the quandary as to how to judge that vital generic context correctly. According to Hirsch, much 'depends on the interpreter's previous experience of the shared type',³³ on what Genette calls the 'narrative competence of the reader'.³⁴ In practice, a close analysis of the early signals in a work, often in the opening paragraph,³⁵ will yield dependable clues as to the generic context. In *Middlemarch*, for instance, the invocation of Saint Teresa of Avila in the Prelude posits a frame of aspiration within which Dorothea's life is bound to seem an ironic shortfall. At the opening of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Don Juan*, and *Jacques le fataliste*, as we shall see, the generic context is rapidly set in a few strokes as remarkable for their economy as for their pertinence.

The external context must also be taken into account, and this includes besides the cultural milieu the historical moment. The political, social or philosophical background may be crucial in discerning satiric thrust and ironic nuance, as in the case of *Gulliver's Travels*, Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, or Orwell's *1984*. The relationship of 'cultural circumstances' to a concept such as sincerity has been fruitfully explored by Trilling, who insists that 'the word cannot be applied to a person without regard to his cultural circumstances'; and that the 'sincerity of Achilles or Beowulf cannot be discussed' any more than that of the patriarch Abraham. But the question of sincerity can fittingly be raised in regard to Elinor and Marianne Dashwood in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, or to Goethe's Werther because

sincerity 'became, at a given moment in history, a new element of the moral life'.³⁶ Once a trait such as sincerity is incorporated into the ethical canon, the lack of that quality may be the object of satire or of irony. To ignore these historico-cultural contexts is to risk grotesque misreadings. A striking example of such a misreading has recently been documented in the Romantics' approach to *Don Quixote*:³⁷ they took it out of its context, overlooked the novel's satiric purpose and burlesque techniques, idealised the hero, and invested the work with a symbolism that reflected their own ideology, aesthetics and sensibility. That might be called the imposition of a burden of a present alien to a work. More often it is the burden of the past³⁸ that weighs so heavily as to drive a writer towards parodistic irony or self-irony.

There are thus a number of ways whereby an ironic countermeaning or subtext within the discourse may be detected. None of them is infallible, for irony must always retain its quintessential ambivalence. 'One man's Overt irony is another's Covert, as every teacher knows', Knox³⁹ ruefully comments; or, one man's 'soft' day is another's spoiled day. This epitomises one of the chronic problems attendant on irony: the role of personal response. However rigorous the endeavour at objective analysis, subjective input is unavoidable in the process of interpretation. The dilemma has been aptly summarised by P. Gifford in his searching article on *La Chute*: 'Precisely because irony engages the creative participation of its interlocutor, it gives scope for subjectively biased or disproportionate judgements as other modes do not.'⁴⁰ To translate this into concrete terms, the *Mona Lisa*, Muecke reminds us, 'has been interpreted both as a portrait of someone smiling ironically and as an ironical portrait of someone smiling with foolish self-satisfaction'.⁴¹ The danger of subjective reading, of misreading, and with it of overreading is an ever threatening pitfall, for which the only corrective is constant attention to the text itself.

If subjectivity is the Scylla of reading irony, then authorial intention is its Charybdis. In interpreting signals, looking for clues and examining contexts, credence is invested in the ironist's good faith on the assumption that he intends us to understand meanings other than those explicitly stated. The criterion of intentionality has been endorsed by persuasive critics.⁴² But its validity has also been severely impugned, and its authority questioned. It is particularly tricky in narrative, where

it may be unclear whose intention is operative: that of the actual author or that of the narrating voice? The two must not be automatically fused, though they may coincide to an extent often hard to pinpoint. The problem of intentionality is at its most acute with the persona of the unreliable narrator, who frequently seems to intend to mislead us as readers, and who may further cloud the issue by insinuating that it is we who are unreliable readers. Leaving these complications aside for the moment, it is well to recall that the veiling of intention is integral to the practice of irony which is a willed deception. The ironist's mask of innocent ignorance may be a temporary one; the deception may be calculated to be seen through. However, a residual grain of doubt is bound to remain; in that sense, all ironists are, by definition as it were, to some degree unreliable.

Moreover, the doubt inherent in irony may grow and spread. When intentionality becomes suspect, the standard definitions of irony come to seem inadequate. The *O.E.D.* underlines the reversal of 'the intended meanings' and 'the words used'. The same dichotomy of 'intended meaning conveyed to the initiated' and 'pretended meaning presented to the uninitiated' is posited in a recent scholarly work on irony.⁴³ These definitions rest on certain fundamental suppositions: conscious intentionality on the part of the ironist; the existence of stable meanings; and the efficacy of words as a medium of communication between writer and reader. What happens when 'meaning', 'intention' and 'language' are themselves exposed to scrutiny as to their signification? Or when they become the objects of irony? These questions lead us towards the precincts of romantic irony.

2 The Metamorphosis of Irony

'Jedes Ansehen geht über in ein Betrachten, jedes Betrachten in ein Sinnen, jedes Sinnen in ein Verknüpfen, und so kann man sagen, dass wir schon bei jedem aufmerksamen Blick in die Welt theoretisieren'

Goethe, Preface to the *Farbenlehre*

('Every scrutiny turns into a contemplation, every contemplation into a meditation, every meditation into a linking, and so we can say, that with every attentive look into the world, we are already theorising')

1

For Dr Johnson irony was 'a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words'. In this terse phrase from his *Dictionary* of 1755 he subscribes to the traditional conception of irony, outlined in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, as a rhetorical figure whose essence lies in *dissimulatio* and reversal. Barely fifty years later Goethe, in the preface to his *Farbenlehre* (1808), was beset by hesitations about 'Ironie', branding it a 'hazardous word'.¹ This may well be the first of those warnings often attached nowadays to the term. Its appearance in 1808 signals a change in the perception of irony since Dr Johnson's confident diction of 1755. The connotation, usage, and aura of 'irony' underwent such a metamorphosis towards the close of the eighteenth century as to make it a hazardous notion.

The Augustans did not deem irony worthy of much respect. It

was a figure of speech, a vehicle for local wit, a means of adding brilliance to a discourse or of making a point strikingly. But it was not intrinsic to a work of art as a central shaping factor. Accordingly, while the Augustans gave some critical notice to a number of ways in which their irony revealed itself, they never troubled to break down its practices into principles of literary theory. The place for discussion of irony was in primers of rhetoric, and the models were almost exclusively Roman.

It was only at the turn of the eighteenth century that irony suddenly assumed a prominent position. It lagged forty or more years behind such concepts as 'genius', 'originality', and 'creativity' which had sprung into the limelight soon after the middle of the century in a cluster of aesthetic treatises from which irony was conspicuously absent. The Age of Sensibility doubtless preferred the warmth of a tender heart to the coolness of an ironic mind. When irony burst onto the intellectual scene, it was in a different place and an altered format: from the lowly primers of rhetoric it moved to the lofty tomes of speculative aesthetics, and its model switched from the Latin to the Greek, from Cicero and ~~Quintilian to Socrates~~ and Plato. The year 1797, with the publication of Friedrich Schlegel's *Lyceum* fragments, has been cited² as the turning-point in the European history of the concept of irony. Schlegel's *Lyceum* collection, together with his *Athenäum* fragments (1798) and his *Ideen* (1800), accomplished a metamorphosis of irony by presenting it in a new context and with new functions.

Friedrich Schlegel's ideas are seminal in inaugurating an innovative approach to irony that was to be of lasting importance for modern literature. He must occupy a pre-eminent place in any study of irony because he formulated an original perception of irony, to which he gave a leading role in his aesthetic theory. A bold thinker gifted with insight and imagination, a scholar with broad interests and sound Classical learning, Schlegel was a sparkling initiator rather than a patient builder of systems. His fertile mind poured out ideas in hundreds of aphoristic fragments on an astonishing variety of topics, ranging in length from a few words to several pages, and in manner from grave reflections to jesting witticisms. Writing for an élite circle, he tended to use a cryptic, idiosyncratic, compressed phraseology which presents extraordinary obstacles to interpretation. Though his doctrine is not wrought into the formal *ars poetica* customary until then for

major statements of aesthetic theory, his aphorisms are interconnected into a cohesive web rich in suggestion and provocative in thrust.

Schlegel began by drawing sharp distinctions not only between differing uses of irony but also between different levels. He discriminated between what he considered the lower types of irony – the rhetorical, satirical, polemical, and parodistic – and that irony which he designated as genuine, complete, and divine in spirit.³ The former corresponds to the Augustan view of irony, while the latter describes Schlegel's own vision. Schlegel dismisses the lower sorts of irony as cynical and tinged with viciousness, though he admits their usefulness in polemics. In an entry in his *Literary Notebooks* dating from 1798 he expresses his scorn for those who believe irony consists in knowing how many children Petrarch's Laura had.⁴ The complement to this is another entry from the following year in which he emphasises that to him irony is essentially philosophical.⁵ In an essay entitled *Über die Unverständlichkeit* (*On Incomprehensibility*, 1800), Schlegel sets up an elaborate hierarchy of ironies: common irony; subtle or delicate irony; supersubtle irony; straightforward irony; dramatic irony; double irony; and irony of irony: From his bantering tone, his waggish examples, his accumulation of conditional verbs, his pleasure in exaggeration and deflation, it is amply evident that Schlegel's discourse is itself saturated with irony, a defence of his own irony written 'im Feuer der Ironie' ('with the fire of irony'). Jesting apart, however, the dichotomy between the two levels of irony is an insistent theme throughout Schlegel's aphorisms in the closing years of the eighteenth century. What is more, it is reiterated in the writings of Tieck, Solger and Adam Müller, all of who contrast commonplace satirical irony with true artistic irony. This distinction between the former acceptance of irony and its new significance to Schlegel and his successors is the cornerstone for its metamorphosis. When Schlegel refers to 'Ironie' in his *Lyceum* and *Athenäum* fragments and in his *Ideen*, what he has in mind, unless he specifically mentions rhetorical irony, is the higher authentic type of irony, which he characterises in scattered aphorisms.

