

IRONY AND IDEOLOGY

IRONY AND IDEOLOGY IN
SCHLEGEL, DE MAN, AND RORTY

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Abstract

Why have we spoken about irony so much for so long? What is at stake in the different ways it has been figured and, just as much, what is at stake in the persistence of certain figures through shifting historical contexts? This study attempts a *metacritical* approach to irony, one which does not so much propose a particular theory of irony or apply a particular understanding of irony to literary or cultural texts as is often done, but which takes as its object of study the discourse *on* irony. The lengthy history, as well as the continuing proliferation, of critical and theoretical work on irony, not to mention the frequency of its invocation in everyday discourse, invites such an approach. In particular, this work explores the relationship between irony and ideology, two terms that stand in a vexed relationship of interdependence and opposition. What this investigation establishes is that from its modern inception, the critical discourse on irony has been as much a political discourse as an aesthetic or philosophical one.

I examine the ideologies underlying and informing three different attempts to theorize, or otherwise invoke and employ, the term irony; those represented by the writings of Friedrich Schlegel, Paul de Man, and Richard Rorty. On the one hand, I argue that the theory of irony partakes inextricably in the philosophy of the self, of the autonomous individual associated with a dominant tradition of liberal thought. To this extent irony

can partake in the ideological construction of an imaginary realm of freedom that masks the subject's social and historical domination. On the other hand, I have persistently discovered, and argued for, the resistance to ideological enclosure within the discourse on irony, and the positing of a social and intersubjective character to irony.

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Introduction

Once More with Irony

The last thing the ironist theorist wants or needs is a theory of ironism.

Richard Rorty (*Contingency* 97)

. . . but can one avoid theorization of irony?

Paul de Man ("Concept" 165)

Irony is a frequently employed term in our current critical climate, and it has enjoyed such regular employment, with overtime wages, for many years. In Tilottama Rajan's terms, irony is one of the "figures of understanding" that have been a dominant concern of critical theory, and practical criticism, since the term was revived by Friedrich Schlegel and the German Romantics, one amongst a spectrum of tropes which readers have used "to crystallise some relationship between appearance and reality, and hence between the surface and depth of the text" (Rajan 63). Curiously, in its many manifestations irony has been seen as the master trope of various literary periods, genres, and movements that critics have otherwise sought to delineate and differentiate from one another: Romanticism, the Victorian novel, modernism, and postmodernism, to name several of the major ones, but these do not exhaust the list.

Numerous critics have commented on, even complained, about the term's tendency to expand beyond any useful delineation, becoming merely that which the critic wishes to call "irony." Thus, Cleanth Brooks, in a very influential statement, came close to associating irony with literariness

itself when he defined it for the New Criticism as the "qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context" (210). Northrop Frye, claiming "not [to be] using the word ironic itself in any unfamiliar sense, though... exploring some of its implications" (40), asserted that "we are now [1957] in an ironic phase of literature" (46), and defined that phase broadly as one in which the hero is inferior in kind and degree to his or her environment--in its final stages a world of "unrelieved bondage" (238). Though Linda Hutcheon would certainly not wish to maintain that we are still in the modernist literary phase Frye referred to as ironic, irony returns in her writings (and the works of others such as Alan Wilde) as the defining trope of the postmodern cultural milieu. Irony is understood by Hutcheon as a radical suspensiveness between two or more terms which can be, simultaneously, a politically motivated contestation of dominant ideologies from within the terms of their own discourse ("Lightness" 70). In Hutcheon's view, this postmodern irony is related to poststructuralist theories of the indeterminacy of language (*Splitting* 10). Thus in a further expansion of the term the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* notes that irony "practically coincides with the notion of deconstruction" (635), an assertion which is in fact consistent with certain of de Man's later statements concerning irony.

Both the ambiguity and potential limitlessness of the concept of irony invite several responses. One might work toward a poetics of irony by delineating and defining the various kinds of irony, their spheres and effects, as D.C. Muecke has attempted to do; or in the fashion of Wayne Booth one might propose a rhetoric of irony (in the traditional sense of

rhetoric) studying how irony operates between interlocutors, and from this inquiry simultaneously argue for the superior quality, for critical and social discourse, of a particular kind of irony.¹ Like Linda Hutcheon the critic might take irony itself as an historically shifting trope and restrict herself to examining a particular historical manifestation of the trope in some aspect: formal, aesthetic, political or otherwise.² Alternately, one might, after de Man, juxtapose irony and history theorizing a "total arbitrariness" ("Concept" 181) of language, named irony, that will always disrupt the narratives and metaphors through which we understand entities, such as irony and ourselves, to be historical.³

These are invaluable approaches to irony; my own approach, in more ways than one, will be dependent upon them. Given, however, the sheer weight of the theoretical discourse on irony, not to mention the innumerable studies that employ some conception of the trope for more specific readings of literary, or more broadly cultural, texts, it would seem worthwhile to attempt, rather than a variation or a contribution to one of these projects, a *metacritical* approach to the very *discourse* on irony. Granting all the difficulties attendant upon the idea of metacriticism, difficulties which are particularly acute when discussing irony, often theorized as the self-consciousness of the impossibility of a metacritical stance, to my mind a variety of metacritical studies of different theoretical, critical, and aesthetic discourses have provided some of the most insightful contributions to critical theory over the last two decades or more.⁴ The lengthy history, as well as the continuing proliferation, of work on irony, not to mention the frequency of its invocation in everyday discourse,

would appear to make it ripe for such an approach.

Why have we spoken about irony so much for so long? What is at stake in the different ways it has been figured and, just as much, what is at stake in the persistence of certain figures through shifting historical contexts? De Man may be correct when he writes: "It is not irony but the desire to understand irony that brings such a chain [irony's "infinite chain of solvents"] to a stop" ("Concept" 166). This, then, will be an attempt to read those desires and those understandings, even as they inform de Man's own writing.

Joseph Dane's *The Critical Mythology of Irony* provides the beginnings of a metacritical approach to irony, one that will provide a starting point, and an occasional point of return, for my own very different concerns. Dane focuses "on [the] critical language [on irony] rather than the objects of that language" (4). Accepting outright that the understanding of irony is being continually refigured, Dane asks: "what particular advantages have there been for the philosopher, the poet, or the critic in invoking irony?" (2). "The danger in any discussion of irony," Dane maintains, "is the assumption that the word must have a coherent and universal referent in the objects to which it is applied... the word is better understood [however] in terms of origins and motivations" (6). Dane's bracketing of the referent (irony), for an inquiry into the underlying motivations of the numerous critical discourses on irony is refreshing and suggestive. It opens the door to a consideration of the relation between irony and *ideology* upon which I have focused this study.

The relation between irony and ideology is a direction, however,

that Dane does not follow in any sustained sense. His aims, in the end, are largely to *demythologize* the mythology of irony. While a certain demythologizing, or demystifying, gesture must inform the ideology critique that my own study partly attempts to be, Dane, appropriately enough for his concerns, demythologizes in the name of a more sober, objective, practice of criticism. He seeks to correct the excesses into which discussions of irony have fallen, to demonstrate that such discussions "rest on very shaky grounds when their origins are considered" (3), and to expose them as the largely inauthentic means by which critics attempt to wrest authority from texts. Ultimately Dane seeks to "lessen [irony's] influence over critical thinking" (5). He concludes his study with some suggestion of the limited ways in which the term might continue to be used with accuracy, ways that would draw directly from literature's own, and in Dane's opinion more straightforward and limited, use of the term. Through careful and detailed readings of classical and modern language texts, Dane provides an indispensable *genealogy* of irony as a term. Yet finally, for him, irony's genealogy is largely a false one masking an underlying sameness consisting of a basic species of rhetorical *inversio* and the elevation of the *eíron* over his interlocutors.

Taking up the lead suggested but not directly pursued by Dane's approach and methodological presuppositions, my own approach to irony explores the ideologies underlying and informing three different attempts to theorize, or otherwise invoke and employ, the term irony; those represented by the writings of Friedrich Schlegel, Paul de Man, and Richard Rorty. I bracket, more fundamentally than Dane, the question of

whether or not such theories are *accurate* accounts of the operation of the trope. As my aims are not directly toward a contribution to a theory of irony, nor toward the more efficacious employment of irony as a critical term, there is no explicit call for a more delimited or a more objective understanding of the term, or for that matter, a more expansive and all disruptive understanding of the term. De Man has shown that the former claim can always be deconstructed; but at the same time it might be generally agreed by now that there is little point in continually rehearsing that lesson.

Having, however, asserted my own lack of investment in a particular view of irony I must confess that there is, as J.L. Austin quipped, "the bit where you say it and the bit where you take it back" (2). To read the theory of irony ideologically is to read for a certain repressed content, and if one attempts to make one's ideological reading a *dialectical* one in the sense proposed by Jameson, then this means to read also for the more utopian ideal obliquely and distortedly represented in the ideological expression (Jameson *Political* 281-299). Thus on the one hand, I argue that the theory of irony partakes inextricably in the philosophy of the self, of the autonomous individual, which after C.B. Macpherson's landmark study *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, I associate with a dominant tradition of liberal thought and the "possessive market society" (Macpherson 53), or capitalism, from which this philosophy arose and whose class-based interests it has always partly reflected in the ideologically distorted form of *universal* interests.⁵ On the other hand, I have persistently discovered, and argued for, the positing

of a social and intersubjective character to irony in the theories examined herein, one which is most openly, if not always successfully, articulated in Schlegel, but which is more repressed, in different ways and for different purposes, in both de Man's and Rorty's discourses on irony. Schlegelian irony, then, holds a certain pride of place in this reading.⁶

I do not mean to wholly imply, however, that the individualistic aspect of the theory of irony is the *lie* beneath which we can reveal the *truth* of the social into which the individual should be dissolved. Thought must hold onto the value and the truth of the collectivist and individualist propositions.⁷ The *chiasmus*, or crossing, between the polarities of an opposition, such as the individual and society, to maintain the aspect of truth and falsity in each, and to keep them in a necessary tension, is, as Gillian Rose has shown, characteristic of Theodor Adorno's *negative dialectic* (13 and *passim*). I will argue furthermore, that this process best characterizes Schlegelian irony and provides a productive reading of Kierkegaard's profound insight that irony is such a "negative dialectic" (145). Thus Adorno's doubled position on the individual strikes me as exemplary: "that which posits itself as 'I' is indeed mere prejudice, an ideological hypostatization of the abstract centres of domination, criticism of which demands the removal of the ideology of 'personality'. But its removal also makes the residue all the easier to dominate." (*Minima* 64).

And in the late essay "Subject and Object" Adorno allows this much:

If speculation of the state of reconciliation were permitted, neither the undistinguished unity of subject and object nor their antithetical hostility would be conceivable in it; rather, the communication of what was distinguished. Not until then would the concept of communication, as an objective concept, come into its own. (499)

Adorno's words echo Schlegel's assertion that irony names the "indissoluble antagonism between . . . the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication" (*Lyceum* 108).

An exploration, however, of the relations between irony and ideology, delivers, I believe, much more than simply another ideology critique (if one more were felt to be unnecessary, and I am far from believing that to be the case). In commencing this study I had anticipated a certain relation of opposition between irony and ideology--irony in opposition to, in Frye's words: "the lumber of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatism, oppressive fashions" (*Anatomy* 233). What I had anticipated less were the strange crossings and intersections of irony and ideology in which the terms struggle to expel the other even as each must invoke and depend upon that other.

While neither term seems that difficult to grasp, which accounts for its use, both seem to move inexorably toward meanings that are at once more indefinite and all pervading, which accounts for their overuse and for the suspicions their use sometimes arouses. This parallel movement of attenuation and expansion has, as I have already suggested with respect to irony, alarmed certain theorists, leading them to argue that one or the other term should be strictly delimited in its use or, more vociferously, that the term is in effect useless and should be jettisoned altogether. This is where matters get interesting. For the two theorists I have in mind are not, as de Man says with respect to Hegel and Kierkegaard's hostility toward Schlegelian irony, *n'importe qui* ("Concept" 168). They are, rather,

theorists who have achieved a certain prestige and reproductive power in the academy and who, moreover, represent significantly different positions on the political spectrum.