Schlegel regards this higher irony as 'das höchste Gut und der Mittelpunkt der Menschheit'⁶ ('man's highest possession and his centre of gravity'). Its domain lies within the realm of

philosophy: 'Die Philosophie ist die eigentliche Heimat der Ironie'⁹ ('philosophy is the true homeland of irony'). Far from being just a literary device, it is endowed with 'philosophisches Vermögen'¹⁰ ('philosophical capacity'). This means not merely that Schlegel's conception of irony has its origins in philosophy; rather it denotes the capacity of irony to confront and, ideally, to transcend the contradictions of the finite world. Again and again Schlegel dwells on the intimate association of genuine irony and philosophy: 'Bei der wahren Ironie muss nicht bloss Streben nach Unendlichkeit sondern Besitz von Unendlichkeit mit mikrologischer Gründlichkeit in Philosophie] und Poesie] verbunden, da sein'¹¹ ('In true irony not only striving for the infinite but possession of the infinite must be present, linked with micrological thoroughness to philosophy and poetry'). Placed in this context, irony becomes something quite other than the mordant, half-jocular 'dry mock' it had been to the Augustans. Never before had such deep seriousness been attributed to irony. Schlegel sounds playful when he asserts in *Über die Unverständlichkeit*: 'Mit der Ironie ist durchaus nicht zu scherzen'¹² ('Irony is certainly no matter for jest'); elsewhere he expounds the same idea with a sedateness that verges on solemnity: 'Die vollendete absolute Ironie hört auf Ironie zu seyn und wird ernsthaft'¹³ ('Complete, absolute irony ceases to be irony and becomes serious'). Irony is thus given a wholly new metaphysical status, and invested with an epistemological and ontological function. The philosophical stance implicit in this authentic irony has aesthetic manifestations too, perceptible in the relationship between the artist and his work. In the arts authentic irony is the equivalent to the universe-organ that it was to Schlegel in his apprehension of the universe. The concrete forms of irony are here grounded in a distinctive ideological substructure: they are secondary to its philosophical capacity, serving not as a technical device but for the exposition of a cosmic vision.

Schlegel envisages the artist as both involved in and detached from his creation, aware of the contradictions of his endeavour, but able to transcend them. He is simultaneously committed to his work and to himself as creator. This dual loyalty determines his position and his creative procedures, and also has its precipitate in certain features of his created work. The dimension of reflection and self-consciousness is, for Schlegel, intrinsic to creativity. The artist, even as he replicates the original divine act

of creation, reflects on his creation; conscious of his own creative processes and Godlike, he delights in sporting with it at will. In this way the artist is cast as the self-conscious architect of transcendence, whose instrument is the particular kind of irony outlined by Schlegel.

Through the preponderance of such irony the artist remains in a state of floating suspension (*schweben*), a sort of negative capability, that is recognised as central to spiritual life and conducive to artistic productivity. It is this belief that underlies Schlegel's affirmation of paradox as a positive value and its close association with irony. Paradox is the basis and the outcome of irony, its *conditio sine qua non*, its soul, source, and principle, as Schlegel put it in a notebook entry:¹⁴ 'Hence paradox comes to be seen as the very incarnation of irony: 'Ironie ist die Form des Paradoxen'¹⁵ ('Irony is the form that paradox takes'). To this Schlegel adds the immediate rider: 'Paradox ist alles, was zugleich gut und gross ist' ('everything that is at once good and great is paradoxical'), thereby affirming the importance of paradox as a spur to that dynamic evolutionary progression which the young Schlegel upheld with such ardour. Three core strands of Schlegel's thought on irony, i.e. the role of consciousness, the assent to mobility, and the notion of paradoxicality, are united in a key aphorism often cited as Schlegel's definition of irony: 'Ironie ist klares Bewusstsein der ewigen Agilität, des unendlich vollen Chaos'¹⁶ ('Irony is clear consciousness of eternal mobility, of the infinite fullness of chaos'). This can only be understood holistically within the web of Schlegel's theory as a summation of his belief that the finite world is contradictory and can therefore be mastered only through the conscious floating of an ironic stance. Puzzling though that dictum may seem, not least in its tantalising brevity, it contains a view of irony illuminating for a Kafka, a Beckett, or a Cervantes. Irony is transformed into a way of seeing the world, of embracing within one's consciousness paradox and chaos.

But irony was not to be merely a passive notation of a mobile world: on the contrary, it was conceived as an active force, an instrument of transcendence as well as of perception. Together with its negative capability, it also carries a positive charge. So Schlegel maintained, 'durch sie' [i.e. Ironie] 'setzt man sich über sich selbst hinweg'¹⁷ ('by means of it' [i.e. irony] 'one transcends oneself'). Irony is an essential tool in the dialectical process of self-

transcendence. This is the context in which another famous phrase of Schlegel's has to be read: irony as the 'steten Wechsel von Selbstschöpfung und Selbstvernichtung'¹⁸ ('constant alternation of self-creation and self-destruction'). This is frequently misinterpreted to refer simply to the breaking of artistic illusion. That may be one of its visible effects in a work of art. What Schlegel proposed, however, went far beyond a superficial play with levels of illusion. Irony, he asserted, is a permanent parábasis ('Die Ironie ist eine permanente Parakbase'¹⁹); it stems from the artist's critical self-detachment and unremitting self-consciousness; it denotes his complete freedom, his superiority over the work-in-progress; and it becomes manifest in the liberty with which he creates, de-creates, and re-creates. The ascending momentum implicit in parábasis for Schlegel is brought out in a notebook entry: 'Parabasis und Chorus jedem Roman nothwendig (als Potenz)²⁰ ('Parabasis and chorus necessary to every novel (for potentiation)'). The destructive side of irony, the 'stete Selbstparodie'²¹ ('incessant self-parody'), as Schlegel called it, is only a stage in a dialectical progression towards ideal transcendental poetry of poetry. It is within this frame of reference that irony is also termed 'eine wirklich transzendente Buffonnerie'²² ('a truly transcendental buffoonery'), for it carries a lofty purpose beneath its roguish appearance.

Schlegel's concept of irony is thus dependent on his theory of Romantic poetry as 'eine progressive Universalpoesie'²³ ('a progressive universal poetry'). In this theory irony occupies a commanding position: the dialectic of its tensions is to permeate every facet of the aesthetic artifact, shaping its outer and inner configuration, and this dynamic is to act as the propellant for the advance towards transcendence. The destructive de-creation of irony is envisaged as a vital step for the subsequent re-creation on a higher plane. The capacity for free self-determination: 'Alles was sich nicht selbst annulliert, ist nicht frei und nichts wert'²⁴ ('Whatever does not annihilate itself is not free and is worth nothing').

Schlegel's theory is patently fraught with dangers. There is no doubt that he posited irony as a manifestation of supreme independence that represents a path to self-transcendence. Whether irony could in practice fulfil these expectations is another matter. Schlegel's inability to realise his aims in his novel

Lucinde (1799) can be attributed more to his own shortcomings as a creative writer than to flaws in his theory. But his conception of irony is a two-edged sword. For though irony may spring from the yearning for transcendence,²⁵ the shortfall from that desired state can induce a damaging sense of negativity. The possibility of such an inversion into the opposite of its intended outcome is an ever present threat. Instead of ascending in an ecstatic self-liberation, irony may provoke a descent into an agonising awareness of uncertainty. The flux of its vaunted mobility may result in acute disorientation. There is, as Beda Allemann²⁶ has recognised, 'etwas leicht Vexatorisches' ('something slightly vexatory') in Schlegel's concept of irony, 'die Möglichkeit eines Umschlags in die dunkle Kehreseite' ('the possibility of inversion into its dark other side'). If transcendence does not follow from irony, as Schlegel would wish, the nihilistic tendencies that Allemann discerns (pp. 99-100) could supervene. Schlegel, incidentally, soon dropped this early theory of irony, and after his conversion to Catholicism came to link irony to love.

For the reader there is another more immediate risk. Once irony is transferred from the rhetorical into the metaphysical sphere, the consequences of missing or misreading it are vastly increased. When irony is a form of witicism, as with the Augustans, ineptitude in grasping it leads to a local and limited misunderstanding. On the other hand, when irony is centrally encoded in an entire work, failure to recognise it produces a radical misinterpretation. The greater the potential of irony in its scope, range, and role in a work, the greater the attendant hazards for the reader.

While Schlegel formulated a new theory of irony allied to his postulate for Romantic poetry, he did not actually invent it. He derived his theory from the practical models he acknowledged in Socrates, Petrarch, Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Sterne and Diderot. His achievement lies in his insights into the significance of their irony and in his ability to crystallise those insights into a palpable, albeit complex theory. Nor did he in fact call it 'romantic irony' in any of the writings that appeared during his lifetime. The phrase occurs four times in his private literary notebooks which were not deciphered and published until 1957. The four relevant entries²⁷ refer to Shakespeare, to drama, to Petrarch, and to the essence of the romantic. In the literary criticism of the German Romantics, the combination of

'romantic' with 'irony' was not common currency; Tieck, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Solger and Adam Müller simply wrote about 'Ironie', like Friedrich Schlegel, though like him they too distinguished between rhetorical irony and their particular concept of irony. Only Novalis used the phrase in reference to Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister*,²⁸ but as in the case of Friedrich Schlegel, in a private notebook not published until a century after his death in 1801. Nor does the phrase occur in Hegel's aesthetic treatises of 1835-8 despite his many attacks on irony and on Romanticism and his evidently ironic sally against the 'geniale, göttliche Ironie'²⁹ ('divine irony of the genius') invented by Friedrich Schlegel and 'nachgeschwätzt' ('repeated slavishly') by unpteen others. Kierkegaard does not use it either in his *Concept of Irony* (1842) where he writes about 'Irony after Fichte'. It was not until 1850 that this 'unhappy phrase' made its debut in a scholarly work, *Die romantische Schule in ihrem Zusammenhang mit Göthe und Schiller*, by Hermann Heitner, the first systematic historian of German literature. Heitner writes of that 'übermütig aufösende Willkür des Schaffens . . . die unter dem Namen der romantischen Ironie so berühmt und berüchtigt geworden ist'³⁰ ('exuberantly dissolving willfulness in creativity . . . that has gained such fame and notoriety under the name of romantic irony'). In his *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert* (1865-70) Heitner went on to use it freely, alluding with more verve than accuracy to 'jene vielberufene romantische Ironie, von welcher die Romantiker so viel singen und sagen'³¹ ('that much vaunted romantic irony, of which the Romantics sing and speak so much'). Heitner's near contemporary, Rudolf Haym, shows greater caution and understanding in his monumental *Die romantische Schule* (1870) where he eschews 'romantische Ironie' in favour of the more neutral 'poetische Ironie'³² ('poetic irony'). However, Haym's wise modification did not prevail, and it was the recalcitrant 'romantische Ironie' that came to haunt literary criticism.

2

Before the actual term 'romantic irony' was launched in the mid-nineteenth century, Schlegel's new perception of irony had become a topic for heated controversy. It had enthusiastic

advocates and vehement opponents. Yet despite their antagonism the two camps were in agreement in fundamental approach: they envisaged irony not in a rhetorical but in a metaphysical context, not as a figure of speech but as a philosophical and aesthetic stance. This is cogent evidence of the metamorphosis that irony had undergone.

Schlegel's immediate successors among the German Romantics mostly echoed and elaborated on his principles. Adam Müller, in lectures held in Dresden in 1806, equated irony with consciousness and freedom as if the three were interchangeable,³³ asked for a German translation of the term, he averred that he could think of none better than 'revelation of the freedom of the artist or of the human being'.³⁴ Solger outdid Müller in his exaltation of irony in *Erwin* (1815) and in his posthumously published *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (1829). Notwithstanding, Solger's strictures against Schlegel's cynicism and subjectivity, his theory is in three respects strongly reminiscent of his predecessor's: the pronounced demarcation between common irony and that true, noble irony that 'fängt erst recht an bey der Betrachtung des Weltgeschicks im Grossen'³⁵ ('only really begins with the contemplation of the fate of the world as a whole'); the interdependence of irony and consciousness;³⁶ and the endorsement of irony as a philosophical stance.³⁷ But Solger excludes the paradoxicality so prominent in Schlegel's theory, stressing instead the divine mission of irony as a mediator between, or a transition from earthly and eternal being. Solger acclaims irony as the 'wesentlichen Mittelpunkt der Kunst'³⁸ ('quintessential kernel of art'), 'die vollkommenste Frucht des künstlerischen Verstandes' ('the most perfect fruit of artistic insight'), and ultimately the 'helle Pforte zum vollkommenen Erkennen'³⁹ ('the shining gateway to complete understanding'). Solger repeatedly insists that artistic irony, far from being intermittent or fortuitous, is the wellspring of artistic creativity.⁴⁰ In this mystical apotheosis of irony Solger surpasses Schlegel; in aspiring to subsume all art under the aegis of irony he seems strangely to prefigure the 'new critics'.

The reaction against this virtual canonisation of irony came in the forceful reasoning of Hegel in his *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (*Philosophy of Right*, 1833), *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (*Aesthetics*, 1835-8), and *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (*Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 1837). The main thrust of

Hegel's attack is directed against the foundation of the Romantics' concept of irony, namely Fichte's doctrine of subjectivity. Hegel argues that the boundless vanity of the enthroned ego undermines and displaces the authority of the object:

Nicht die Sache ist das Vortreffliche, sondern Ich bin der Vortreffliche und bin der Meister über das Gesetz und die Sache, der damit, als mit seinem Belieben, *nur spielt* und in diesem ironischen Bewusstsein, in welchem Ich das Höchste untergehen lasse, *nur mich geniesse*. – Diese Gestalt ist nicht nur die *Eitelkeit* alles sittlichen *Inhalts* der Rechte, Pflichten, Gesetze – das Böse, und zwar das in sich ganz allgemeine Böse –, sondern sie tut auch die Form, die *subjektive* Eitelkeit, hinzu, sich selbst als diese Eitelkeit alles Inhalts zu wissen und in diesem Wissen *sich* als das Absolute zu wissen. –⁴¹

(It is not the thing that is excellent, but I who am so; as the master of law and things alike, *I simply play* with them as with my caprice; my consciously ironical attitude lets the highest perish and *I merely hug myself at the thought*. This type of subjectivism not merely substitutes a *void* for the whole *content* of ethics, right, duties, and so is evil, in fact evil through and through and universally – but in addition its form is a subjective *void*, i.e. it knows itself as this contentless void and in this knowledge knows *itself* as absolute.)

This 'Konzentration des Ich in sich'⁴² ('concentration of the ego on itself') results in the opposite of what the supposedly divine irony of the genius seeks to attain:

Das Prinzip dieser Produktionen, die nur in der Poesie vornehmlich hervorgehen können, ist nun wiederum die Darstellung des Göttlichen als des Ironischen. Das Ironische aber als die geniale Individualität liegt in dem Sichvernichten des Herrlichen, Grossen, Vortrefflichen, und so werden auch die objektiven Kunstgestalten nur das Prinzip der sich absoluten Subjektivität darzustellen haben, indem sie, was dem Menschen Wert und Würde hat, als Nichtiges in seinem Sichvernichten zeigen. Darin liegt denn, dass es nicht ernst sei mit dem Rechten, Sittlichen, Wahrhaften, sondern dass an

dem Hohen und Besten nichts ist, indem es sich in seiner Erscheinung in Individuen, Charakteren, Handlungen selbst widerlegt und vernichtet und so die Ironie über sich selbst ist.⁴³

(The guiding principle of these works, which can exist fully only in poetry, is again the representation of the divine as the ironic. The ironic, however, as an expression of the genius of individualism resides in the self-destruction of the splendid, the great, the excellent, and so the objective figures of art will have to represent only the principle of a subjectivity become absolute, showing all that has worth and dignity in man as null and void in its self-destructiveness. Consequently, not only is the right, the ethical, and the true not to be taken seriously; furthermore, the highest and best is reduced to nought when it contradicts and destroys itself through its appearance in certain individuals, characters and actions, and thereby becomes the ironic comment on itself.)

For Hegel Schlegel's concept of irony represents the emblem – and the scapegoat – of his hatred of subjectivity. Censured for its reductive frivolity⁴⁴ and its irresponsible dissolution of ethical values,⁴⁵ irony is identified as 'the absolute principle of negativity'⁴⁶ in which the ego, having destroyed all external certainties, comes to bask in its self-centred consciousness.

Hegel's accusation of subjectivity against the Romantic concept of irony became the focal point of contention thereafter. It led to some curious alignments: Hegel's sympathy for Solger, for instance, stemmed from their common stand against Schlegel's subjectivity. Kierkegaard, too, sides with Hegel on this issue; in reviewing irony after Fichte, he concurs with the Hegelian view that it 'is a determination of subjectivity',⁴⁷ indeed 'the being-for-itself of subjectivity' (p. 274). Kierkegaard raises 'the same objection as Hegel to a subjectivity run amok: "The ego was like the crow, which, deceived by the fox's praise of its person, lost the cheese. Thought had gone astray in that reflection continually reflected upon reflection, and every step forward naturally led further away from all content" (p. 289).⁴⁸ Kierkegaard also accepts Hegel's definition of irony as the principle of 'absolute negativity', though not for the reasons advanced by Hegel, who assailed the subjectivity of irony on the grounds that it posed a threat to the authority of the objective system. Kierkegaard's pronouncement carries all the more

weight because it derives not from a doctrinaire position, but from an apparently dispassionate assessment of irony:

Thus we have irony as infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity because it only negates; it is infinite because it negates not this or that phenomenon; and it is absolute because it negates by virtue of a higher which is not. Irony establishes nothing, for that which is to be established lies behind it. It is a divine madness which rages like a Tamerlane and leaves not one stone standing upon another in its wake. Here, then, we have irony. (p. 278)

On balance, however, Kierkegaard's posture in *The Concept of Irony* is itself ironically ambivalent. He is further from Hegel than at first seems: he takes Hegel to task for discussing irony in a tone of indignation and with contempt, specially in regard to Schlegel; yet he also emphasises that his criticism does not imply either that Hegel erred in his judgement of Schlegel, or that the Schlegelian perception of irony was not gravely flawed. Nonetheless he ends closer to Schlegel than is generally supposed, although his interest shifts increasingly from the concept of irony onto the persona of the ironist. On two major aspects of irony there is substantial accord between Kierkegaard and Schlegel. Both make the basic distinction between 'irony as a momentary expression' and 'pure irony, or irony as a standpoint' (p. 270). The former is defined by Kierkegaard in Johnsonian terms as a 'figure of speech' that 'travels in an exclusive incognito'; its characteristic is 'to say the opposite of what is meant' (pp. 264-5) so that it is, to all intents and purposes, 'identical with dissembling' (p. 272). This 'executive irony' is differentiated from 'contemplative irony' (p. 271) in quality as well as in quantity:

Irony in the eminent sense directs itself not against this or that particular existence but against the whole given actuality of a certain time and situation. It has, therefore, an a priori in itself, and it is not by successively destroying one segment of actuality after the other that it arrives at its total view, but by virtue of this that it destroys in the particular. It is not this or that phenomenon but the totality of existence which it considers *sub specie ironiae*. (p. 271)

The total ironist, therefore, on the metaphysical plane, is

consistently ironical. Though such 'contemplative' irony springs from a perception of the discontinuities of existence, it has in itself a continuity that makes it harder to reconstruct than the intermittent 'executive' irony. Directed as it is at the 'totality of existence', it can be read only in its totality. Thus, the more thorough the irony, the scunter the indications held out to the reader. But then, according to Kierkegaard, metaphysical irony, not being engaged in a mere conceit of dissemblance, 'does not generally wish to be understood' (p. 266); indeed, the ironist may even seek 'to lead the world astray' (p. 268).

Besides this distinction between irony as a figure of speech and irony as a philosophical standpoint, there is another significant affinity between Schlegel's and Kierkegaard's views. For while Kierkegaard subscribes to Hegel's characterisation of irony as infinite absolute negativity, he realises that this is only one aspect of irony. He is certainly far more aware than the idealistic Schlegel of the dangers of an irony trapped in an annihilating scepticism. But he concludes *The Concept of Irony* by proclaiming that: 'Irony is like the negative way, not the truth but the way' (p. 340). The 'truth' and aim of irony is 'as a mastered moment', and when it attains this idea, it is the antithesis of infinite absolute negativity:

When irony has first been mastered it undertakes a movement directly opposed to that wherein it proclaimed its life unmastered. Irony now limits, renders finite, defines, and thereby yields truth, actuality, and content; its chastens and punishes and thereby imparts stability, character, and consistency. Irony is a disciplinarian feared only by those who do not know it, but cherished by those who do. (pp. 338-9)

So Kierkegaard affirms the positive potential of irony. Its negativity is not a terminus, only a stage - 'a cleansing baptism' (p. 339) - in a cathartic process that ultimately yields 'truth'. Kierkegaard here envisages irony, like Schlegel, as a means of transcendence and self-transcendence. For both, the intent of the highest kind of irony is to raise the individual above the paradoxes that constitute the dialectic of life. Irony is simultaneously the mode of perceiving and of overcoming those paradoxes.