Richard Rorty, who stands as something of a paradigm of the postmodern academic (Simpson *Postmodern* 18), forthrightly identifies himself as an ironist, and in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* proposes "a liberal utopia: one in which ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal" (xv). His position on ideology in this same work, however, is bluntly stated and consigned to a footnote: "On the uselessness of the notion of 'ideology' see Raymond Guess *The Idea of a Critical Theory*" (59).⁸ Fredric Jameson, with his influential brand of *Late Marxism*⁹, has, by contrast, done more than any other figure to keep questions of ideology foremost in the Anglo-American academy's concerns. Yet he has been correspondingly suspicious of irony. In "The Ideology of the Text," an essay first published over two decades ago, which concerns itself with situating, ideologically, the poststructuralist criticism that was then making its inroads in American departments of literature, Jameson refers to the "conception of a linguistic or a formal 'self-consciousness' or 'reflexivity' . . . [that] has become the unexamined premise of an enormous variety of pseudo-historical descriptions of modernity and survives anachronistically, under its pseudonym 'irony' . . ." (64). Jameson concludes: "It does seem to me high time to abandon this particular concept" (64). Thus at least a good portion of what irony has come to mean since it was expanded and popularized for critical discourse by Friedrich Schlegel at the end of the Eighteenth Century should be set aside for the trash heap.

What does this urge on behalf of a theorist with an investment in one of these terms to expel the other term suggest about the nature of the relation between irony and ideology? The question is complicated in addition to its evident political overdetermination by the fact that neither Rorty nor Jameson makes do without the term he wishes to jettison. Rorty, as I will argue in Chapter Four, must posit the ideology he wishes to deny both for the social cohesiveness he wishes to achieve and, more suggestively, as a minimal precondition of irony's possibility. "Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated" (*Contingency* 88). The "something" Rorty refers to is the necessarily nonironist "public rhetoric" a society must employ to "socialize" its members, a rhetoric which the ironist knows to be at least partially false and restrictive (*Contingency* 87). It is thus, by at least one of the predominant ways of understanding the term, ideology.

While it would take me too far out of my way to pursue the question of Jameson's dependence on irony, it would appear evident that our major theoretician of the "persistence of the dialectic" (*Late* iii) could not do without a certain "self-consciousness or reflexivity" both linguistic and otherwise that "survives anachronistically, under its pseudonym 'irony'." Jameson's view of totality as a necessary "methodological standard" rather than as a "'positive' conception of Marxism as a system" (*Political* 52, 53) could well be described as an ironic view of the totality. Indeed, it is similar in part, as I will argue in Chapter Two, to Schlegel's ironic view of totality and, in particular, his ironic view of that partial

totality, the nation. Jameson's totality, as William Dowling writes, is "an ideal and abstract standard that allows [Jameson] to expose all partial or limited ideological truths as such . . . his notion of the totality is 'negative' or without concrete content of its own" (51). Likewise irony, as Kierkegaard teaches, posits an abstract ideal and, in the name of this ideal, cancels out all particular content as incommensurate with it.

In a characteristically suggestive, if characteristically saturnine, statement, Theodor Adorno succinctly posited a relation between irony and ideology. He declared, furthermore, that the relation, one of difference and resistance, had come to an end in the "administered world" of advanced capitalism.

Irony's medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared. The former resigns itself to confirmation of reality by its mere duplication. Irony used to say: such it claims to be, but such it is; today, however, the world, even in its most radical lie, falls back on the argument that things are like this, a simple finding which coincides, for it, with the good. There is not a crevice in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail. (*Minima* 211)

If irony's medium has disappeared, and if this irony existed in a relationship of resistance to the ideology it unmasked, then one should expect to find Adorno saying somewhere that ideology, as a concept that can only be meaningful given some standpoint of truth untainted by a completely untrue social order, has likewise disappeared. And, indeed, he does not disappoint.

For ideology in the proper sense, relationships of power are required which are not comprehensible to the power itself, which are mediated and therefore also less harsh. Today society, which unjustly has been blamed for its complexity, has become too transparent for this. . . . *Nothing remains then of ideology* but that which exists

itself, the models of a behaviour which submits to the overwhelming power of the existing condition. (qtd. in Jay 117 emphasis added)

Without some access to truth, one can speak meaningfully of neither the ideology which masks and distorts this truth, nor of an irony which wears the mask grinningly in order to expose it as a mask.¹⁰ Much as Sinatra postulated of love and marriage: "You can't have one without the other."

Ideology and Irony must exist together or disappear together. Their relationship becomes clearer when certain rhetorical operations fundamental to each term are taken into account. Ideology, in one dominant sense I will depend upon, refers to a yoking together of disparate differences into a falsely totalized identity: "the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (Jameson *Political* 77). The monism of the Romantic Symbol, as I will discuss with reference to de Man, is often seen as the prototype for the promotion of this *auratic* closure. Yet, linguistically, ideology's actual operation of stitching or quilting together of language into accepted beliefs, is more persuasively attributed, as Kim Michasiw theorizes, to *zeugma*, described by George Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie*, in a telling political analogy. Zeugma "may be likened to the man that serves many maisters at once, but all of one country or kindred . . . one word serves them all in that they require but one congruitie and sence" (qtd. in Michasiw 25).¹¹ If ideology, in one sense, stitches together meanings, irony, with a rhetorical basis in *antiphrasis*, saying the opposite of what is meant, rends unified meanings apart (Teskey 398). In this sense irony exists in an antithetical relationship of resistance and negation to the ideological process.

Yet irony and ideology, much as Quintilian (8.6.54) and Marx said of each respectively, also both rely upon the rhetorical figure of *inversio*, visually conceived as a turning upside down as in Marx's definition of ideology as a "camera obscura." "If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the *inversion* [my emphasis] of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process" (154). Irony in Frye's *Anatomy* is predominantly figured as such an inversion, epitomized most famously by the inverted body of Satan in Dante's *Inferno*. Likewise, in Marx's famous estimation, Hegel, in articulating the pervasive *German Ideology*, was standing on his head and needed to be turned back over on his feet.

Irony and ideology's identity in the figure of *inversio* suggests how the one term often seems to substitute for the other, and thus, how the theorist with an investment in one term sees the other as unnecessary. It suggests also how theorists can postulate that the culture of late capitalism is *all* irony, or *all* ideology. Postmodernists postulate the former condition; certain neo Marxists would assert the latter. But at this point the two terms *do* mean everything, and the *same* thing, groundless simulation, and thus as critical concepts they are so attenuated as to be useless, as though, rather than inverting anything on solid ground they were each performing back flips in mid air. But despite a certain inherent identity perhaps a productive relationship of resistance and difference is not so

dead as all that, even for Adorno.

Irony, despite Adorno's near elegy, is, Gillian Rose argues, characteristic of his own method in several respects. There are, in a straightforwardly ironic sense, his classic *inversios* of Hegel: "the whole is the false"; and Nietzsche: "Life does not Live" (qtd in Rose 18). His description of irony's operation, furthermore, is virtually identical to his description of one of his central methods of ideology critique: an "'immanent procedure' which takes the 'objective idea' of a work, whether philosophical, sociological, literary or musical, and 'confronts it with the norms which it itself has crystallized'" (qtd. in Rose 18). Likewise Adorno writes:

Irony convicts its object by presenting it as what it purports to be; and without passing judgement, as if leaving a blank for the observing subject, measures it against its being-in-itself. It shows up the negative by confronting it with its own claim to positivity. (*Minima* 210)

Adorno's irony attempts the very ideology critique he states to be no longer a possibility because both irony and ideology have disappeared. Adorno's assertion of society's "total reification," "total control," within which irony and ideology are no longer meaningful concepts are purposeful exaggerations.¹² Adorno, Rose writes, "is dramatising these ideas, presenting them *as if* they were absolutely and literally true, in order to undermine them more effectively" (26). His strategy is, thus, a form of voluntary dissimulation designed to articulate the involuntary dissimulations with which society confronts its members. The strategy echoes Schlegel's description of irony as "the only completely involuntary yet completely deliberate *dissimulation*" (*Lyceum* 108 emphasis added).

Adorno's statements, if overstated (and let us hope they are) as well as authoritatively schematic, posit a relation between irony and ideology of antithesis, resistance and interdependence, a relation moreover with a **history** in so far as irony may more productively challenge ideology at certain points than it can at others. It will be my aim in this study to trace the articulations of this relation and its history, through three distinct employments of the term irony.

As a way of opening up the question of the relation between irony and ideology in a metacritical fashion, and as a groundwork for my own reading of Schlegel's statements on irony, I commence in Chapter One by examining several representations of *Romantic Irony* (Schlegel's irony primarily) in the critical tradition. These representations figure the trope variously as the expression of an unethical rampant individualism (Hegel and Kierkegaard), as a sensitively pluralistic "open ideology" (D.C. Muecke), as a politically subversive discourse that counters hegemonic totalities of meaning (David Simpson), and as a fundamentally ethical trope through which one becomes aware of the intersubjectivity at the core of the self (Gary Handwerk). Despite their contradictory nature these representations are more incomplete than erroneous and the purpose of reviewing them is less to dismiss them than to determine their value and their shortcomings for an understanding of the ideology of the theory of romantic irony. What these various positions show, I believe, is that if irony, as Linda Hutcheon has suggestively stated, is "transideological" (*Irony's* 10)--its political values and effects varying according to context--the critical representation

of irony is equally so.

Chapter Two I devote to my own reading of Schlegel's published *Fragments*, both those concerned directly with irony and those concerned with the numerous other philosophical, cultural and political matters that Schlegel's fragmentary style challenges us to consider in conjunction with his aesthetic concerns. My reading attempts to supplement the discussions of romantic irony that, as Gary Handwerk has noted, have been concerned primarily with aesthetic and epistemological issues, by treating Schlegel's discussion of irony as a response to the ideological debates that raged over the French Revolution. What such an analysis shows is that from its modern beginnings as a critical and aesthetic concept the theory of irony has been as much a political discourse as a philosophical and aesthetic one.

The ideology of Schlegelian irony I argue is best understood as Frederick Beiser has argued of Jena romanticism as a whole, as an attempt to mediate between an enlightenment tradition of liberalism on the one hand, and what became, in the wake of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror, the strong temptation for a defence of conservative values and the "organic community" in the tradition of Edmund Burke. Irony names the attempt to hold these opposing positions in play in a non-synthetic dialectic. Such a dialectic might resemble the kind of "insurgent government" which Schlegel refers to in *Athenaeum Fragment 97* as the political equivalent to "skeptical method": a potentially productive tension between insurrection and authority, individual and community, a positive vision of political interaction in an increasingly fragmented world that combines the liberal and conservative ideologies while avoiding the excesses

of either a destructive individualism or a rigidly unified community.

I turn firstly to Schlegel's fragments concerned directly with irony to define the meaning Schlegel gives to the concept, one that comprises several interrelated connotations, all of which have been accounted for in the scholarship on Schlegel: irony as an author or narrator's self-consciousness of his or her work as artifice and illusion; irony as "continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction"; irony as a "permanent parabasis," or the continuous destruction of the potentially infinite layers of illusion in an artistic work; irony as the "indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication"; and irony as "sublime urbanity." I simultaneously attempt to show how this concept of irony characterizes Schlegel's poetical-philosophical-cultural theory as a whole, and herein we begin to glimpse its political nature.

I then discuss Schlegel's directly political statements concerning the structure of government, the distributions of powers and political representation, arguing that the rudiments of a political theory that they provide are, at points, structurally homologous to the theory of irony. Despite its potentially positive political vision, however, Schlegel's theory does not escape the contradictions and ideological limitations of its time. A hierarchical elitism characteristic of an intellectual who is representative of an ascendant bourgeois class aspiring to power and authority, coexists uneasily in Schlegel's thought alongside a more iconoclastic, nonhierarchical democratic bent.

Finally, I read Schlegel's fragments concerning nation and national

identity as similarly informed by, and homologous to, Schlegel's concept of irony. Between the "tasteless universality" of French political and philosophical radicalism on the one hand, and the "pathological history of common sense" provided by the British on the other hand, an ironic, *inbetween*, stance is proposed as one uniquely and ideally suited to the German people and its future nation. Schlegel's production of, in Etienne Balibar's term, "fictive ethnicity," participates in the "othering" of different nations in a troublesomely totalizing fashion that allows for the nationalistic xenophobia and racism characteristic of his era and our own. At the same time, however, his articulation of the irony of nation and national identity provides a potentially suggestive model for individuals' noncoercive participation in larger political communities, a model that could provide a sense of belonging *within* a larger whole (one that need not be figured as a nation at all, or not at least in any traditional sense) and a sense of the necessity of acting as and for such a whole, while simultaneously providing a saving critical perspective upon that collectivity, a sense of it as artifice and of one's own position *without* it.

Chapter Three approaches the question of irony and ideology in Paul de Man's writings through a detailed reading of "The Rhetoric of Temporality." While I concentrate on this seminal essay, his only sustained theorization of irony published in his lifetime, and certainly his best, of necessity I consider this theorization in relation to earlier statements on irony suggested most significantly in an essay from the 1950's, "Montaigne and Transcendence," to the 1967 *Gauss Lectures* which were significantly revised to become "The Rhetoric of Temporality," to his late remarks on

irony in "The Concept of Irony," and *Allegories of Reading*.