From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, the possibilities of irony as a metaphysical force were increasingly

taken into cognizance. While theoreticians were in agreement on the philosophical nature of irony, opinion was divided as to whether it carried a positive or a negative charge. The transferral of irony from the verbal to the metaphysical domain entailed a change in its literary character too. Like the image, which underwent a parallel metamorphosis at about the same time under the impact of the same cultural constellation, irony rose from the position of servant to that of master. In its traditional role as a verbal trope it could make a limited, peripheral contribution to a work whose direction had already been determined; it was rather more than just ornamental, but less than essential. In its new guise it stood at the epicentre of the aesthetic artifact, defining not only its mode but its meaning and intent, permeating them with an ironic sense of ambivalence, mobility, and paradoxicality. This second potential of irony did not, of course, supplant its original usage. Irony as a figure of speech is a persistent resource of sophisticated discourse at all periods. But its implications as a primal source of energy in a literary work were openly avowed and fully explored only in the modern period whose roots go back into the eighteenth century.

3

The metamorphosis of irony was a product and a manifestation of a wider transformation of Western civilisation during this 'pivotal period . . . that made the turn from Renaissance to modern'.⁴⁹ It was pivotal through its searching re-assessment of the hitherto revered heritage of the Classical canon. The protracted Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, despite its pedantry, was symptomatic of an underlying crisis of confidence. The spate of aesthetic treatises after 1730 reveals the upsurge of speculation about new directions in the arts. These tentative explorations of criteria for beauty and sublimity initiated the emancipation from the established models. The breakthrough came in Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) in which the old prescript of imitation was superseded by the then startling ideal of original creation. The prominence of such terms as 'originality', 'creativity', and 'genius' shows the change of standards in the arts. The artistic revolution of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century was the most striking

indication of a radical revision of man's perception of the universe and of his relation to it and to himself.

The momentous re-orientation which took place in the second half of the eighteenth century is generally ascribed to the break away from 'the belief in the rationality, the perfection, the static completeness, the orderliness and coherency of reality'⁵⁰ that had found its supreme embodiment in the Enlightenment's schema of a continuous Scale of Being. The loss in credibility of certainties formerly buttressed by reason in philosophy and dogma in religion is the crucial 'somewhat enigmatic event'⁵¹ that acted as a catalyst to the transition from the Classical to the modern *epistémè*. The 'closed ideology', for centuries the foundation of the political, social, scientific, and metaphysical organisation of Western Europe, envisaged the world as temporally and spatially limited, and therefore amenable to the imposition of a set hierarchical order. For all its shortcomings, such an archetype fostered a sense of optimism because it made the universe appear open to rational comprehension, and ultimate truths attainable by the power of the human mind. The great monument to the 'closed ideology', the *Grande Encyclopédie* (1751-72), was designed to marshal all the definitives of human knowledge into a methodical syntaxis. Though finally completed, it served less as an apotheosis of the code it represented than as a harbinger of its bankruptcy. For this attempt to arrange data in a logical sequence, to draw regulatory distinctions, to establish permanent values, in short, to order the universe, led instead to the confrontation of a refractory disorderliness, even though this was not then admitted publicly. It was not until a quarter of a century later that the violent end of the *ancien régime* in the French Revolution demonstrated the collapse of venerable institutions and cherished beliefs. This erosion of long standing European systems, which had been the guardians of security, forms the background for the metamorphosis of irony. The 'open ideology', nurtured by the rising young generation of Romantics, tolerated - indeed welcomed - disorder, flux, mystery, and fragmentariness as the elements of that creative chaos from which a better new world could be shaped.

The political revolution of 1789 coincided with an equally far-reaching philosophical revolution. In the preface to the second edition of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787) Kant actually used the phrase 'Copernican revolution'⁵² to

describe the change effected by his theory of knowledge. By postulating the priority of the active perceiving knower over the inert corpus of knowledge, Kant explicitly threw open the entire question as to the bases of our knowledge of objects and the accessibility of absolute truths. Kant distinguished categorically between the phenomenal, which he believed could be known, and the noumenal, which could not. However, this discrimination hardly blunted the impact of Kant's propositions, which diminished men's faith in their epistemological capabilities. The processes of knowing were shown to be far more complicated than had been supposed, yielding fewer certainties and leaving more spaces of doubt. Kant's Copernican revolution represents an important step in the replacement of the 'closed ideology' by the 'open ideology'. The pursuit of the fixities of a finite world gave way to a probing of an infinite universe to which great areas of indeterminacy now had to be conceded. Once the reliability of knowledge had been undermined, a flood of doubt invaded men's minds, making them particularly receptive to the ambivalences of irony.

As the authority of objective judgement declined, the jurisdiction of subjective cognition expanded. It was given unlimited prerogatives in Fichte's *Grundlagen der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (*The Science of Knowledge*, 1794) which predicated the dependence of reality on the perceptions of the ego. Fichte went much further than Kant in sponsoring the primacy and autonomy of the ego. His transcendentalism, by considering things in relation to the perceiving subject, examines the *a priori* conditions for our experience of the world, and thereby concentrates philosophical analysis on subjectivity. When reality is reduced to the status of a non-ego posited by the ego, its claims to authenticity are shattered. In the dialectical relationship between non-ego and ego, it is the ego that has unchallenged supremacy as the fountainhead of knowledge. Fichte's sweeping idealism has a direct bearing on the metamorphosis of irony in three respects. First, his assumption of an underlying polarity between self and reality forms the paradigm for the dialectical structure of Friedrich Schlegel's theory of irony. Secondly, his apotheosis of the ego bred a self-consciousness unparalleled in its intensity at any previous period. The self became conscious of itself as a perceiving consciousness in a spiralling movement that encompassed the opposing poles of self-immersion and self-

detachment. Finally, Fichte's consistent subjectivity, by stripping objective judgement of its prestige, reinforced the drift towards incertitude initiated by Kant. The processes of perception and judgement were seen to be problematical in themselves, while the validity of such concepts as 'meaning' or 'contrariness' is reduced through their subjection to idiosyncratic value referents. The ascendancy of subjectivity thus seriously prejudices the operations of traditional irony, which rests on the acceptance of a common understanding of words and ideas.

One of the consequences of the modification effected by the philosophies of Kant and Fichte in the standing of knowledge as an anterior mode of being was a subtle but vital change in the perception of language. Hitherto knowledge and language had been rigorously interwoven: 'The fundamental task of Classical "discourse" is to ascribe a name to things, and in that name to name their being. For two centuries, Western discourse was the locus of ontology. When it named the being of all representation in general, it was philosophy: theory of knowledge and analysis of ideas.'⁵⁵ This is the postulate that animated the so-called Port-Royal grammar, the *Grammaire générale et raisonnée* (1660; *General and Reasoned Grammar*) of Claude Lancelot and Antoine Arnauld. The framework for this reasoned explanation of the parts of speech is clearly revealed in the significant title of the succeeding volume, *La logique, ou l'art de penser* (1662; *Logic, or the art of thinking*) which achieved still greater fame throughout Europe. The systematisation that is the aim of these codified universal grammars is the linguistic counterpart to that ordering of all knowledge that was the ideal of the *Grande Encyclopédie*. As the validity of objective knowledge came to be questioned, so too were the bases of language. Displaced from its previous almost automatic representative function, the word made a startling new appearance as 'enigmatic raw material'.⁵⁶ The growing scepticism and speculation through the eighteenth century about the efficacy of pre-established and received meanings and also about the assumptions underlying expression and communication is another pregnant manifestation of the wider crisis of authority characteristic of this 'pivotal period'.

The change in the perception of language is, however, harder to pinpoint than in the theory of knowledge because it occurred not with the sudden explosive impact of the works of Kant and Fichte, but in a series of treatises spread over nearly a century.

Gradual though the change may have been, its direction is plain: from the static, schematic view embodied in the Port-Royal grammar to a dynamic, developmental vision. The axiomatic certainty of 'closed' grammar gave way to the 'open' probing of emergent language theory. A major landmark in this transformation is Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) which has been deemed 'the first modern treatise devoted specifically to philosophy of language'.⁵⁵ In Book III of the *Essay*, 'Words', Locke's primary preoccupation is with the precise definition of words on the grounds that great disputes and errors are generally about the signification of words rather than about the nature of things' (III, x, 14). The source of the problem lies, in Locke's opinion, in the 'very unsteady and uncertain significations' (III, x, 4) attached to words which give rise in turn to 'doubt, obscurity, or equivocation' (III, vi, 40). Locke takes a pragmatic and optimistic approach, seeking to remedy an ill for which he believes a corrective to exist. He does not radically question the capacity of words to carry steady significations. His tone is that of a rational enquiry into the reasons for the failure of words to perform their assigned task; he rises to anger at vagrant uses that are a threat to intelligibility, but never to anguish about the possibility of comprehensible communication. It is not in that sense that Locke's notions about words are modern. The long range importance of the *Essay* lies rather in the connection it makes between semantic issues and the theory of knowledge. Semantic inquiries during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had been intimately associated with logic and grammar. The new epistemological orientation of semantics, . . . , was first explicitly established in Locke's *Essay*.⁵⁶ This 'new epistemological orientation of semantics' is a signal precursor of the later parallel tendency of irony. What is more, the metamorphosis of irony is directly linked to the reorientation of semantics. For when 'the name ceases to be the reward for language'⁵⁷ when 'words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things'⁵⁸ that is to say, when signification and meaning in themselves become matters of doubt, then it is no longer practical to say the contrary to what is meant in the supposition that meaning and countermeaning will immediately be understood. If words are used with uncertain meanings, as Locke saw, even rhetorical irony cannot function as the simple, stable device it is generally taken to be.

So Locke sows the first seeds of that 'linguistic relativism'⁵⁹ that was to come into full flower with Herder (1744-1803) and Humboldt (1767-1835). Locke's influence is evident in Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746; *Essay on the Origins of Human Knowledge*) which was advertised on its translation into English in 1756 as 'a supplement to Mr Locke's *Essay in the Human Understanding*'. For Condillac, as for Locke, the model is the mathematician's clear use of signs, although Condillac, building on both the Port-Royal principles of universal grammar and on Locke's doctrine of the origin of ideas in sensation, evolved an original theory of signs that went far beyond Locke. Condillac emphasised repeatedly the dependence of all discursive thought on the use of language, and the rôle of language as the medium of thought: 'Penser devient donc un art, et cet art est l'art de parler'⁶⁰ ('Thinking thus becomes an art, and that art is the art of speaking'). But the crux of Condillac's understanding of language is his interest in its origins, whereby he introduces the dimension of time into the consideration of language, and, above all, endows words with an internal energy, and, as it were, an autonomous life of their own.

The evolutionary capacity of language is the central focus of Herder's *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772; *Treatise on the Origin of Speech*). Herder's theory of speech has been described as 'at the same time a theory of perception, a theory of language, and a theory of signification'.⁶¹ Herder in fact inverts the classical order, according to which the institution of signs rendered possible human communication; he posits the primacy of the communicating being, who defines the signs he is using. Thus the roots of language are transferred to the active subject in the same way as Fichte, in his *Wissenschaftslehre*, and Berkeley, in his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Understanding* (1710), centred the processes of perception in the individual mind. This transference marks a break in the concept of language that corresponds in its thrust to the crucial turn in philosophy towards the end of the eighteenth century. In both fields the movement is from stasis to dynamism, from the acceptance of a regulatory, objective code to the assertion of a mobile, subjective mode. The most obvious and serious outcome of this innovative approach to speech is the formation of an entirely new problem area: that of understanding. A shift occurs in the locus of uncertainty: to the Port-Royal grammarians uncertainty as to what a sign might

signify stemmed from a deficiency of knowledge regarding the object it intended to represent; whereas from the later eighteenth century onwards it became increasingly evident that the uncertainty might reside in the ways in which individuals use words. Like the processes of perception, the processes of communication were now recognised as far more complex and far more wayward than had hitherto been assumed.

This does not imply that the eighteenth century has a theory of meaning in the modern sense. It is well to heed Ian Hacking's warning 'of the extreme difficulty of pinning a "theory of meaning" on any philosopher of those times'.⁶² However, the late eighteenth century was amply aware of the discrepancy between the sign and what it might signify, and of the hazards of language as an unreliable mediator of meaning. What begins as a critique of terminological confusions quickly grows into a disseminated unease about the ways in which language functions to convey meaning as well as about its relation to the processes of the mind. To knowledge, and indeed to the order of things. Once language comes to be regarded as fundamentally precarious, once doubt is cast on the feasibility of communicating meaning with assurance, the traditional tactics of irony, 'saying the contrary to what is meant', lose much of their effectiveness as a form of discourse. The discovery of ambiguities in all words is a potent factor impelling towards more radical and enveloping constructs of irony that mirror the essential paradoxicality of existence. The intuition of the instability of meaning paves the way for the metamorphosis of irony.

4

The dominant literary trends of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century also encouraged the extension of irony and the change in its character. The rise of both the Romantic movement and the novel proved fertile ground for the fruition of irony.

At first sight the association of Romanticism with irony seems as strange conceptually as it is verbally. Romanticism is generally taken to denote a primary commitment to the expression of feeling, and this appears to be the opposite to the controlled detachment of irony. Yet the Romantic poets were too

accomplished as poets not to realise that feeling, even at its most intense, required a certain control if it was to be turned into good poetry. Wordsworth's well-known prescript, 'emotion recollected in tranquillity',⁶³ was not an open invitation to a self-indulgent outpouring of feeling; it recognises the necessity for calm retrospective assessment by the shaping spirit. Nor did Wordsworth see any contradiction between his advocacy of emotion and the avowed moral intent of his poetry. The 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'⁶⁴ was a means to an end: to carry 'alive into the heart by passion truth which is its own testimony'.⁶⁵ If emotion was to serve such higher purposes, its overabundance had to be curbed. Irony clearly offered one method of regulating its flow, and it was used to that end by Byron, though not by Wordsworth himself. Neither Wordsworth's poetic theory nor that of any other leading English or French aesthetician concedes any importance to irony. That was a distinctive feature of German Romantic doctrine. None the less, the demand for tranquil recollection on the poet's part suggests a stance by no means inimical to the ironist's contemplative discrimination. It would be erroneous to dismiss irony outright as alien to the Romantics' engagement in feeling, or to regard it only as a late importation, a mocking corrective to excess.⁶⁶

Despite its absence from Romantic theory except in Germany, irony is far more integral to the Romantic perception of the world and of poetry than is usually supposed. Romanticism is the culmination of that transformation of Western culture under way during the 'pivotal period' of the eighteenth century. Its ideology is the very epitome of 'openness' in its affirmation of an infinite universe, in which flux, change and growth were the norms, and where indeterminacy, chaos, ambivalence and relativism were evaluated as positive preliminaries to a progression towards the ideal. The artistic aspirations, too, were assimilated to this vision. For this reason the Romantics reacted with vehemence against that predication of immutable laws of art that had obsessed their predecessors; they emphasised, on the contrary, its organic aspects, often adding botanic images of germination, unfolding and flowering to illustrate the genesis of a poem. Coleridge, Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley, Hugo, Stendhal, Mme. de Staël, Friedrich Schlegel, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and Novalis all subscribed to this creed of vitalistic evolution. Friedrich Schlegel

believed that the essence of Romantic poetry was that it should 'ewig nur werden, nie vollendet' (forever be becoming, never completed). As soon as art turns from a static, finite entity into an infinitely active force, it desires not perfection but striving energy. Only through incessant movement will it attain the ideal in a self-transcendence that embraces the dialectic of opposites.

In this context it becomes apparent that the marked idealism of Romanticism is not at odds with its willingness to countenance contradiction. The polar tensions of contradiction and paradox were esteemed as productive stimulants to growth in a sequence that comprised negation as well as assertion. So irony could be placed alongside feeling as one of the major activators of Romantic art. As the mechanism for the destruction that must precede the higher re-construction, it becomes the cipher for the creative artist's autonomy, and beyond that for the upward spiral of the Romantics' hopes. Moreover, through its saturation with irony the work of art comes to have a double existence: as an independent aesthetic artifact and as a self-representation of its continuing formative processes. So it can assert *and* negate itself. The role ascribed to irony in Romantic art is therefore in consonance with its aesthetic principles, notably in the insistence on polarity and dynamism. These principles, like the concept of irony itself, reflect the attempt to delineate a form of art that devolves from a vision of the world as boundless and kinetic, and hence most fittingly conveyed in a mode aware of its own essential mobility.

Like Romanticism, though from a different angle, the novel was also conducive to the blossoming of irony. Its rise in stature about the middle of the eighteenth century is commonly connected to the emergence of the bourgeoisie and to 'the transition from the objective, social and public orientation of the classical world to the subjective, individualist and private orientation of the last two hundred years'.⁶⁸ In this respect it is a concomitant of both the outer changes in the structure of European society and the inner transformations that occurred during the 'pivotal period'. This latter aspect has recently been underscored in the contention that the increase in the novel's popularity is 'more an intimate expression in innovative form of the restless self-questioning that has characterized so much of Western culture'.⁶⁹ Whether this large claim holds for the novel as a whole is disputable. However, it certainly holds for a sub-

category of the genre, the self-conscious novel, which leapt to prominence with *Tristram Shandy* (1760-7), and which has a direct bearing on the extended role of irony in fiction.

The growth of self-consciousness and its precipitate in the arts is awkward to chronicle with cogency, let alone brevity. Its aesthetic bases have been illuminated by Bernhard Heinrich's subtle book⁷⁰ on the concept of fictionality in the theory and practice of the German Romantics. He shows that its sources lay in the crystallisation of an awareness that art involves a particular kind of illusion. The understanding of this principle was still lacking in the early eighteenth century when the appeal to literal truthfulness had been the prevailing criterion. The capacity to distinguish between deception and illusion, between the faithful reproduction of reality and the aesthetic appearance of reality marks a crucial watershed in the approach to art. Heinrich dates the spread of this realisation of the innately fictional character of art to the late eighteenth century. The implications of this shift in the perception of art are momentous:

nicht wie ein Roman erzählt wird, ist im Hinblick auf den epischen Fiktionscharakter, auf den ästhetischen Schein des Epischen von Bedeutung, sondern dass er erzählt wird; nicht wie ein Autor erzählt, sondern dass er erzählt - dass er erzählt, obwohl es gewissermassen gar nichts 'zu erzählen', 'zu berichten' gibt. So verstanden ist das fiktionale Erzählen insgesamt und von vornherein ein Fingieren des historischen Erzählens, ist es die künstlerisch-künstliche Form und hat den 'ästhetischen Schein' - des Erzählens selbst. (p. 42; italics are Heinrich's)

(not *how* a novel is told is of importance in regard to its epic fictional character, to the aesthetic appearance of epic, but *that* it is told; not *how* the author tells, but *that* he tells - *that* he tells, although in a certain sense there is nothing 'to tell', 'to report'. Understood in this way, fictional narration is wholly and from the outset a pretence of historical narration; it is the aesthetic-artificial form, and it has the 'aesthetic appearance' - of narration itself.)

This recognition of the pretence inherent in all fictional narration breeds a consciousness of art as art on the part of the writer and the reader alike. The element of playfulness implicated in

conjuring up the illusion promotes detachment from the matter and fascination with the manner of narration. The self-reflexivity that is an outcome of this stance opens up the space for irony as a mode of play with illusion and artistic form.

The concept of art as illusion is relevant to all literary genres, indeed to all the arts, but it is particularly important for narrative. On the one hand, narrative is more likely than either drama or lyric to be mistaken for true report, so to speak. On the other hand, its genetic disposition, with a teller and a listener whatever the actual 'narrative situation',²¹ not only permits but strongly encourages a high degree of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity. The narrator may tell, besides his story, of himself and of the story he is telling. The extraordinary flexibility of the novel as a literary form allows it to move beyond its overt fabulation to a collateral metafictional level where its apprehension of itself as an aesthetic artifact can be voiced. The spaces surrounding the fabulation lend themselves to an elastic expansion that can accommodate interplay between the narrator and his text and/or his reader. The proportion of metafictional comment to fictive story can be varied at will, even to the point where the metafiction eclipses the fiction. And because the novel, more than any other genre, has the freedom to enlarge its spaces, it has the greatest aptitude for irony. For it is those spaces that are the opportune playground for an irony whose ambivalences are the vehicles for self-reflexion. It is indeed arguable that the novel is an intrinsically ironic genre because its form tends to foster a radical scrutiny of its own fictive constructs.