My purpose in reading "The Rhetoric of Temporality," is to consider the possible ideological implications of this particular interpretation of irony, a task that has largely been left undone in the gesturing toward the politics of irony in de Man's work. Toward this end I attempt to contextualize de Man's essay, to consider the dense intertextuality, most emphatically with the writings of Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger, that informs this statement. The consideration of these pre-texts with their very different ideological overdeterminations, allows one to glimpse the ideological horizon before which de Man's reading of irony was articulated and the ideology it in turn articulates.

De Man's reading of irony, I argue, is itself double edged and ideologically contradictory. If, as Adorno conceived, the identity of concept and phenomenon is "the primal form of ideology" (Adorno *Negative* 148), then both allegory and irony in de Man's reading resist such ideological affirmations of identity. What de Man's theory may unreflectingly presuppose, however, is the ultimate identity of all forms of ideology. Accepting Louis Althusser's dictum that there is no outside ideology--a position consistent with the Heidegger of *Being and Time* who, as we shall see, has a profound influence on de Man's discussion of irony--I conclude that de Man's total resistance to ideology leaves no criteria for choosing any less violent or repressive forms of ideology over any others. Such a putatively positionless ideological resistance is itself an ideology, one perhaps unwittingly complicit with an individualistic liberal philosophy that arises out of and reproduces the very structures of domination it

critiques.

But while irony in de Man's reading appears as a potentially endless process of pure negativity whereby the individual is increasingly isolated from his empirical self, from others, and the world, reading de Man against himself I argue that this escalating isolation is by no means the necessary result of the disjuncture irony establishes. On the contrary, such a disjuncture can be read more convincingly as leading the subject to an increased awareness of the constitutively social, collective nature of its being.

In Chapter Four I turn to a consideration of irony in Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. Moving toward a conclusion throughout this chapter I more actively juxtapose and compare the representations of irony in Schlegel, de Man and Rorty. As a neopragmatist philosopher, and a liberal, concerned with proposing a society in which liberal values would flourish in the absence of metaphysical assertions such as individual rights, and basic propositions about human nature that have traditionally accompanied liberal politics, Rorty is directly concerned with the cultural and political efficacy of the ironist stance, and with what he describes as "ironist theory." His work, therefore, directly touches upon the central concerns of this study, paralleling and contrasting in significant ways Schlegel's and de Man's conceptions of irony with their attendant ideological and political assumptions and implications. Indeed, the post-philosophical stance to which Rorty aspires, challenges the basic operating assumption of my study: that theory, and "ironist theory" in particular, necessarily has a significant political dimension and that there

is, therefore, a value to the ideology critique that seeks to articulate such a dimension.

Irony for Rorty, as he directly defines his usage and by virtue of what his usage implies, carries three predominant associations: a *self-consciousness* of the historical and cultural contingency of one's ideas and beliefs, *self creation*, and the *non synthesis* of fundamental antitheses, most notably for Rorty, of the public and the private. Each of these connotations, as we have seen, is contained within Friedrich Schlegel's conception of irony and is taken up again and reworked by de Man. And there are in fact notable similarities in the ways in which Schlegel and Rorty envision irony operating in politics and culture, a fact that should not be surprising given Schlegel's strong liberal leanings in the published *Fragments* and Rorty's own positive endorsement of a certain understanding of romanticism.

Schlegelian irony, however, attempts in part at least to hold contradiction, thesis and antithesis, in play, believing in the productivity of a negative dialectic that does not seek to synthesize or sublate its terms but always to play one term off against the other. Rorty, by contrast, moves from the presumption of non-synthesis articulated by irony to the assumption of the *incommensurability* of terms and thus the inefficacy of playing oppositions off against each other at all. In the sense of an interplay of oppositions there is no dialectic, negative or constructive, in Rorty's irony. What this amounts to is a position that is, by Schlegelian standards, unskeptical and unironic. This difference is most succinctly focused in Rorty's conception of irony as *self-creation* compared

to Schlegel's conception of it as a dialectic of *self-creation* and *self-destruction*.

Rorty provides us with a theory of irony which is both uncritical and profoundly ideological. Since truth is ruled out of the game to begin with, there is little or no standpoint from which to critique the particular *concensus* that passes for truth at any given time. The individual who is postulated as having no access to knowledge of, and hence no control over, the real conditions of his or her existence, is to be consoled by a poetic project of "self creation" which amounts to the construction of an imaginary realm of freedom as a bulwark against one's domination. If de Man's irony presented a kind of total ideological resistance and, increasingly a self-destruction which can finally aid little in confronting the exigencies of a political, ideological world, Rorty provides a correspondingly problematic investment in the subject's self-creation and in, to borrow Adorno's words about the world in which irony's medium has disappeared, "the argument that things are like this, a simple finding which coincides, for it, with the good" (*Minima* 211).

One

From Hegel to Handwerk: Ideological Positions in the Critical Representations of Romantic Irony

This irony was invented by Friedrich von Schlegel, and many others have babbled about it or are now babbling about it again.

--G.W.F. Hegel *Aesthetics* (66)

The genesis of the contemporary critical and theoretical discourse on irony can be situated quite specifically between 1797 and 1800 amongst a small circle of German intellectuals centred in the city of Jena. More particularly, the re-establishment of this ancient rhetorical term, that has remained ever since in at times excessive and indeterminate use in both popular and academic vocabularies, can be largely attributed to one individual within this group--Friedrich Schlegel (see Behler *German* 141; Eichner 74; Wellek 16). Schlegel himself acknowledged the particular historical moment of the revitalization of this concept when in 1800 he wrote of both his theorization and use of irony over the previous three years in the fragments published first in the *Lyceum* and then in the *Athenaeum*, the journal of the Jena circle, that "at the time it seemed incomprehensible to many people because of its relative novelty. For only since then has irony become daily fare, only since the dawn of the new century has such a quantity of great and small ironies of different sorts sprung up . . ." ("Incomprehensibility" 36).

Ironologists and romanticists such as D.C. Muecke, Ernst Behler and Lillian Furst have described how the German romantics revised and expanded the concept of irony beyond its traditional rhetorical usage¹, a usage still constituting the exclusive definition of irony in Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755: "a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words" (cited in Furst 23).² The precise meaning to be attributed to Schlegel's expanded "romantic irony" (as it has been subsequently named, largely by later romanticists³) has been, however, more difficult to determine. In an essay published in 1951 Raymond Immerwahr could already survey over fifty years of critical literature on Schlegel's theory of irony in an attempt to overcome the "bewildering contradictions" (173) found therein. Writing forty years later Joseph Dane notes:

Included among the common (and contradictory) definitions of romantic irony in modern scholarship are: the self-conscious attitude of the artist toward the artistic work, a dialectical process involving the artist or the artistic work, the destroying of illusion in the artistic work, the endpoint of all art, pure artistic subjectivity (or objectivity), that indeterminacy congenial to deconstruction, romanticism itself. (73)

While I am unsure whether these several senses are all contradictory, particularly the first three which appear to be well accounted for in certain discussions of the concept, Dane's survey is accurate and does not exhaust the list of meanings attributed to romantic irony.

The numerous senses applied to romantic irony can in part be attributed to Schlegel's deliberate theorizing of the concept in a series of loosely connected and enigmatic *fragments*. The fragments concerning irony are interspersed among numerous others on art, philosophy, science,

religion, cultural mores, history and politics. The (at times jarring) juxtaposition of these various pronouncements both challenges the construction of a unified theory of irony and forces the reader to consider the trope in relation to the totality of these other discourses. Critics have seen the fragment form practised by Schlegel and his circle as itself well suited to the practice of romantic irony and, thus, as a form in which Schlegel's theory and practice of irony are produced simultaneously (Behler *German* 141-153; Muecke 184; Newmark 912). We are dealing with texts that are, as de Man writes, "to a large extent, themselves ironical" (211), and this has necessarily given rise to a plurality of interpretations of the trope. For when can one be sure Schlegel means what he says and not the reverse, or something entirely different? For the purposes of an ideological reading of Schlegel's theory of irony, however, such indeterminacy need not be regarded as an impasse. Several of the meanings applied to romantic irony appear equally defensible and if contradictory, then contradictory in ways that are in keeping with a theory that is itself about the inescapability and productivity of contradiction.

In considering the intellectual, cultural and historical background of romantic irony the critics have pointed to: German idealism (namely Fichte) with its affirmation of an absolute ego and its emphasis upon reflection, or self-consciousness, as the locus of the subject's freedom (Hegel *Aesthetics* 64-65; Szondi 61-63; Muecke 181; Furst 38-39; Behler *German* 2)⁴; the broader historical development of a concept of individuality or selfhood (Muecke 189); the rise of historicism (Szondi 57 and passim); post-enlightenment skepticism with respect to both the

certainty of knowledge and the efficacy of language as an unproblematic means for its communication (Furst 39-42); a faith in the infinite perfectibility of both man and society manifested in the affirmation of an endless "becoming" (Behler *German* 4); the rejection, characteristic of romanticism more generally, of neoclassical ideals of unity, order, decorum and mimesis (Behler *German* 3); Friedrich Schiller's distinction between "naive" and "sentimental" poetry (Muecke 181; Eichner 65); and the social and political upheavals of the French revolution (Behler *German* 54-71; Muecke 187; Furst 36). Of these the last, while certainly not isolable from many of these other "background" determinants, has received no sustained consideration. While the politics of German romanticism more generally have been, arguably since the very inception of romantic studies in the mid to late nineteenth century, the topic of considerable speculation and debate,⁵ the function of romantic irony as a particular philosophical and aesthetic response to the ideological debates that raged over the French Revolution has received no sustained analysis. What such an analysis can show, however, is that from its modern beginnings as a critical and aesthetic concept the theory of irony has been as much a political discourse as a philosophical and aesthetic one.

Madame de Staël, in her book *De l'Allemagne*, wrote of German intellectuals at the close of eighteenth century that "they join the greatest boldness in thought to the most obedient character" (qtd. in Beiser 7). There was for de Staël, who knew personally many of the preeminent figures of the late eighteenth-century German intelligentsia, including Friedrich Schlegel to whom she would on occasion provide financial aid

(Eichner 102), a gulf between radical German thought and the conservatism of those who produced it. She attributed this very precisely to "*la prééminence de l'état militaire et les distinctions de rang*" (qtd. in Beiser 7). Frederick Beiser in his recent study of the development of German political thought between 1790 and 1800 attributes to de Staël's comments the genesis of a predominant view of the apolitical nature of German thought in this era.⁶

Supposedly, the philosophers and writers of this period developed a profound distaste for politics, because they were compelled to live in a political world that they could not tolerate but could not change. Hence they escaped from a harsh political reality into an ideal world of metaphysics, theology, and poetry. (7)

Against this view Beiser argues that "the aims, origins, and context of the major thinkers of this period--both before and after the Revolution--reveals that their ideas were almost always motivated by political ends"(8)--ends that in various ways either supported or contested the authority of the absolute state. Rather than apolitical, then, it is more accurate to regard the thought of this period as, Beiser contends in a suggestive phrase, "cryptopolitical" (7). For "although the absolute state did not destroy political thought, it did drive it underground" (8).

Beiser's position is in many respects salutary and will inform my own reading of the political content in Schlegel's statements on irony to an extent that I will outline further below. It would seem, however, that in interpreting de Staël as characterizing late eighteenth-century German thought as apolitical, Beiser passes over the possibility that she characterizes it as strongly *ideological*. Ideology would be here understood in the sense that Fredric Jameson derives from Claude Lévis-Strauss as the production of

"imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (*Political* 79). Thus German philosophy, aesthetics and literature construct an imaginary realm of freedom for the subject that masks a social/political condition of domination. Such an ideology functions to reproduce the status quo in so far as it makes such a state of affairs more liveable. It is itself more "cryptopolitical" than apolitical. Hence the possibility for the contradiction de Staël observed between the radical German thinker and the obedient German subject.