Changes in the practice of irony during the 'pivotal period' followed also from the modification of the relationship of the narrator to his audience. In the ancient epic that relationship had been ritualistic, conforming to the conventions of rhetoric, and based on the assumption of a uniform, cohesive listenership. The switch from the epic, designed for oral recitation, to the novel aimed at a solitary reader brought a fundamental alteration in the attitude of the narrator to his audience, which had become amply evident by the mid-eighteenth century and which was reinforced by a sociological shift. The readership modulated from a known collective group familiar with the canons of taste and acquiescing in them to an amorphous assortment of individuals whose reading competence could not be taken for granted and whose paths of access had to be incorporated into the narrative itself.²²

Tristram Shandy (1760-7) and *Humphrey Clinker* (1770) are the major landmarks cited by Wolfgang Iser,²³ while Goethe's *Werther* (1774) is chosen by Victor Lange²⁴ as the exemplar of the novel's newly personal, intimate address *ad hominem* – or, probably, *ad feminam*. The one-to-one address evinced a more immediate involvement on the reader's side. With increasing frequency he/she is required to participate actively in the coordination of events rather merely to listen passively. The 'characterized'²⁵ fictive reader, such as 'Madam' in *Tristram Shandy*, is turned into the narrator's accomplice in the creation of the narrative, though the alliance entails a tense combination of camaraderie and provocation. As the figure of the reader becomes more problematical, so too does that of the narrator. Aware himself of the fictive nature of his text, he is often tempted to sport with the illusion he is creating. The patterns of expectation traditional to classical story-telling are disrupted by a whimsicality that indulges irony – but that rebuffs its easy intelligibility.

The metamorphosis of irony in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century is therefore not an isolated phenomenon nor even a particularly esoteric one. The change that irony undergoes is one facet of the broad transformation in the political face, the social structure, the philosophic tenets, and the artistic creed of Europe at that period. As such it partakes of the spirit of the age; it has filiations to factors as capacious as the ascendancy of relativistic thinking in the wake of Kant's Copernican revolution and the nascent suspicion of the unsteadiness of words; the explosion of self-consciousness following from Fichte's subjectivism; the aesthetic doctrines of the Romantic movement concerning the function of poetry, the role of the artist, and the configuration of the work; the rise of the novel and the predilection for self-reflexivity; and the altered relationship between narrator and audience. In short, the metamorphosis of irony is another intimation of the avocation of that age for questioning its heritage, reassessing its values, and fashioning an ideology in keeping with its own apprehension of the universe.

What is far more perplexing is the correlation between the new theory of irony and the literary practice of irony. The shift in the conceptualisation of irony is paralleled by roughly contemporaneous experimentation with the possibilities of irony in fiction. In fact in one respect the link between theory and practice can easily be documented in that Friedrich Schlegel

9 In Search of a Theory

' - to define - is to distrust'
Tristram Shandy, vol. 3, ch. 33

1

'Toward a Definition of Romantic Irony in English Literature': the title of Stuart Sperry's article alludes to the predicament faced sooner or later by all who write about romantic irony, that is to say, the necessity, but the infeasibility of the task of definition. Without definition the phenomenon remains inchoate; yet no succinct definition is adequate to its complexity.

The increasing attention that romantic irony has recently been attracting has resulted in a number of attempted definitions. Sperry's own suggestion, '*indeterminacy*', 'a kind of irresolution', which he links to 'the beginnings of that fragmentation and skepticism we see on all sides of us today' (p. 5), has the advantage of steering between limiting specificity and unserviceable vagueness. Some of the more picturesque definitions unfortunately fall into the latter trap: Ricarda Huch's charming phrase, 'ein geistiges Fliegenkönnen' ('the spiritual ability to fly'); the generous sweep of René Bourgeois' 'le sens du jeu'³ ('the sense of play'); or Vladimir Jankélévitch's grandiose verdict: 'une ivresse de la subjectivité transcendendale'⁴ ('an intoxication of transcendental subjectivity'). Though apposite, none of these is of much practical help. Many of the more substantive definitions are equally unsatisfactory because they are either too partial or too restrictive. For instance, David Simpson claims that

English romantic irony, broadly put, consists in the studied avoidance on the artist's part of determinate meanings, even at

such times as he might wish to encourage his reader to produce such meanings for himself; it involves the refusal of closure, the incorporation of any potentially available 'metacomment' within the primary language of the text, the provision of a linguistic sign which moves towards or verges on a 'free' status, and the consequent raising to self-consciousness of the authoritarian element of discourse, as it effects both the author-reader relation and the intentional manipulation, from both sides, of the material through which they communicate.⁵

This proposition, though challenging and tenable up to a point, is so imbued with contemporary theories of reading and of language as to be less than luminous to the uninitiated. Culler's account, while stemming from a similar critical approach, is considerably more incisive and illuminating; citing Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* as a prime example, he describes romantic irony as 'the posture of a work which contains within itself an awareness of the fact that while pretending to give a true account of reality it is in fact fiction and that one must view with an ironic smile the act of writing a novel in the first place'.⁶ This is a valid position, except in its exclusive concentration on only one aspect of the phenomenon. Morton L. Gurewicz's hypothesis that romantic irony 'blends a romantic ardor with an anti-romantic animus'⁷ is rather naïve in its implicit separation of the romantic from the ironical component. Even that most thoroughly scholarly investigation by Ingrid Strohschneider-Kohrs finally comes up with a definition that is brief and acceptable, but reductive in its formalism: 'Mittel der Selbstrepräsentation der Kunst'⁸ ('the means whereby art represents itself'). Martin Walsler elaborates somewhat fancifully on that sparse formula without amending its substance: 'Das Bewusstsein des Bewusstseins, das andauernde Selbstbewusstsein also, die Transzendental-Präsenz also, ist dann die Desillusions-Technik der Romantiker geworden. Beim Dichten immer dazudichten, dass man dichte'⁹ ('The consciousness of consciousness, the unremitting self-consciousness, the presence of the transcendental then became the Romantics' technique of disillusionment. In the act of writing always to write in that one in writing'). Most recently Anne K. Mellor has offered the best crisp summary in English: 'Romantic irony, then, is a mode of consciousness or a way of thinking about the world that finds a corresponding literary mode',¹⁰ and she has

backed this statement with a competent exposition of that 'way of thinking'. The weakness of her paradigm, however, stems from its exclusive dependence on Friedrich Schlegel, whom she explicates and illustrates, but does not query or develop.

The greatest challenge in grappling with romantic irony is to try to get away from Schlegel's cryptic terminology so as to evolve not so much a portable definition as a robust understanding of the phenomenon in its bewildering ramifications. Such an endeavour must take as its point of departure not the postulates of German Romantic theory but the actuality of romantic irony as it becomes manifest in the works of some of its outstanding exponents. By delineating the differences between their irony and that of traditional ironists, the relationship between the two modes can be brought out, and with it the specific character of romantic irony.

Fundamental distinctions can be drawn between traditional, classical irony and romantic, modern irony. Traditional irony is an irony of discrimination that springs from the security of knowledge held with assurance. Buttressed by faith in the existence of truths and absolute standards, it is an expression of moral judgement as well as of social values. Among the possible alternatives facing him, the traditional ironist is able to distinguish sharply between what he considers 'true' and what he regards as 'false'. His confidence in his knowledge is rooted in the solidity of the ethical framework and in the widespread acceptance of norms held to be sound. His world possesses the coherence of firm contours, and he himself maintains a steady perspective on it; in saying the opposite to what he means, he knows what he means, and what he wants to attain. From the vantage-point of his detachment, and with a slightly supercilious sense of his moral and intellectual superiority over the masses, the traditional ironist uses irony as a means of sceptical evaluation and as a weapon for clarification, seeking to elicit and establish the truth by an argumentation *per contrarium*. His irony is generally local and concrete, focused on contraries that can be resolved. Such stable irony is akin to satire in so far as it is a means to an end, though the ironist always harbours a deeper scepticism about the human condition than the satirist, together with an awareness that its innate ambivalence may in part defy resolution. His mask must, however, remain fairly transparent and his irony finite if they are to achieve the purpose for which

they are designed. For the mask and the rhetoric of irony are the visible manifestations of a vision of the universe, from which they must not be divorced. Irony is never merely a figure of speech; all irony, whether traditional or romantic, originates in a vision of the universe, though that vision is quite different in the two modes. Beneath his ambiguities and equivocations, the traditional ironist aspires to an affirmation of certainty.

Socratic irony is a good example of traditional irony at its most subtle. Often regarded as a dialectical tool and a method of inductive polemics, it far exceeds these circumscribed limits in its reach. Whether Socratic irony is deemed 'a war upon Appearance waged by a man who knows Reality',¹¹ or whether its essence lies 'in Socrates' commitment to the process of intellectual self-enquiry combined with a skepticism concerning the ultimate conclusions it might yield'¹² is largely immaterial. What matters is the staunch commitment to the worth of the process and, beyond that, to the validity of the vision inspiring it. The pretence of ignorance and the mocking assertions of the contrary to what Socrates believed are intended as provocations to uncover falsehoods. In this sense Socrates' systematic irony represents an oblique profession of faith in the efficacy of rational enquiry as well as in the authenticity of the standards upheld. The teasing method of ironical rhetoric peculiar to Socrates springs not from a doubting state of mind but from strongly held convictions, from the urge to attain truth and, what is more, to lead others towards that truth.

The unceasing questions of romantic irony, by contrast, are less a pursuit of enlightenment than an assent to, indeed an affirmation of continuing doubt. For romantic irony is an irony of uncertainty, bent primarily on the perplexities of searching. Alert to the plurality of all meaning and the relativity of every position, the romantic ironist probes an open-ended series of contradictions which bound into a chaos of contingencies instead of coming to rest in a state of resolution or comprehension. In the context of a changing, disjointed world of shifting values, his quest is for transcendental certainty, even while he may question its existence. His irony is therefore pervasive and infinite, absorbing everything in its exponential progression. It is not a perspective on a situation, but a presence within each situation. So its effect is one of kinetic, relativistic perspectivism. Irony is not used to differentiate the true from the false because for the

romantic ironist all options may be true, or false; nor can he manipulatively say the opposite to what he means because he cannot be sure of any meaning. Thus whereas the traditional ironist, who accepts authority and has a hold on knowledge, exposes the disparity between appearance and reality, the romantic ironist, who suspects that each successive reality may be as illusory as the previous one, subjects appearance and reality alike to an unrelenting ontological scrutiny. And the greater the gaps in the knowledge held, the more radical the doubts, and the larger and deeper the spaces occupied by irony. In short, far from using irony, as the traditional ironist does, the romantic ironist is ironic. His irony is the instrument for registering the obdurate paradoxicality of a universe in eternal flux.

2

The divergence between traditional and romantic irony is thus as much a matter of ontology and epistemology as of literary technique. The form that the discourse takes devolves from the underlying philosophic vision. But it is in the discourse itself that the difference between the two modes becomes fully apparent.

In narration this can most cogently be expressed in terms of the narrative stance. The dynamics of the tripartite relationship between the narrator, the narrative, and the reader are distinctively at variance in the two kinds of irony. Traditional irony resides in the space between the narrative and the reader who is able to reconstruct the intended covert meaning with the aid of clues deliberately planted by the knowing narrator who acts as an invisible guide because he wants his irony to be understood. The narrator's stance is impersonal and detached; he functions as an extraneous observer, purposefully uncovering subversive implications which are brought to the reader's attention through indirect but unmistakable signals. The presentation of Casaubon's feelings in *Middlemarch*, cited in the first chapter, is a fine instance of such irony. The narrator, while maintaining his aesthetic distance, is in collusion with the reader, behind the protagonist's back, so to speak. The irony is transparent in that the words carry meanings other than those on the surface, and it is finite in application and stable in that there is no further demolition of the reconstructed meaning.

Romantic irony, on the other hand, is situated primarily in the space between the narrator and his narrative. The discreet, assured chronicler of traditional irony is replaced in romantic irony by a self-conscious, searching narrator who openly stands beside his story, arranging it, intruding into it to reflect on his tale and on himself as a writer. He portrays himself in the act of writing alongside his story as an integral part of his narrative, operating not from behind the scenes, but groping his way across the stage in the presence of his protagonists and his readers. So the romantic ironist assumes a prominence in the text that is the antithesis of the reticent role of the traditional ironist. The distance between the mask and the persona of the narrator is significantly foreshortened to the point where the mask takes possession of the persona. The sense of a dissembling that is meant to be seen through has vanished, and so has the consistent texture of traditional irony. With the romantic ironist the mask merges with the persona in a displacement likely to generate disorientation. The narrator abdicates his controlling, directing function, or at least appears or pretends to do so, becoming in effect a narrative gamesman¹³ who delights in sporting with his creation, exploiting it as a medium for displaying the fireworks of his creativity. While traditional irony is *between* the lines, romantic irony is *in* the lines.

One immediate result of this shift of emphasis is a drastic reduction in the status of the story. While the created, finished product and the effects it achieves attract most interest in such works as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Middlemarch*, and *Effi Brieset*, it is the actual business of story-telling that demands greatest attention in *Tristram Shandy*, *Don Juan*, or *Jacques le fataliste*. The romantic ironist has forgone that supremacy over the world and over his story that enables the traditional ironist to order, to explain, and to resolve. The romantic ironist's self-conscious embroilment in the strategies of narration is at the expense of his narrative. An important mutation occurs here in the art of narration. Not only is linear plot replaced by associative arabesque; in fact, classical aesthetic theory, which held that writers should adapt their style to their tale, is inverted when manner takes precedent over matter. The insistence on the essentially fictional, illusory nature of art furthers this transference. The prominence and space given to the narrated situation declines in proportion to that devoted to the narrative situation. In the *Flegeljähre* and in *Don Juan* the two are

roughly equal, but in *Jacques le fataliste* and certainly in *Tristram Shandy* it is on the tactics of narration rather than on the stories narrated that the spotlight falls. With the romantic ironist narration usurps the centre of the stage, dislodging the story from its customary privileged place. Classical narrative expectations are overturned when narration asserts its autonomy in this way. Literature as product yields to literature as process.

This shift of focus has far-reaching consequences for the reader. The traditional ironist looks outwards to his narrative and also to his listeners; through a network of oblique but comprehensible signals he maintains a tacit rapport with the reader to whom the ironic countermeaning is to be communicated. The stance of the romantic ironist, on the contrary, is introverted; his gaze is directed inwards onto the work he is creating and onto himself as its creator. The reader, even when he is specifically addressed, is no more than an audience of the creative spectacle at best, and at worst merely an eavesdropper. For although the romantic ironist assumes an audible and visible role in his intrusive running commentary on his narration, he has a tenuous connection to the reader despite his vociferous presence because of his overriding interest in himself and in the problems of writing. This entails another fundamental alteration in the entire narrative set-up. The contract between narrator and reader loses its reliability as the basis for communication. Once perspective is converted into perspectivism, the reader is deprived of his sense of assurance *vis-à-vis* the narrative. The signals that he catches from the mercurial narrator may be loud and manifold, but they are inevitably conflicting and confusing since the narrator himself has no firm position or clear insight. So in romantic irony 'the meaning is not simply "reversed" in any determinate and identifiable sense; it is inserted'.¹⁴ It is 'unsettled' through the reciprocal suspicion of narrator and reader. On the one hand, the unreliable narrator implies that it is the reader who is unreliable; on the other, the reader comes to query the narrator's competence and to doubt his knowledge. The resultant irony is wholly different in nature to that engendered by a mutually trusting narrator and reader whose shared intelligence is contrasted with the ignorance of the protagonists. In place of the reader's participation in knowledge, as is the case in traditional irony, in romantic irony he is, by devious manoeuvres, made to realise the unattainability of truth and the prevalence of paradox. It is the reader who becomes the

disconcerted victim of irony, whereas in traditional irony he is a party to the whisperings and snickerings at the expense of the protagonists, the duped objects on whom he preys in concert with the narrator.

Because of these divergences in narrative disposition and in the underlying vision of the universe, the discourse of romantic irony is a palpable departure from that of traditional irony. The ironic discourse of such contemporary writers as Barthelme, Kafka, Beckett, Borges, or Nabokov has been characterised as one 'that invites its own ironies: upon itself, through the deliberate introduction into both story and discourse of gaps, contradictions, and absurdities'.¹⁵ It contrasts with that of, say, Balzac, Austen, or George Eliot, where irony 'was controllable only at the price of introducing a highly coercive and manipulative discourse' (p. 86). The phrase 'only at the price of', together with the adjective 'coercive', contains a value judgement that is hardly warranted. However, the essential distinction between the two modes of discourse is legitimate and important. Almost equally important is the fact that the specification of twentieth century irony is apposite to romantic irony without need of modification or qualification. The close similarity between the discourse engendered by the irony known as 'romantic' and that intrinsic to many modernist texts is the surface stylistic manifestation of the kinship between them. Like its modern descendant, romantic irony emanates from an open sense of self which is projected into images of hovering identity and which finds its aesthetic format in the eschewal of enclosure. The literary structures of romantic as of modern irony are nurtured by the perception of art as a self-generating dynamic process. The consciousness of its own mainsprings is incorporated into the composition and determines its intrinsic form.

The transformation wrought in fiction by romantic irony has a wider significance that extends far beyond the disposition and tactics of narration into the approach to representation in the arts in general. A bold postulate has recently been put forward in the field of art history which has a direct relevance in this context. In *Absorption and Theatricality*, Michael Fried documents and analyses 'a major shift in the relationship between painting and beholder'¹⁶ in mid-eighteenth century French painting. He chooses the terms 'absorption' and 'theatricality' to indicate two

disjunctive positions. By 'absorption' he means the representation of a group of figures hermetically engrossed in whatever they are doing and hence perfectly oblivious to anything extraneous, including the beholder's presence. This corresponds in effect to the situation in traditionally ironic narrative. 'Theatricality', by contrast, denotes the primacy of dramatic and expressive considerations and 'the accomplishment of an ontologically prior relationship, at once literal and fictive, *between painting and beholder*' (p. 76; italics are Fried's). The thrust for theatricality entailed 'the fracturing of perspectival unity, which makes it virtually impossible for the beholder to grasp the scene as a single instantaneously apprehensible whole' (p. 134). The parallelism in presupposition and in impact to romantic irony in narration is quite striking, as is the timing of this shift during the 'pivotal period':

starting around the middle of the eighteenth century in France, the beholder's presence before the painting came increasingly to be perceived by critics and theorists as something that had to be accomplished or at least powerfully affirmed by the painting itself, and more generally that the existence of the beholder, which is to say the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld, emerged as problematic for painting as never before. (p. 93)

Such a perception is animated by the same self-consciousness of art as an illusory theatrical play with its own possibilities and with its audience as romantic irony. What is more, it produced in painting a paradox closely akin to that implicit in narration:

the recognition that paintings are made to be beheld and therefore presuppose the existence of a beholder led to the demand for the actualization of his presence: a painting, it was insisted, had to attract the beholder, to stop him in front of itself, and to hold him there in a perfect trance of involvement. At the same time, taking Diderot's writings as the definitive formulation of a conception of painting that up to a point was widely shared, it was only by negating the beholder's presence that this could be achieved: only by establishing the fiction of his absence or nonexistence could his actual placement before and enthrallment by the painting be secured. This paradox

directs attention to the problematic character not only of the painting-beholder relationship but of something still more fundamental – the *object-beholder* (one is tempted to say *object-subject*) relationship which the painting-beholder relationship epitomizes. (pp. 103–4; italics are Fried's)

The outcome of romantic irony in narrative is equally contradictory. To all appearances the reader is actively invited, indeed cajoled and coerced, into energetic participation in the making as well as in the reading of the narrative. But in reality his efforts are neutralised by the teasing mistrust of which he is the victim; the multiple invocations to the reader are no more than a disarming strategy. He remains an outsider to the transactions between the narrator and his narrative on which the text pivots. He has ultimately a lesser stake in the dynamics of romantic irony than in traditional irony where the confiding narrator, though sparing of explicit appeals, counts on him for comprehension. Thus traditional irony may be said to depend on the reader's relationship to the text, while romantic irony hinges on the narrator's orientation towards his own construct.