D.C. Muecke in his discussion of the genesis of romantic irony provides a perspective that closely parallels de Staël's perspective on German thought of this period in general. In considering the "compost from which Romantic Irony grew" (a perhaps ironically inappropriate organic metaphor when discussing irony, as will become more clear in my later discussion of de Man) Muecke lists firstly:

the historical situation at the end of the eighteenth century. For Germany, as for the rest of Europe, the French Revolution was a deeply disturbing experience; but in Germany with its hundreds of territorial sovereignties there was no possibility of a political revolution. Blocked in that direction, Germany had, however, both scope and means for an intellectual revolution; the only possible German empire at that time was an empire of speculative thought. (187)

Muecke follows up this suggestive assertion by citing Schlegel's *Athenaeum* Fragment 216 in which he conceives of Fichte and Goethe's work as constituting a "revolution" as profound as the French Revolution though neither "clamorous" nor "materialist" (187); and by citing Heinrich Heine's quite different view--though Muecke characterizes it as "the same point" (187)--that German philosophy was preparing the way for an eventual

"political revolution" that "will be no gentler or milder because it has been preceded by the *Critique* of Kant, the transcendental idealism of Fichte, and even the philosophy of nature" (qtd. in Muecke 187).⁷ Schlegel's comment suggests that the German cultural and intellectual "revolution" is sufficient in itself to produce thoroughgoing change within its society; Heine suggests that it is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition. Muecke, however, leaves the passages without commenting upon them, going on to the next of his three sources of romantic irony⁸, and thus precludes any detailed consideration of the particular relationship between romantic irony and politics that his point invites.

Is romantic irony conservatively ideological in its very inception, providing an imaginary freedom that masks a real condition of domination? Does it on the contrary suggest both a model of subjectivity and a critique of totality that are potentially proto-revolutionary? Or does it assume some ground between these extremes? In exploring these questions I will begin by examining several critical representations of romantic irony (Schlegel's irony primarily) that figure the trope variously as the expression of an unethical rampant individualism, as a sensitively pluralistic "open ideology," as a politically subversive discourse that counters hegemonic totalities of meaning, and as a fundamentally ethical trope through which one becomes aware of the intersubjectivity at the core of the self. Despite their contradictory nature these representations are more incomplete than erroneous and the purpose of reviewing them will be less to undermine them than to determine their value and their shortcomings for an understanding of the ideology of the theory of romantic irony.⁹

The earliest and most enduringly influential critique of romantic irony is provided by Hegel. Kierkegaard's *Concept of Irony*, in its own examination of Schlegel and his group (272-323), essentially supports and elaborates upon Hegel's position. Since Hegel's critique of romantic irony is simultaneously ethical and philosophical, it has broad implications for the politics of this concept with which any examination of the ideology of romantic irony must be concerned. Hegel commences the long tradition (amongst both critics and defenders) of situating romantic irony in relation to the philosophy of Fichte. "The so-called irony," Hegel maintains in the *Aesthetics* "had its deeper root, in one of its aspects, in Fichte's philosophy, in so far as the principles of this philosophy were applied to art" (64). Hegel interprets irony in terms of three propositions Fichte makes of the ego.

[*First*] Fichte sets up the *ego* as the absolute principle of all knowing, reason, and cognition, and at that the *ego* remains throughout abstract and formal. *Secondly, this* ego is therefore in itself just simple, and, on the one hand, every particularity, every characteristic, every content is negated in it, since everything is submerged in this abstract freedom and unity, while, on the other hand, every content which is to have value for the ego is only put and recognized by the *ego* itself. . . . Now *thirdly*, the *ego* is a *living*, active individual, and its life consists in making its individuality real in its own eyes and in those of others, in expressing itself, and bringing itself into appearance. (64-65)

In Hegel's reading, romantic irony, as a dialectic of self-creation and self-destruction (a point upon which I shall elaborate below), is both permitted and in a sense demanded once one accepts these tenets of the Fichtean absolute ego. The ego must ceaselessly posit reality to affirm its power of creativity; at the same time it must negate that reality to affirm its

freedom from it. The formal transcendent first principle, the ego, must be as infinitely empty and infinitely full as what Hegel describes here as the romantic ironist's "self made and destructible show" (65).

For Hegel, as for Kierkegaard, the ironist's posture is elitist, unethical and ultimately fatuous. In "trifling with everything" (Hegel *History* 3: 401) the ironist is

the divine creative genius for which anything and everything is only an unsubstantial creature . . . he who has reached this standpoint of divine genius looks down from his high rank on all other men, for they are pronounced dull and limited, inasmuch as law, morals, etc., still count for them as fixed, essential, and obligatory. (Hegel *Aesthetics* 66)

Here is the crux of Hegel's ethical critique of romantic irony. In denying a firm basis to all actuality the ironist threatens to undermine the laws, morals and truths that sustain a society. He has, moreover, nothing more positive to put in its place that might justify such destruction, for to affirm his abstract freedom he must deny any such content. Romantic irony, Hegel asserts in what will become an extremely influential assertion, remains "infinite absolute negativity" (*Aesthetics* 68). Ultimately the romantic ironist represents the pathetic spectacle of an entirely self-enclosed ego "for which all bonds are snapped, an ego that can live only in the bliss of self-enjoyment" (*Aesthetics* 66).

Such a position of "absolute subjectivity" (*Aesthetics* 67) is also philosophically unsatisfactory in its failure to account adequately for material reality--the object. To the extent that philosophy denigrates the status of external reality it paradoxically denigrates the subject whose power and freedom it had intended to promote. The subject becomes lord

and master of nothing, of an external world that is simply a reflection of its own ego. There is, Hegel recognizes, a melancholic strain in Romantic irony, a longing for reality and the absolute that desires to put an end to the ego's isolation and impotence. But such melancholy does not serve to sublate romantic irony into a higher form that more adequately accounts for truth and the object. "That longing," Hegel asserts, "is only the empty vain subject's sense of nullity, and he lacks the strength to escape from this vanity and fill himself with a content of substance" (*Aesthetics* 67).

Hegel's critique of romantic irony, consisting of relatively brief salvos in the *Aesthetics*, the *History of Philosophy* and scattered elsewhere in various lectures and reviews (see Dane 84), is motivated in part by his overall project of subordinating aesthetics to philosophy, and seeing the culmination of philosophy in his own version of the dialectic--a dialectic in which the negative, in Maurice Blanchot's description, always consists of "destruction in view of possible construction" (119). Romantic irony as an aesthetic device is derivative of Fichte's philosophy, and Fichte's philosophy is in turn supplanted by Hegel's system. Hegel's critique, however, has been of immense influence. It is arguably a source of an entire tradition of anti-romanticism amongst Victorian moralists, modernists, New Critics, structuralists (one thinks of René Girard) and postmodernists that views romanticism as the expression of an unbridled and naively construed subjectivity. More directly one can see the evocation of Hegel's view of romantic irony in as recent an essay as Linda Hutcheon's "'A Lightness of Thoughtfulness:' The Power of Postmodern Irony" wherein

Hutcheon approvingly cites W.K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks' definition of romantic irony as "megalomania" (68) in order to contrast it to the putatively less subjectivist workings of "a postmodern irony."

Scholars of romantic irony, however, have as often dismissed Hegel's critique. Hermann Hettner's *Die romantische Schule* of 1850, as Joseph Dane writes,

criticizes Hegel for allowing his personal dislike of Schlegel's 'fanaticism' to cloud his interpretation of Schlegel's irony; because of Hegel, Hettner claims, romantic irony . . . has come into undeserved ill repute as an arrogant nihilism. . . . To Hettner, romantic irony is purely an aesthetic concept, not, as Hegel and his school understand it, a moral one. (83)

Modern scholars while figuring romantic irony in diverse ways have generally concurred that Hegel (and later Kierkegaard) misrepresents Schlegel's irony, that he inadequately addresses the latter's theory, simply sacrificing a falsely conceived idea of such irony to the demands of his own system (see Dane 92). While there is, as we shall see, a good deal of truth in this view, the rejections of Hegel's critique have themselves remained within Hegel's long shadow.

Most significantly, irony would henceforth be understood in terms of some kind of opposition between the subjective and objective--a characteristic defense of romantic irony being that it is in some sense more objective than Hegel allows (see Dane 77-78). Similarly, the defense of romantic irony will frequently maintain that irony is not "infinite absolute negation" but in some respect positive and affirmative (Szondi 60; Mellor 22-23; Handwerk 24). This in turn often entails an implicit or explicit defense of the ethics of romantic irony as in Gary Handwerk's discussion

of Schlegel (18-43). De Man on the other hand will, like Hettner and against Hegel, maintain that irony is not an ethical concept, although for de Man it is understood less as an aesthetic concept than as an epistemological/tropological limit ("Rhetoric" 216-220; "Concept" 179-184). Thus whether Hegel is explicitly invoked or not his critique of "this so called irony" has greatly influenced its interpretation as critics argue against this critique on the terms that he established.

To the value and influence of Hegel's critique one would also have to add the ultimate productivity of its *misprision*: namely, the conception of irony as "infinite absolute negativity," or as Kierkegaard will repeatedly insist, "a purely *negative dialectic*" (135). While for both Hegel and Kierkegaard this is a critical insight that is intended to represent the ultimate limitation of a certain kind of irony, for critics such as de Man ("Rhetoric" 220), Candice Lang (18-36) and Gordon Tesky (399) it is taken up as the most profound insight into the true nature and value of the trope.

For an *ideological* reading of romantic irony Hegel's critique is suggestive insofar as it interprets such irony as the ego's expression of a false, empty freedom. Hegel uncovers the underlying contradiction in a conception of the ego that on the one hand is said to enjoy absolute freedom, and yet on the other hand must finally commit itself to no action for fear of compromising that freedom. Here Hegel appears to have grasped something of the historical moment of romantic irony for such an abstract formal freedom is closely analogous to that accorded to the bourgeois liberal subject whose autonomy is affirmed in principle but who is in fact

highly constrained by law, economic self-interest, and propriety. Since the subject's freedom is blocked in the realm of action there remains for it only the freedom to explore its putatively limitless interiority in "the bliss of self-enjoyment" (*Aesthetics* 66). The construction and celebration of such an interior realm transcending any relation with the world and with others is one of the chief ideological effects of bourgeois culture in its production of docile subjectivities.

Hegel, and more elaborately Kierkegaard, in their juxtaposition of Socratic and romantic ironies invite a consideration of the validity of different historical manifestations of the trope that is also extremely suggestive for any consideration of the ideology of irony. Socratic irony is finally justified not only because it represents an embryonic version of the eventual Hegelian dialectic, but because Socrates, through irony, achieves a degree of individuality and freedom that mark the emergence of subjectivity and self-consciousness against the individual's previous enslavement to myth, pagan religion, and the *polis*. The "negative power" of Socratic irony, Kierkegaard writes in *The Concept of Irony*, "[broke] the spell in which human life lay in the form of substantiality . . . emancipated man from his relation to God just as it freed him from his relation to the state" (171). If one attempts to view Socrates' irony from the standpoint of ancient Greek society, one can certainly see the danger, even the "immoral" (185) quality, of his irony, and to this degree the justification for his capital punishment. "From the view point of the state [Socrates'] offensive had to be considered most dangerous, as an attempt to suck its blood and reduce it to a shadow" (178). Socrates' irony, however, has a

greater "world-historical validity . . . early Greek culture had outlived itself, a new principle had to emerge, but before it could appear in its truth, all the prolific weeds of misunderstanding's pernicious anticipations had to be ploughed under, destroyed down to the deepest roots" (211).

By contrast Kierkegaard maintains that "irony after Fichte" (272) is not an irony in the service of "world spirit" (275) but in the service of a "self-created actuality" (275). The idea of a free individualistic subjectivity that Socratic irony had fostered is by this point in history well established. While from Kierkegaard's Christian protestant perspective selfhood is indeed a necessary idea for establishing the first stage of one's proper individualistic relationship to God, it does not require further elaboration and emphasis in itself. What is required, one assumes from the general lines of Kierkegaard's thought, is the transcendence of such subjectivity which he seeks in religious faith. But what romantic irony provides is precisely such a wrongly conceived fetishism of subjectivity in itself.

It was not subjectivity that should forge ahead here, since subjectivity was already given in world situations, but it was an exaggerated subjectivity, a subjectivity raised to the second power. . . . this irony was totally unjustified and . . . Hegel's hostile behaviour toward it is entirely in order. (275)

Within this teleological Hegelian historicism to which Kierkegaard more or less adheres in this early work, romantic irony is seen as an aberration, a regressive move in the wrong direction.¹⁰

Not only does romantic irony fail to facilitate the progress of world history, but in its attempted negation of all concrete actuality it goes so far as to reject history as a determinate force upon the individual.

Kierkegaard maintains that the romantic ironists' central error is to confuse and conflate Fichte's "rudimentary metaphysical position" (275), an eternal absolute *I*, with the empirical finite *I*. "Fichte wanted to construct the world, but he had in mind a systematic construction. Schlegel and Tieck wanted to obtain a world" (175). Because the absolute *I* is equated with the empirical *I* no concrete actuality is ever commensurate with the *I*. Such incommensurability becomes the source for all the ironist's negations, including the negation of history.

For in irony, however, there really never was a past. This was due to its refusal to be involved in metaphysical inquiries. It confused the eternal *I* with the temporal *I*. But the eternal *I* has no past, and as a result the temporal *I* does not have one, either. But to the extent that irony is good-natured enough to assume a past, this past must be of such a nature that irony can have a free hand with it and play its game with it. Thus it was the mythical part of history, legend and fairy tale, that mainly found favour in its eyes. The actual history, however, in which the authentic individual has his positive freedom because therein he possesses his premises, had to be set aside. (277)

Kierkegaard himself openly conflates "post-Fichtian irony" and "romanticism" claiming that "both terms say essentially the same thing" (277). Thus what he is referring to in this passage is romanticism's well known fascination with such folk elements as legend, and fairy tale. He suggestively attributes to such a fascination a desire to replace real history, a history that might in some way be binding upon the subject, with an obviously fictionalized history that can make no such claims. In so doing the ironist achieves an easy but ultimately empty freedom in exchange for the more "positive freedom" that might derive from a more substantial confrontation with the "actual history" wherein he "possesses

his premises."¹¹

If we accept Kierkegaard's charge here irony becomes deeply ideological, allied with those processes whereby an individual or a culture constructs an imaginary idealized past for itself that serves to cover over, to make more liveable, the real contradictions that characterize its past and its present. We must ask ourselves, however, whether Kierkegaard, in addition to conflating irony and romanticism has not also conflated irony with the aesthetic as a whole, and whether irony might not have some more disruptive relation to the kind of seamless totalities that exist as the goal of a certain aesthetic tradition.

Hopefully one need not import into one's discourse the entire legacy of Hegelianism with its own very constructed, totalizing and eurocentric version of "world history" in order to see the insight and value for an ideological reading of irony in Hegel and Kierkegaard's approach, an approach that seeks to relate different historical expressions of irony both to their philosophical origins and to their historical contexts. In Kierkegaard's case, furthermore, he opens up to inquiry the problematic relationship between irony and history itself--a problem that, as I shall discuss, is taken up again by de Man. If on the one hand Hegel and Kierkegaard critique romantic irony as being merely empty in its claims to freedom and transcendence, there is another sense in which they do accord it a destructive power over the laws, morals and customs by which men and women live. To this extent romantic irony can be seen as analogous to the historical process of an emergent capitalism with its rampant individual self-interest that threatens to unravel the very fabric of the public

sphere. The elitism that Hegel and Kierkegaard perceive in the romantic ironist's stance is significant in this respect. It is an expression of an emergent bourgeois's desire for power and authority. In a paradoxical fashion classically articulated by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, the bourgeois's aspiration for power characteristically takes the form of an identification with the older forms of power presented by the nobility. Hegel's reference to "Friedrich von Schlegel" and even "Lord Friedrich von Schlegel" is surely intended to mock Schlegel's dubious and pretentious assumption in his later years of the aristocratic "von" (Eichner 125). Schlegel articulates such a desire for authority in the most striking terms in a letter to his brother Wilhelm describing the advantages to be wrought from producing their own journal *The Athenaeum*: that they should become "critical dictators of Germany" (qtd. in Dane 117).

But whether irony's negations are looked upon as fortuitous or lamentable, as "world-historical" or as an ahistorical aberration, depends not only upon one's own metanarrative of history, but upon the social perspective from which one views these negations in the present. And this applies as much to Hegel and Kierkegaard as to the romantics they critique. Both Hegel, as Germany's leading professor of philosophy, the dutiful son of a civil servant, and Kierkegaard as a "*rentier* living off the rents of the buildings he own[ed]" (Buck-Morss 117)¹², had a considerable stake in the stability of the social order of their day, arguably a greater stake than Friedrich Schlegel who struggled unsuccessfully throughout much of his life to secure a permanent position with which to support himself (Eichner 125 and *passim*).

To point to such social situations is to go some way toward explaining why Hegel and Kierkegaard view a negative mode of art such as they perceive in the romantic ironists with suspicion, even hostility. For Kierkegaard, Socratic irony is valid because through it Socrates managed to arrive "at the idea of the good, the beautiful and the true" (197). It is limited, however, because Socrates arrived at these ideas "only as the boundary" (197). That is, he takes history up to these ideas but no further; his own philosophy can tell us nothing of their positive content. "Much later, however, after these ideas have acquired their actuality and personality its absolute *pleroma* [fullness] . . . irony manifests itself in a more alarming form" (179). For Kierkegaard, for whom Christianity has provided the actualization of these ideas, no further dialectical development of history is necessary or conceivable; further negation can only be construed as "alarming." In this respect he resembles the ideologues of the current advanced capitalist order who have proclaimed "the end of history." Politically Kierkegaard's position is quietistic, denying any further value to the negation of society's laws and morals. This is not because Kierkegaard, in some Hegelian or generally ameliorist fashion, views society as near or moving toward perfection but because, like Heidegger afterwards, he rejects the public sphere entirely as a realm within which the subject can find any degree of fulfilment and freedom. Hegel's political philosophy on the other hand, as Michael Mosher has argued, with its promotion of the modern nation state as the ideal synthesis of individualist and communitarian demands, its "celebration of the state bureaucrat as a modern hero" (119), contains its own troubling authoritarian implications.

From Hegel and Kierkegaard, then, one receives the influential representation of romantic irony as an unbridled and unethical subjectivity, a valuable representation insofar it glimpses something of the historical rise of the subject of which the modern theory and practice of irony necessarily partook, and insofar as it attempts to critique such an ideology of the subject as, in part, delusive and destructive. In one sense whether such a representation is accurate or not is beside the point for irony, romantic or otherwise, is synonymous in part with the interpretations it has been given within a critical tradition. Yet there is unquestionable validity in the charge that Hegel and Kierkegaard's representations are largely polemical critiques aimed less at understanding the newer manifestation of irony than in sacrificing it to the demands of their own systems and, as I would argue, to upholding a social and political status quo; to this extent their critiques are themselves ideological. I turn now, more briefly, to the much more recent tradition of Anglo-American scholarship on romantic irony which provides three quite different representations of the concept.

"Romantic Irony" for D.C Muecke "is the expression of an ironical attitude adopted as a means of recognizing and transcending, but still preserving" (159) the contradictions of art such as: the contradictions presented by the existence of the work of art on two levels, its existence as a material object in the world (a painting on a wall), and its existence as what it represents (Venus de Milo) (160); or the contradictions presented by the gap between what an artist intends a work to achieve and what it actually achieves (163). Muecke, then, treats Romantic irony

primarily as an aesthetic device yet one that is clearly related to the intellectual and historical milieu out of which it arose. Romantic irony for Muecke is a representative expression of the "open ideology" (188) of post-enlightenment European culture. An "open ideology" is Muecke's large all encompassing term for the ways of thinking that replaced an older "closed ideology" characterizing "a society whose values are more or less established, whose members, as a body, are 'assured of certain certainties'" (120). The Christian world-view that begins to become unhinged during the enlightenment is the most predominant example of the closed ideology, "closed" not only because it was comprehensive, unitary, and went almost unchallenged for hundreds of years but because it was:

(i) temporally and spatially limited, the terms 'eternity' and 'infinity' being applicable only to the translunary or 'heavenly' and (ii) hierarchically and statically ordered--at least in principle--change being either cyclic (the alternation of seasons, growth and decay), and therefore not really change, or deplored as aberration or degeneration. (125)

An "open ideology" by contrast is characterized by the development of

the concept of the positive value of change, change as dynamic and progressive, and the concept of the normalness of contradiction and paradox in human affairs . . . of the belief that there are certain fundamental contradictions in the human conditions, in human nature, and in the nature of art which cannot be resolved in one total metaphysical answer. Both these concepts are implicit in Friedrich Schlegel's theory of Romantic Irony. (188)

In Muecke's representation, then, romantic irony is seen as an artistic expression of both the belief in progress as well as the scepticism and relativism that characterize modernity. In a more directly political terminology (one that Muecke skirts even as his reference to ideology invokes it) such an "open ideology" appears to be very close to that of

liberal pluralism. Thus in addition to the notion of progress Muecke relates the rise of romantic irony to the historic development of notions of selfhood (189), two fundamental tenets of liberalism.¹³ Muecke's representation of romantic irony is akin to Hegel and Kierkegaard's in this respect but without the negative valorization. The more relativistic and pluralistic outlook on life provided by romantic irony is seen as a necessary and potentially positive response to a more fragmented, contradictory and changing world.

The pluralistic outlook that Muecke amongst others has recognized and lauded in romantic irony certainly grasps an aspect of the concept as theorized by Schlegel and is an important corrective to Hegel and Kierkegaard's polemical dismissals. And his position that romantic irony recognizes and preserves contradictions will be central to my own treatment of Schlegel. But like liberal pluralism itself such a representation would seem to leave romantic irony bereft of any critical edge, any standpoint upon truth, and hence, politically neutralized. Romantic irony is here limited to a *reflection* of a contradictory and fragmented world. It can at best help us understand and live with this world (and in this respect Muecke's association of it with an ideology, open or otherwise, is most apt); it can do little to criticize or promote the change of it.

David Simpson's representation of romantic irony in *Irony and Authority In Romantic Poetry*, while also largely concentrating on the trope as a formal-aesthetic device that poses certain hermeneutical challenges to the reader, hints at the recovery of a political subversiveness missing from such representations that simply celebrate its pluralism. For Simpson

romantic irony is synonymous with the indeterminacy of meaning congenial to the poststructuralist critical climate of his work's publication in 1979.

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 upon 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. (190)

The struggle for hermeneutic freedom against hermeneutic authority that Simpson here invokes under the name of romantic irony might also be understood, he suggests, as an allegory for more broadly political struggles.

It may well be . . . that the rather esoteric exploration of self-focusing revolutions which these writers offer have much to do with the repressive legislation and draconian censorship introduced during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. The ethical reservations which they project about their own tendencies towards authority, combined with the high sense of urgency about passing on those reservations, may after all be part of a sophisticated self-protection, producing a version of 'revolution' which is permissible precisely because personal, because unorganised in the social sense. (xii)

Simpson likewise associates the enlightenment faith in reason and a "general nature" (173) with political quietism, even outright authoritarian coercion, and thereby deepens the political stakes involved in his representation of a romantic irony that displaces these tenets of the enlightenment.

This view [of universal reason and general nature] at the simplest level, condones the belief in gradualism; that the kernel of truth, once implanted into society, must grow and

spread of its own accord. There is thus no call for revolution or personal exertion. . . . It also allows for the supposition of a relation of direct correspondence between the good of the individual and the good of the state, rendering unnecessary any concept of a division of interest. (173)

Simpson's suggestion of a politics of romantic irony is salutary and the subversion of authority, of coercive totalities, that he singles out as its chief operation is, in my view, a key aspect of the theory of irony articulated by Schlegel. Simpson's suggestions, however, remain just that: apart from scattered comments such as I have cited, *Irony and Authority* contains no sustained analysis of the political implications of the theory or practice of romantic irony.¹⁴ Furthermore, even at the level of suggestion Simpson's study is arguably guilty of imputing too much subversive power to romantic irony in representing it as a kind of proto-revolutionary aesthetic device, just as he is surely wrong in totalizing enlightenment rationality as necessarily politically quietistic and/or coercive.¹⁵ Schlegel's theory of irony, as I will show, engages in a complex dialogue with enlightenment assumptions about reason, system, and self, attempting to retain their moment of truth while simultaneously demonstrating their limitations; it is in no way a simple rejection of these views.

The political subversiveness of pluralistic\indeterminate writing and the totalitarianism of conceptual reason are, of course, tenets of a certain strain of poststructuralist thought in the *Tel Quel* mode towards which Simpson leans in this work--an ultra-leftism opposed to everything except, perhaps, a rather abstract concept of freedom and, therefore, opposed to nothing. At the same time, however, Simpson seems well enough aware of the political limitations of such a view. In the conclusion to his study,

sketching very briefly the "alternatives to what I have been describing as a world where 'infinite blindness supplies the place of sight,'" (198), i.e. the world of the hermeneutic indeterminacies Simpson names romantic irony, he writes:

Political commitment . . . is another option, and it is in this context that we would have to take account of the possibility that the insistence upon the impossibility of a 'metacomment' is nothing more than a conspiracy to pre-empt the opportunity for any sort of determinate action. (198)

Irony may well oppose political commitment, a predicament Simpson is honest enough to name (in what amount to a repetition of Hegel's critique of Schlegel) but clearly feels uneasy with as it meshes poorly with the generally subversive character he has imputed to the trope. His only response in answer to this predicament (in the near final words of *Irony and Authority*) is to say that "the poets of this generation [the English romantics] were not, by and large, 'activists'. . . [T]he 'way beyond' does not so much involve the assimilation of our leading problems as the refusal of them" (199). But such a response appears to make romantic irony politically insignificant in contradiction to Simpson's suggestion in his preface that it may be crypto-revolutionary. Clearly Simpson could not negotiate such a contradiction and his own later work does indeed find the "way beyond" in a political commitment that refuses the problematic of irony.