If the shift in narrative is in many ways similar to that in painting, it differs in one important respect. 'Absorption' and 'theatricality' represent in Fried's terminology opposing poles with no intermediate possibilities between the two. This is not the case with traditional and romantic irony in fiction. It would no doubt be satisfying to be able to systematise the two modes as either/or alternatives, but such a clear-cut schema would be misleading. When the extreme examples of each type, say *Pride and Prejudice* and *Tristram Shandy*, are juxtaposed, the contrast is so conspicuous as to suggest a mutually exclusive antithesis. It is true also that in the majority of texts one mode or the other predominates. But this does not amount to the 'absolute split' that Booth claims when he argues that:

it is important to recognize the absolute split between works designed to be reconstructible on firm norms shared by authors and readers, and those other 'ironic' works that provide no platform for reconstruction. In one kind all or most of the ironies are resolved into relatively secure moral or philosophical perceptions or truths; in the other, all truths are dissolved in an ironic mist.¹⁷

Much closer to the mark than 'absolute split' is Sperry's phrase: 'Innumerable gradations'¹⁸ between the historical prevalence of specific or corrective irony and the whole line of development that leads to the all-pervading ironies of Beckett and Genet'. 'Innumerable gradations' indicates a sliding scale which is in fact as valid in the typological as in the historical context in which it is here applied. The change from 'stable' to 'unstable', from traditional to romantic irony, chronologically and typologically, consists in a process of relativisation, a shift from a steady perspective to a paradoxical perspectivism. It is the degree and intensity of ambivalence that is at variance. This is revealed primarily in the stance of the ironic narrator and in his handling of the dialectical tensions inherent in the irony. In *Pride and Prejudice* the tensions are dissipated through the elucidation of the misunderstandings. In *Madame Bovary* they turn on the vexatary image of Emma, the outcome of the dissonant oscillation between perspective and viewpoint, and the source of fluctuating attitudes on the part of the narrator and the reader alike. In *Don Juan* the dialectic is exploited for structural purposes, particularly in the alternation between the text's fictional and metafictional levels. In the *Flegeljahre* and in *Jacques le fataliste* it is immanent in both subject and form: it is portrayed in the contrast between the twins and between Jacques and his master, and it also shapes the arabesque patterns of these texts. Its most complete incarnation is in *Tristram Shandy*, where the indeterminate relationship between the actual and the fictive narrator opens up vast spaces of dubiety, while the compelling preponderance of a highly suspect but unassailable first-person narrating voice removes any assured vantage ground from which to direct a definitive interpretation. In all these works except *Pride and Prejudice*, the dialectical tensions remain unresolved, but the movement from the almost total certainties of *Pride and Prejudice* to the almost total uncertainties of *Tristram Shandy* is one of 'gradation' rather than 'split'. When the quantitative balance between resolvable and unresolvable ambivalence reaches a certain point, the proportions are so decisively altered as to consummate a qualitative transformation. The metamorphosis in the conceptualisation of irony in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century marks the crucial turning-point where the qualitative transformation is voiced and asserted. But in literary practice the lines of demarcation between traditional and romantic irony are too fluid to be subordinated to

any rigorous paradigm. It is perhaps a fitting hallmark of irony that it should be so resistant to schematisation.

3

In the light of this theory of romantic irony, some commonly held beliefs about it can be dispelled as fictions.

First, the thesis that it is 'ein historisches Phänomen'¹⁸ ('a historical phenomenon'). Through the name attached to it by Hettner it has come to be associated with a specific period of literary history. Not without some justification either, since it was the leading theoretician of German Romanticism, Friedrich Schlegel, who identified the phenomenon, recognised its importance, and delineated its characteristics. It was, moreover, at a particular phase in history, roughly contemporaneous with its cognitive formulation, that this kind of irony became widespread and prominent in fiction. Yet it is a curious reflection of its jumbled time-schema that the opening volumes of *Tristram Shandy* appeared within five years of Dr Johnson's *Dictionary*. Despite some such inconsistencies in its upsurge, romantic irony does have a historical constituent, but it would be erroneous to insist on its historicity, and quite wrong to envisage it along purely historical lines.

Many critics have indeed made passing reference to the tendency of romantic irony to surpass its conventional historical boundaries. Stroh Schneider-Kohrs cautiously concedes: 'das von der Romantik konzipierte Prinzip der künstlerischen Ironie und die mit dieser Konzeption hervorgehobene Möglichkeit der Kunst trägt eine gewisse Antizipation von Problemen der modernen Kunst in sich'²⁰ ('the principle of artistic irony as conceived by the Romantics and the potential for art brought out in this conception includes a certain anticipation of problems of modern art'). Muecke resorts to a slightly evasive witticism: 'To study Romantic Irony is to discover how modern Romanticism could be, or, if you like, how Romantic Modernism is.'²¹ Muecke's cardinal example of romantic irony in the modern period is Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* (1947). One could just as well cite James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), André Gide's *Les Faux-monnayeurs* (1926; *The Counterfeiters*), Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1951), Italo Svevo's *La Coscienza di Zeno* (1920; *Confessions of Zeno*), Saul

Bellow's *Herzog* (1964), almost any of the fictions of Jorge Luis Borges, Max Frisch's *Mein Name sei Gantenbein* (1964; *A Wilderness of Mirrors*) or *Der Mann erscheint im Holozän* (1979; *Man in the Holocene*), Delmore Schwartz's story, 'In Dreams Begin Responsibilities' (1948), or such very recent works as Stanisław Lem's *Doskonale próznia* (1974; *A Perfect Vacuum*), E. L. Doctorow's *Loon Lake* (1980), Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* (1979), Juan Benet's *Una meditación* (1970; *A Meditation*), or Italo Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979; *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*). This is a random sample of twentieth-century fictions that draw heavily on practices central to romantic irony. The continuing relevance, indeed the crucial importance, of this kind of irony to modern fiction is cogent evidence of its transcendence of the limits of historicity.

Equally telling is its existence before the cultural segment called Romanticism. Friedrich Schlegel and the Romantics were themselves fully aware of the historical antecedents on which they based their perception of irony. It is no coincidence that *Don Quixote* held pride of place among their reading. Tieck published a new German translation of Cervantes' novel in 1799-1801, and even if the Romantics did misread²² certain aspects of *Don Quixote*, they were the first to appraise adequately the teasing ambivalences it insinuates into the narrator-reader relationship. *Don Quixote* was indisputably the foremost model to the Romantics of uses of irony other than those habitual among the Augustans. They also idolised Shakespeare, not only for the spontaneous originality of his genius, but specially for that imaginative perspectivism that enabled him to transport himself into every situation and every character with a mobility that never ceased to astonish them. It is for this quality that Shakespeare is granted an irony that is romantic in its stance, though Schlegel still asserted: 'Cervantes ist doch romantischer als Shakespeare'²³ ('Cervantes is even more romantic than Shakespeare'). The sporadic occurrence of an irony akin to romantic irony before the Romantic period and its frequent recurrence thereafter vitiates the argument that it is predominantly a historical phenomenon. It must be accorded archetypal as well as historical status. It encompasses a typological approach to the manipulation of fictional illusion together with an open-ended querying epistemology and an ontology that embraces an order of disorder quite distinct from orderliness. Such an approach becomes pre-

eminent at an identifiable historical period, but it is by no means confined to that period. To disregard the archetypal dimension of romantic irony is to forfeit an element of momentous significance for an understanding of the art of narration and, above all, for the devices and structures of modern fiction.

Any enquiry into the historicity of romantic irony must needs beg another question: if romantic irony is not to be associated solely with the Romantic period, how appropriate is its name? To put it more bluntly, should it be deemed a misnomer? It is well to recall at this juncture that this name was not in fact accepted usage among the originators of the concept, but was popularised only later by mid-nineteenth century scholars. The Romantics themselves, with an intuitive sense of its wider implications, chose to refer to it as 'artistic' irony. They would, however, emphatically have affirmed the integral function of such irony within the metaphysical and aesthetic edifice they built. Irony was the essential dynamic force in a progressive process in which the work of art was to be de-constructed and re-constructed into a closer approximation of the ideal. Irony is thus one of the major instruments of Romantic idealism: 'sie erscheint als eines ihrer "Mittel", ist erkennbar als ein inneres agens, eine der Bedingungen romantisch-poetischer Möglichkeit' ('it appears as one of its "means", it is recognisable as an inner activating force, one of the conditions for the romantic-poetic endeavour'). What is more, a number of other cardinal tenets of Romanticism, such as the supremacy of the subjective vision, the belief in the transcendental nature of art and in the artist's divine creative powers, and the consequent explosion of self-consciousness have a direct bearing on the crystallisation of the new concept of irony. So it is a facet of the philosophical, aesthetic, and literary re-orientation that is at the core of the Romantic movement. It is no coincidence that an innovative perception of irony and new uses of irony in fiction came into the forefront at that time. In this sense, therefore, there is a certain aptness in the name 'romantic' irony. Yet it has also proved an unfortunate misnomer in so far as it has fostered too exclusive an identification of this type of irony with a limiting period concept. The irony normally described as romantic irony represents an aesthetic category independent of the Romantic movement. Its name has, regrettably, contributed to the underestimation of the phenomenon it denotes by triggering an automatic association that has resulted in a failure

to appreciate to the full its importance beyond the Romantic period.

Partly because of the misleading implications of its name, romantic irony has acquired the reputation of being a peculiar caprice of a few esoteric writers at the turn of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century, resistant to common comprehension and of slight relevance anyway. Such a view of romantic irony is a grave misconception. There is admittedly no denying the intricacy of the concept nor the often rebarbative formulation of ideas by its sponsors from Friedrich Schlegel to Kierkegaard. But these objections do not impugn the worth of the ideas in themselves, although they make them less accessible. What is ultimately at issue in romantic irony is nothing other than the authority of the invented fictional world both unto itself and in relation to the world of our experience. The authenticity of the self-contained illusion remains intact in traditional irony, whereas it is incessantly undermined and questioned in romantic irony. A progressive deconstruction of illusion takes place: first it is broken within the fiction by the impulse to self-representation in mirror images and in those labyrinthine arabesques so favoured by Romantic and modern narrators. The illusion becomes controversial at a second level through the continual arousal of the reader's awareness of the text's standing as fiction. This has a strangely contradictory impact: for the pretence of realism is heightened when the contingencies of the known world appear to be faithfully noted as they beset the narrative; but at the same time the sense of artifice is strongly reinforced through the reader's realisation of the games that are being played. Taken far enough, as in *Tristram Shandy*, such games can finally draw the entire text into an ironic state of relativity. In the transition from traditional irony to romantic irony, irony within the framework of the fiction is transmuted into an irony of the fiction which may then be potentiated into an irony of fictional irony – and of the fictionality of existence. It is a process that starts with ambiguity, edges from ambivalence to paradox, and ends in an alienating derangement of the text and of the world. So romantic irony, far from being the remote preserve of a small coterie of specialists roaming the byways of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, must be of urgent concern to all who travel the highways of fiction and of life.