The notion of an insurmountable opposition between irony and political commitment upon which Simpson's work founders is, however, illegitimate: the result of an erroneous equation of irony with hermeneutic indeterminacy. Irony, on the contrary, may well be the condition of the

possibility of a political commitment that could be described as consensual and non-coercive. As de Man suggests in an early essay on Montaigne's irony, one can "be on the side of the rebels . . . without, for all that, taking [oneself] seriously" (10).¹⁶ Gary Handwerk's *Irony and Ethics in Narrative* provides an interpretation of an "ethical irony" located in Schlegel and others, that "can provide an alternative between indeterminacy and authority. It can prevent freezing them into a static polarity, where indeterminacy would itself become authority" (16). He thereby takes us some way toward an understanding of irony that would allow for the political commitment Simpson sees irony precluding.

Handwerk's ethical irony is a process through which a putatively isolated ego becomes aware of the irreducible intersubjectivity at the core of meaning and of self and, correlatively, a process through which consensus can be negotiated from amongst a variety of competing meanings. Irony arises "in Schlegel's system as a device to reintegrate the individual and society, to pass beyond the isolated creative consciousness and regain the sense of speaking to kindred spirits" (30). Schlegelian irony is not synonymous with negation as Hegel, Kierkegaard, and an entire tradition of both those who argue with and against them have assumed; negation "is only a secondary and superficial aspect of its functioning" (24). Nor are the dichotomies of humanity and nature, or subject and object, its chief concern but, rather, the dialectic of self and other" (24, 25). As such, irony can provide "relative but adequate social, if not ontological, verities" (14).¹⁷ By enacting "constant relocations of meaning within verbal interactions" (viii), between for example the author and reader of a poem,

or between several characters in a novel, irony "insists upon the provisional and fragmentary nature of the individual subject and thus forces us to recognize our dependence upon some mode of intersubjectivity that exceeds the furthest extension of any individual subject" (viii). It thereby incites "the verbal consensus on which a coherent and self-conscious community must rest--while never underestimating the hermeneutic obstacles to such consensus" (viii). Handwerk notes the increasing predominance in Schlegel's writings of the concept of *conscience* as a "sense for others" (43) and argues that this concept takes up and moves beyond the meanings Schlegel had previously attributed to irony. "This terminological transformation," Handwerk asserts, "makes it evident that irony all along has had an ethical as well as an aesthetic potential" (41).

Handwerk's representation of Schlegelian irony is almost the exact antithesis of Hegel's representation of it as an isolated, enclosed subjectivity; therein lies its strength and its weakness. There can be little doubt that Schlegel's writings on irony represent more of an interrogation than a hypostatization of the subject, and Handwerk's interpretation is the more subtle and convincing for taking this into account. Furthermore, Handwerk permits us to consider a communally oriented politics of irony, a politics that might amount to more than glib assertions of pluralism or a vague all subversive ultra-leftism. The negotiation between self and others, self and community, that Handwerk places in the centre of Schlegel's writings on irony is crucial and informs my own treatment of Schlegel's texts.

Handwerk, however, may save Schlegel's irony from Hegel's critique at the risk of turning Schlegel into an Hegelian. Handwerk runs this risk most acutely in his devaluation of the individual subject to the social totality. "Ethical irony implies a *holistic view of identity*, a possible reinterpretation beyond incompatibilities. . . . The ultimate force of ethical irony is thus to *undermine the integrity of the subject it seemed to imply existed*" (Handwerk 3 my emphasis). In the terms of political discourse such an irony entails "the possibility indeed the *necessity of eliminating the isolated subject of liberal political theory*" (Handwerk 30 my emphasis). Handwerk comes close in such statements to eliminating a necessary tension between the individual subject and the social totality--a process that, as I shall discuss in chapter three, would appear to more accurately describe the ideology of the symbol than the ideology of irony. As Adorno wrote: "If [the subject] were liquidated rather than sublated in a higher form, the effect would be regression--not just of consciousness, but regression to real barbarism" ("Subject" 499). The subject in Schlegel's texts is neither "undermined" nor "eliminated" in favour of the social totality but, precisely, ironized--in the sense of being known simultaneously, and dialectically, to be true and untrue. Thus of the artist, who as we shall see in many respects represent Schlegel's ideal of both the individual and the community, Schlegel writes:

An artist is someone who carries his centre within himself. Whoever lacks such a centre has to choose some particular leader and mediator outside of himself, not, to be sure, forever, but only to begin with. For a man cannot live without a vital centre, and if he does not yet have one within himself, then he can only seek it in another man, and only a man and a man's centre can stimulate and awaken his own. (Id 45)

Schlegel simultaneously affirms that the centre must reside within

the self *and* that it derives from elsewhere; it is one's own and it is not one's own. In terms of the ideological critique that we are pursuing here we could say that the subject is both true as a description of an historical reality (an emerging capitalist mode of production and its political, juridical and cultural formations was producing isolated subjectivities), and true in a more ideal sense in so far as one would expect a significant degree of individual autonomy to characterize any just society. The subject is certainly untrue in the sense maintained by liberal political theory of being ontologically prior to its society. It is also untrue in so far as the vast majority of historically existent individuals can be said to enjoy anything like the degree of freedom and autonomy that an ideology of the subject, in order to maintain and reproduce a dominant social order, posits for them. But lest one assume too quickly that Schlegel's ironizing of the subject leads to an affirmation of the social totality over the subject, one need keep in mind that Schlegel is equally capable of ironizing the social totality: "One sometimes hears the public being spoken of as if it were somebody with whom one had lunch at the Hôtel de Sax during the Leipzig Fair. Who is this public? The public is no object, but an idea, a postulate, like the Church" (*Lyceum* 35).¹⁸

Another aspect of Handwerk's Hegelianization of Schlegel is the tendency to interpret Schlegel's writings as constituting a coherent *system*. As Joseph Dane has noted such a "myth of coherence" (101) characterizes most of the scholarship on Schlegel's irony. Such an assumption of coherence is necessary to some extent and Handwerk's virtuoso reading of irony, within "the total framework of Schlegel's philosophy" (20),

certainly derives strength from it. Yet there are degrees of such an assumption and Handwerk's eliding of terminological distinctions in Schlegel's writings between irony, wit, conscience, and even love to construct a consistently "ethical irony" performs undue hermeneutic violence. While as Handwerk notes "terminological fixity" (20) does not characterize Schlegel's thinking, to use such a lack of fixity to perform what Dane describes as a "critical sleight of hand" (102), whereby terms are taken as interchangeable to "patch together a theory from any number of Schlegel's own fragments" (102), also goes against the character of Schlegel's work. For Handwerk, finally, Schlegel's irony is without contradiction. It changes through the course of Schlegel's writings but this shift takes the form of a teleological evolution toward the realization of ethical irony in the affirmations of *belief*, *conscience*, and *love* characterizing Schlegel's later work. From the standpoint of an ideological reading of Schlegel's irony the difficulty with such a narrative of progressive development is not only the refusal to recognize contradictions but that such a narrative corresponds to the development, on Schlegel's behalf, of an increasingly reactionary politics. As opposed to the young republican and supporter of the French Revolution who wrote explicitly of irony, the Schlegel who increasingly preached the value of belief, conscience and love also became conservatively nationalistic and promoted a return to the rule of the Holy Roman Empire (Eichner 130).

It is possible, then, to trace in the history of the critical reception of Schlegel and the romantics an entire spectrum of ideological positions

attributed to romantic irony, from Hegel's association of it with the isolated ego characteristic of the detached subject of liberal political theory, to Handwerk's association of it with the socially constructed subject characteristic of various (socialist and conservative) forms of communal politics. Thus the "transideological" politics that Linda Hutcheon has recently attributed to irony would appear also to characterize the critical discourse *about* irony (*Irony's* 10). As I have attempted to show, such varying positions are attributable in part to the different agendas of those representing romantic irony, and to the social and intellectual contexts out of which they write--in short, attributable to their own ideological subject positions. As I will try to bring out in my own reading of Schlegel, however, such ideologically contradictory positions are also permitted in part by the peculiar *inbetweenness* of Schlegelian irony, between individualist and communalist political discourses, as well as between insurgency and authority.

TWO

"Insurgent Government": Irony, Politics and Nation in Friedrich Schlegel's *Fragments*

As a temporary condition scepticism is logical insurrection; as a system it is anarchy. Sceptical method¹ would therefore more or less resemble insurgent government.

--Friedrich Schlegel (Ath 97)

Friedrich Schlegel's concept of irony, I have suggested, and indeed his entire philosophical and aesthetic project that is sometimes placed under the rubric of this term, can be more fully and accurately understood when read in the context of the political debates that raged across Europe in the wake of the French Revolution. This does not amount to an extrinsic reading of Schlegel's writings in a more traditionally historicist sense whereby one provides the "background" and "influences" of a body of work. Nor will it take us down the road (however enlightening such a course might be) of the deliberately estranging "thick descriptions" of a certain vein of New Historicist interpretation whereby one might read Schlegel's aesthetic theories alongside some seemingly wholly other contemporaneous political or juridical documents. My reading is intrinsic in so far as Schlegel himself--in keeping with his dictum that "there is no self-knowledge except historical self-knowledge. No one knows what he is if he doesn't know what his contemporaries are" (*Id* 139)--addresses his historical context ceaselessly, striving for an historical consciousness of his

turn-of-the-century German and European culture. It is the critics who have extracted Schlegel's aesthetic discourse from the social and political discourses within which he purposively interwove it.² To attempt to read Schlegel's aesthetic theories in conjunction with these other statements is merely to attempt to come to terms with the poly-discursive nature of Schlegel's fragmentary writing; and to attempt to negotiate between part and whole, fragment and totality, in a dialectical fashion explicitly thematized by Schlegel.³

Frederick Beiser's thesis (supported through detailed readings of many lesser known political tracts by writers known more for their aesthetic and philosophical work) that the politics of the "early" German romanticism of 1797-1800, constituted an attempt to negotiate between on the one hand, a tradition of enlightenment liberalism widely believed to have precipitated the French Revolution, and on the other hand, a conservative response to the violence, rapid change and disempowerment it produced, provides, as I have suggested earlier, the starting point and frame for my own analysis of the politics of Schlegel's theory of irony.

[Early German romanticism] struggled to avoid the extremes of liberalism and conservatism: an insistence on individual liberty that destroyed all social bonds on the one hand, and an emphasis on community that suppressed all individual liberty on the other hand. It accepted the communitarian elements of conservatism, but rejected its paternalism, its identification of the community with the old social and political hierarchy. It endorsed the defense of individual liberty of liberalism, but criticized its free-for-all of self-interested agents. (223)

The romantics initially supported the ideal of a democratic republic propounded by the revolutionaries in France: "They believed that the true community will come into existence only through the liberty, equality, and

fraternity of a republic" (Beiser 223). They even "hoped that, eventually, through increasing enlightenment and education, the need for the state itself would disappear" (Beiser 223). Yet they were not revolutionaries in the sense of supporting violent political upheaval, not in any event in their own German political context. They remained suspicious even critical of the violence resorted to by the French Revolutionaries--a suspicion that, I will argue, is manifested in Schlegel's philosophical critique of the violence of abstract conceptuality upon particularity and individuality. In place of political revolution they supported, in the tradition of Schiller and the German enlightenment, or *Aufklärung*, the role of culture, of art, poetry and philosophy, as *Bildung*: as educating the people to become the future citizens of the ideal republic (Beiser 228-229).

In proposing such a politics for early Romanticism Beiser is arguing against a long tradition, perhaps most eminently represented by Lukács, that has regarded the German romantic movement with its evocation of the organic community, its celebration of folk art, and an idealized, mythologized past as the Nazi ideology in embryonic form--a view that is certainly lent credibility by the open appropriation of the romantics by National Socialist writers who themselves looked to Romanticism as a precursor to their own movement (Beiser 225-226). But the ideal of community proposed by romantics in this early phase, Beiser contends, while it employed organic metaphors was "not to control but to cultivate the autonomy and unique characteristics of every individual. For this reason alone, [it] cannot serve as a model for the Nazi ideal" (227). As with the organic metaphors for society employed by Burke in his famous critique of the

French Revolution, the organic conception of society theorized by the young Schlegel and his contemporaries argued against rapid, revolutionary change. But unlike Burke's conception of the organic society theirs was not a defense of the status quo in reaction to the revolution: "they continued to stress the importance of gradual reform and evolution toward the principles of reason. . . . Their opposition against radical and wholesale change was directed as much against the authoritarian policies of absolute princes as against the revolutionary program of the French radicals" (239). The maintenance of the distinction between the community and the paternal state is, for Beiser, what separates the politics of early romanticism from its later catholic and monarchist phases. As their fear of the social disintegration, even anarchism, that they perceived in the aftermath of the Revolution grew, so did their identification with authority until the distinction between community and state was elided and romanticism "ultimately became the most powerful current within [the] conservatism" (224) that dominated the intellectual atmosphere of the post-Napoleonic Restoration.

In his reading of Schlegel's aesthetic theories Beiser is primarily concerned with demonstrating how they partake in the Schillerian project of "the aesthetic education," and hence how they carry on the progressive reformist tradition of the German enlightenment (247), and correspondingly how the theory of romantic poetry constitutes "the aesthetics of republicanism" (260). Irony, however, the reintroduction and theorization of which is arguably Schlegel's greatest legacy and central to his theory of romantic poetry, central indeed to his theoretical project as a whole, is

not mentioned by Beiser. Irony is, nonetheless, the best overall description for the dialectical relationship between the antinomies of liberal and conservative positions that Beiser seeks to delineate as the early romantic's political position.

To take Schlegel's theory of irony as the dominant trope defining his political position is, however, to begin to modify and problematize in significant ways Beiser's thesis on the politics of the early romantics. We find that Schlegel hovers between the antinomies of conservatism and liberalism in a less synthetic and more vertiginous fashion than Beiser's reading suggests. Beiser, indeed, while he proposes to read Schlegel and his circle as positioned between liberalism and conservatism, in effect shows romanticism's strong leanings toward liberal republican ideals at an early stage followed by a turn in a very short space of time toward conservatism. In this narrative of movement from one position to another much of romanticism's proposed political inbetweenness is lost or ignored. This narrative, furthermore, involves Beiser in some difficult contradictions when reading Schlegel's fragments. Thus fragments contemporaneous in their publication date (*Athenaeum* 214 and 222) are cited to adduce, respectively, Schlegel's "definite retreat from . . . radicalism" (261), on the one hand, and the revolutionary goals of his aesthetic project on the other hand (259). A fragment published two years later in 1800 (*Ideas* 60), when one would have expected such a "definite retreat" toward conservatism to have gone some little distance, is cited in support of the romantic's liberalistic emphasis upon the individual (230).⁴ One rather conventional hermeneutic strategy with which to explain such contradictions would be

to characterize the published fragments of 1797-1800 as politically transitional and, in a sense, confused; this, in part at least, is Beiser's position.⁵ But to assign the *Fragments*, and this entire period, to a transitional confusion is to do away with most of Schlegel's early romanticism including the theory of romantic poetry that Beiser delineates as the "aesthetics of republicanism" (260) and to involve Beiser in a further contradiction.

To read Schlegel's political statements in the *Fragments* through his own theorization of the concept of irony and to attempt to see these statements as structurally homologous with this theory constitutes another, and I would argue more satisfying, hermeneutic strategy. In this reading we see Schlegel deliberately and self-consciously juxtaposing and alternating between the antinomies of liberal and conservative assumptions on such fundamental issues as the individual, the community, progress, authority and the status of reason, in an attempt to delineate a politics comprised of a non-synthetic dialectic that might permit both individual freedom and the recognition of one's place and duty within the wider totality of the polis or nation. The contradictions remain in this reading, certainly, but we do Schlegel--who in advance even of Hegel begins to thematize the productivity of contradiction--the credit of dealing with them self-consciously. To what extent Schlegel's irony can be seen to provide a productive model for an alternative politics, or alternately to what extent he can be said to have been deluded, providing (in one of our key senses of ideology) symbolic resolutions to real contradictions is a question I will leave for my conclusion to this chapter.

I will turn first to Schlegel's fragments concerned directly with irony to define the meaning Schlegel gives to the concept, one that comprises several interrelated connotations all of which have been discussed in the scholarship on Schlegel and on irony more generally. I will simultaneously attempt to show how this concept of irony characterizes Schlegel's poetical-philosophical-cultural theory as a whole, and herein one may begin to glimpse its political nature. I then discuss Schlegel's directly political statements concerning the structure of government and the distributions of powers and political representation, arguing that the rudiments of a political theory that they provide are structurally homologous to the theory of irony. Finally, and perhaps most important, I will read Schlegel's fragments concerning the establishment of a nationalist German identity, in contrast largely to French and English nationalist identities, (one of the most overriding concerns of the *Fragments*) as similarly informed by, and homologous to, Schlegel's concept of irony. Between the "tasteless universality" (Ath 423) of French political and philosophical radicalism on the one hand, and the "pathological history of common sense" (Ath 61) provided by the British on the other hand, an ironic stance is proposed as one uniquely and ideally suited to the German people and its future nation.

1. Irony

Only a dozen of the hundreds of fragments Schlegel published in the *Lyceum* and *Athenaeum* journals refer to irony⁶. Of these only five (*Lyceum* 42, 48, 108; *Athenaeum* 431; *Ideas* 69) are directly concerned with the concept. By contrast, concepts such as "wit" and "genius" that have

not enjoyed as significant a critical legacy are the subject of a considerably greater number of fragments. There appears to be, then, a certain credibility to in Joseph Dane's argument that Schlegelian irony, and romantic irony in general, constitute a "critical mythology," a concept critics have constructed in numerous ways after the fact as the central concern of Schlegel and his group. Hegel and Kierkegaard, ironically enough, stand as the chief perpetrators of this mythology, for in setting out (without engaging Schlegel's actual statements on irony) to bury rather than praise romantic irony, they lend to it a far more central position than can be found in the works of Schlegel and his group themselves, even going so far as to synonymize irony and romanticism. This centrality is henceforth assumed by both defenders and critics of the concept (see Dane 73-82).

While a general synonomization of irony and romanticism would elide important distinctions between these terms, irony is, I maintain, despite the word's relatively infrequent appearance, the central trope for both the form and content of Schlegel's *Fragments*. To this extent Hegel and Kierkegaard's synonomization of the two terms was perhaps inevitable. Several other terms employed by Schlegel, while themselves not synonymous with irony, are analogous with this concept, representing different ways of addressing parallel concerns. The strongest case for taking irony as the master trope of the *Fragments* is provided by Schlegel's own testimony to this effect in his essay "On Incomprehensibility" published in 1800. In this essay Schlegel looks back upon his then scandalous fragmentary style--on "all the offence *the*

Athenaeum has given, and . . . all the incomprehension it has provoked" (35)--and attempts (albeit with irony) to explain and justify it. "A great part of the incomprehensibility of the *Athenaeum*," Schlegel asserts, "is unquestionably due to the *irony* that to a greater or lesser extent is to be found everywhere in it" (36). Schlegel then proceeds to quote his own *Lyceum* fragments 48 and 108 in full, both as an illustration of what he means by irony, and as a clear indication of the best hermeneutic strategy with which to approach the *Fragments* as a whole. For this reason, I will centre my consideration of the concept around these two fragments while expanding the discussion to include others as they elaborate upon particular connotations of Schlegel's concept of irony. The crucial *Lyceum* 42 which develops a rather different connotation of the term will be discussed last.

Lyceum 48 in its entirety states: "Irony is the form of paradox. Paradox is everything simultaneously good and great." The *Oxford Dictionary* defines paradox as a "seemingly absurd though perhaps actually well-founded statement; self-contradictory or essentially absurd statement." Wordsworth's "The child is father of the man" is a well known example, demanding that one bracket the temporal priority, genetic causality and cultural authority that evidently make the man the father of the child, and attempt to see the self-contradictory reverse as simultaneously true on a different plane of meaning. Schlegel's own language is eminently paradoxical presenting, similarly self-contradictory statements: "A good preface must be at once the square root and the square of its book" (Ly 8). In this first formulation of irony as paradox, then, Schlegel introduces

the crucial idea of the concept as the simultaneous holding together of contradictions to perceive a truth not accessible to a logic of noncontradiction; and he valorizes such a paradoxical language in the strongest terms. The presentation of such contradictions both within and between fragments is central to Schlegel's method. In *Athenaeum* 121 Schlegel writes: "An idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual selfcreating interchange of two conflicting thoughts." It is important to note along with numerous commentators on Schlegel's irony that the "absolute synthesis" to which Schlegel refers is not the monistic identity sought for in certain articulations of the dialectic, but precisely this "continual . . . interchange" of antithesis (Eichner 63; Muecke 194; Mellor 11; Handwerk 15; Albert 826-829).

Schlegel thematizes this method in several other fragments in which irony is not mentioned but can be assumed to be descriptive of the method.

If one becomes infatuated with the absolute and simply can't escape it, then the only way out is *to contradict oneself continually and join opposite extremes together*. The principle of contradiction is inevitably doomed, and the only remaining choice is either to assume an attitude of suffering or else enoble necessity by acknowledging the possibility of free action.¹ (emphasis added)

In this fragment the method (irony) is explicitly conceived as a way of breaking through static intellectual positions such as "an infatuation with the absolute" that might preclude a necessary attention to the relative and the particular. The final words referring to the "enobl[ing] of necessity by acknowledging the possibility of free action" is an instance of a paradoxical

irony in practice--one in which we can see the trace of a political allegory that remains to be sketched more fully. The reference to "contradict[ing] oneself continually" moves Schlegel's method out of the singular instance of the paradox within which we read the individual fragments into a more fluid movement that allows us to see how Schlegel's fragments as a whole may be read as an ironic dialectic.

"Contradict[ing] oneself continually," suggests what will become, as Ernst Behler notes, "the dominant theme in the exposition of irony in the *Athenaeum*" (*German* 148): irony as "self-creation and self-destruction." While Schlegel refers to a process of self-creation and self-destruction at various points in the *Fragments*, *Athenaeum* 51 is the sole fragment where this process is explicitly discussed in conjunction with irony: "Naive is what is or seems to be natural, individual, or classical to the point of irony, or else to the point of continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction." According to the dominant interpretation of this line the reference to "self-creation and self-destruction" serves to elaborate upon the previous reference to irony and thus the two terms are taken to be interchangeable.⁸ The parallel syntax of "to the point of" in both clauses would seem to support this reading, suggesting that Schlegel is discussing the same "point" described in two synonymous ways.

In *Athenaeum* 51 Schlegel works with Schiller's concept of naive art as an art that "is nature," that provides "the completest possible *imitation of actuality*" (Schiller 274, 275). Schlegel's point is that irony, in the sense (discussed more fully below) of a hovering between instinct and intention, must inhabit even the most apparently natural "naive" works

of art. "If it's simply instinctive, then it's childlike, childish, or silly; if it's merely intentional, then it gives rise to affectation. The beautiful, poetical, ideal naive must combine intention and instinct" (Ath 51). The dialectic of self-creation and self-destruction, then, represents in this context the artist's movement vis-à-vis the work between instinctive (un-self-conscious) and intentional (self-conscious) subject positions. For Schlegel, the way to achieve such a movement is to alternate between enthusiasm and skepticism, "inspiration and criticism" (Ath 116), toward the creative artifact (or in a philosophical context toward the idea or concept), alternately affirming it as natural and true and negating it as artificial and false. Schlegel is emphatic that only such a dual movement of *affirmation and negation* is tolerable or valuable.

There are people whose whole life consists in always saying no. It would be no small accomplishment always to be able to say no properly, but whoever can do no more, surely cannot do so properly. The taste of these nay-sayers is like an efficient pair of scissors for pruning the extremities of genius; their enlightenment is like a great candle-snuffer for the flame of enthusiasm; and their reason a mild laxative against immoderate pleasure and love. (Ath 88)

Thus despite the necessity of the negative, Schlegelian irony is not conceived of as "absolute infinite negativity."⁹ "Hegel to the contrary," Tilottama Rajan notes, "Friedrich Schlegel sees the decreative power of irony as consistent with the teleological project of a progressive universal poetry and finally connects irony (particular Socratic irony) with love" (*Supplement* 63).

For a reading attuned to the politics of Schlegelian irony, one of the most significant questions in the articulation of irony as self-creation

and self-destruction is the view of the self such a process presupposes. Is it the autonomous subject of classical liberal political theory freely choosing its own destiny? In this case there remains behind the created and destroyed manifestations of self an underlying essential self, an absolute ego, performing these acts. This is Hegel's reading of romantic irony and the basis upon which he critiques it. Schlegel's ironic self is not, for that matter, the organic self of Burkean conservatism, a self inextricably bound up in an historically evolving community. There would be no division or split within such a subject to allow for the process of self-creation and self-destruction. Such a self would indeed be identical with instinct, and hence merely "childlike, childish, or silly." Yet there is in the process of self-creation and self-destruction a similar emphasis upon the determination of identity by context (even if this determination is only momentary or partial) that belies any easy identity between Schlegel's self and the isolated autonomous ego of liberal theory. In the enthusiastic, positive, moment of Schlegel's ironic dialectic the self appears to be indivisible from its context, both determining it and determined by it, embracing the whole as natural and true. In the negative critical moment of the dialectic the self attempts to distance itself from this other self, to see it as partial and limited. Both moments, Schlegel insists, are necessary and this suggests an inherently split self that hovers between communal and individualistic models of the self.

The articulation of irony as paradox in *Lyceum* 48, then, encompasses the idea of irony as the productive play of contradictions, and this in turn leads into the idea of irony as "continuously fluctuating

between self-creation and self-destruction." The lengthier *Lyceum* 108 expands upon the idea of irony as a conjunction of antinomies and in so doing introduces several other senses crucial to Schlegel's formulation of the concept. "Socratic irony" is postulated in the opening of the fragment as "the only *involuntary* and yet completely *deliberate dissimulation*" (emphasis added). These three attributes, "involuntary," "deliberate," and "dissimulation" permit one to glimpse how irony functions in Schlegel's overall post-Kantian theoretical project. In Kant's Third Critique the aesthetic is proposed as a solution to the fundamental problem arising from the first two critiques: how does one explain and guarantee the interaction of the imagination (which processes sensuous phenomena into representations) and the understanding (which works those representations into conceptual knowledge)? That these two faculties do interact is the cornerstone of Kant's philosophy, but where and how? On what common ground might they be shown to meet? Kant proposes that they meet in the aesthetic experience, the experience that is the peculiar synthesis of material phenomena and the form giving purposiveness of human understanding. That which is aesthetically satisfying is so because it fulfils a rational need but requires an animal element. The rational need is order and design, and its animal foundation lies in its necessary sensuousness and the pleasure derived therein. Furthermore, morality and aesthetics are *analogous* for Kant: as with art our submission to the moral law is at once free, yet bound up with an unavoidable compulsion.

Kant's Third Critique opens up upon the interactions of philosophy and art that it will be the project of much of romanticism, and one of the

dominant themes of Schlegel's fragments, to negotiate. Romanticism is frequently read as naively and dangerously eliding the dualities kept rigidly separate in Kant's philosophy such that the distinctions between reason and sense, truth and beauty become dissolved into the vastly expanded realm of the aesthetic. What was intended by Kant as a heuristic fiction becomes identified, in a primal ideological gesture, with a stable ontological ground (see Eagleton ch. 5). Schlegel at least--in keeping with his dictum that "there are probably only a very few Kantians" (Ath 30)--proves to be a much more subtle and faithful reader of Kant than any such hasty elision would indicate. Like Kant's aesthetic, irony is a term that negotiates between reason and sense, hence both its "completely deliberate" and "involuntary" nature. Like Kant's aesthetic again it is not to be mistaken for the real but is, precisely, "dissimulation." One might surmise that Schlegel prefers the concept of irony to what he at one point refers to as "your so-called aesthetics" (Id 72), because of its greater resistance, in its self-conscious awareness of any given position as dissimulation, to any ideological elision of fiction and reality.

How are we to understand the all important paradox of an irony that is both an "involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation"? Irony is "completely deliberate" because Schlegel believes one can be, and indeed should be, *self-conscious* that any given position is a dissimulation, a partial truth and-or a partial lie, and because he believes that one can use such self-consciousness, as we shall see, towards various ends. Through such self-consciousness of dissimulation one is freed from an enslavement to a particular idea, or an entire system that might masquerade as absolute;

just as Socrates' irony, as Kierkegaard shows, freed him from an enslavement to both the Greek state and its pagan mythology (Kierkegaard 171). Irony is "involuntary," on the other hand, in so far as one has no access to a position, or language, of complete truth from which one could be unironic. One's self-consciousness of dissimulation and the uses one puts it to, are one's only escape from an enslavement to an involuntary necessity: the necessarily partial nature of understanding and communication which one might locate in Kant's fundamental premise that we can have knowledge of phenomena only and not of the thing-in-itself, or in an anticipation of Nietzsche's premise that understanding is necessarily linguistic and figural.¹⁰ Thus Schlegel reaffirms: "[Irony] is the freest of all licences, for by its means one transcends oneself; and yet it is also the most lawful, for it is absolutely necessary" (Ly 108). "Necessary," however, should be here understood in both the negative sense as "that which could not be otherwise," and the positive sense as "that which should be performed," for clearly Schlegel is less interested in delineating the "prison house of language" or phenomenality, than in outlining a dynamic method through which one can attain the greatest possible approximation to truth as well as the greatest possible freedom.

Self-consciousness, then, in the sense of a general awareness of, or reflection upon, one's condition (linguistic, historical, political etc) comprises another of the key connotations of Schlegelian irony. Thus *Ideas* 69 states: "Irony is clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos." Spatial metaphors of *distance* and *height* frequently articulate the attempt to achieve such a position. Schlegel describes irony

as "the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above its own art, virtue, or genius" (Ly 42). In his articulation of a "transcendental poetry" Schlegel also posits such reflexivity as an ideal: "In all its descriptions this poetry should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry" (Ath 238). In the tradition of German idealism within and against which Schlegel works, self-consciousness, consciousness's ability to reflect upon its own situation, is seen as the locus of the subject's freedom from necessity. But with Schlegel such self-consciousness does not so much provide an escape from a given situation as lead to the peculiar awareness of being at once both within and without it--what comes to be described as an ironic standpoint or predicament. When Schlegel in an early statement (1791) in his unpublished notebooks writes: "Irony is a permanent parabasis" (qtd. in Behler *German* 150), he is precisely articulating irony's paradoxical hovering "inbetweeness." Parabasis is "in Greek Old Comedy, a speech made by the Chorus during intermission, directly to the audience, in the name of author" (Frye et al. 334). As de Man points out, parabasis is akin to "what is called in English criticism the 'self-conscious narrator,' the author's intrusion that disrupts the fictional illusion" ("Rhetoric" 218-219). Irony would constitute a *permanent* parabasis because such an intrusion "is not a heightened realism" ("Rhetoric" 219); the fictionality does not as it were disappear with a magical gesture that leads us out of the text and into the world. The intrusion of the narrator while *representing* an *outside* of the text, is still an event *within* the novel.¹¹ All such destructions of artistic illusion--and scholars have debated whether or not such a device

should be seen as the essence of romantic irony (Immerwahr 179; Muecke 164-165; Mellor 18)--simply superimpose one level of illusion upon another. The consciousness that one is still within the text would necessitate, to keep the irony going, a further parabasis as in certain texts, of which *Don Quixote* may be the proto-type, that successively undermine a given position as illusory only to undermine the stable position from which it was undermined as itself illusory.

The remainder of *Lyceum 108* reiterates and expands upon the antinomies that irony brings into conjunction and holds in play: the "playful and serious," the "guilelessly open and deeply hidden," "*savoir vivre* and scientific spirit," a "perfectly instinctive and a perfectly conscious philosophy." In a crucial articulation Schlegel then indicates one of the key purposes of such a non-synthetic dialectic: "[Irony] contains and arouses a feeling of *indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative*, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication" (Ly 108 emphasis added). Perhaps the chief concern of Schlegel's fragments is this "indissoluble antagonism." One crucial form this takes, in the wake of Kant and German idealism, is Schlegel's concern with *system*.

A philosophical system is an attempt to construct an absolute of sorts, a totality within which each particular finds its meaning and its place. Schlegel, however, will repeatedly emphasize (in metaphors that clearly import the political concerns underlying his theoretical position) the violence that any system and its concepts must perform upon the particular in order to marshall it into a system. "The demonstrations of

philosophy are simply demonstrations in the sense of military jargon. And its deductions aren't much better than those of politics; even in the sciences possession is nine-tenths of the law" (Ath 82). The totality presented by a system is always only what Schlegel describes in a suggestive phrase that anticipates later theories of ideology, a "polemical totality" (Ath 399), a partial, *interested*, version of the whole.

Polemical totality is, to be sure, a necessary consequence of assuming and demanding unlimited communicability and communication, and it can no doubt destroy one's opponents completely. Still, it does not suffice to legitimize the philosophy of its possessor (Ath 399)

While as we have seen, Schlegelian irony works within the problematic presented by Kant's aesthetic theory, Schlegel critiques Kant's philosophy on similar grounds. "In vain do the orthodox Kantians seek the principle of their philosophy in Kant. It's to be found in Bürger's poems, and reads: 'The words of the Emperor shouldn't be twisted and turned'" (Ath 298). While the association of Kant with "the words of the Emperor" is here represented as the foolish deference of overly orthodox Kantians, when we note Schlegel's comments upon Kant in an earlier fragment, it is difficult not to interpret such an association simultaneously as a critique of the rigid, even dictatorial (*vis-à-vis* the dictates of Kant's moral imperative or the submission to authority produced by the sublime) aspects of Kant's system.

I'm disappointed in not finding in Kant's family tree of basic concepts the category 'almost,' a category that has surely accomplished, and spoiled, as much in the world and in literature as any other. In the mind of natural skeptics it colors all other concepts and intuitions. (Ly 80)

Indeed in associating Kantian philosophy with "the words of the Emperor"

Schlegel may be indicating that he views Kant's so-called "critical philosophy" as ideologically complicit with the then dominant political order--the Prussian absolute state.¹²

With his counter-emphasis upon "almost" Schlegel affirms, as will Adorno after him, that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder" (Adorno *Negative* 5). Schlegel repeatedly asserts the irreducible particularity of things against the attempts of systems to subsume them within the uniformity of their concepts.

Is it possible to characterize anything but individuals? Isn't whatever can't be multiplied after a certain given point just as much a historical entity as something that can no longer be divided? Aren't all systems individuals just as all individuals are systems at least in embryo and tendency? Isn't every real entity historical? Aren't there individuals who contain within themselves whole systems of individuals? (Ath 242)

But Schlegel is no empiricist, no good Anglo-Saxon nominalist affirming that only particulars exist and that concepts are merely the arbitrary names with which we group such particulars. Against the empiricist position he equally affirms the necessity of the *a priori* concept.

Since people are always so much against hypotheses, they should try sometime to begin studying history without one. It's impossible to say that a thing is, without saying what it is. In the very process of thinking of facts, one relates them to concepts, and, surely, it is not a matter of indifference to which. If one is aware of this, then it is possible to determine and choose consciously among all the possible concepts the necessary ones to which facts of all kinds should be related. If one refuses to recognize this, then the choice is surrendered to instinct, chance, or fate; and so one flatters oneself that one has established a pure solid empiricism quite a posteriori, when what one actually has is an apriori outlook that's highly one-sided, dogmatic, and transcendental. (Ath 226)

"Formal logic and empirical psychology," Schlegel elsewhere maintains, "are

philosophical grotesques. For whatever is interesting in an arithmetic of the four elements or in an experimental physics of the spirit can surely only derive from *a contrast of form and content*" (Ath 75 my emphasis).

Given Schlegel's emphasis upon both the violence *and* the necessity of the concept his philosophical position is best summed up in his famous dictum: "It's equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two" (Ath 53). Irony as Schlegel's term for the dialectical interplay of such antinomies, for the "indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative" (Ly 108), and for the "contrast of form and content," best describes this philosophical position as a whole. In *Athenaeum* 226 above we again see Schlegel affirming the value of the *awareness* of one's predicament that permits one "to determine and choose consciously among all the possible concepts" as opposed to the "[surrender] to instinct, chance or fate"--a self-consciousness defined elsewhere as an ironic standpoint. Here the predicament is represented as an epistemological and methodological danger yet, as we shall see, Schlegel applies it equally to his historical, political situation.

My direct discussion of Schlegel's articulation of the concept of irony must make note, finally, of his close association of the term with "urbanity" [*Urbanität*], connoting a worldly sophisticated manner. The critical discussions of Schlegelian and romantic irony have not emphasized the significance of this association. This may be due in part to a recognition that such an association does not constitute an original contribution to the theory of irony. Furthermore, in the majority of discussions that treat romantic irony as primarily a formal-aesthetic device

or a hermeneutic strategy, the seemingly *belletristic* quality of urbanity may well seem superfluous. Yet from the perspective of a reading attuned to the social semiotics of Schlegel's theory of irony, the association with urbanity becomes central, providing an important indication of the class conflict embedded in the former concept and a key tie-in between irony and Schlegel's nationalistic construction of the *cosmopolitan German*.

Lyceum 42 is the key locus for Schlegel's association of irony with urbanity.

Philosophy is the real homeland of irony, which one would like to define as logical beauty: for wherever philosophy appears in oral or written dialogues--and is not simply confined into rigid systems--there irony should be asked for and provided. And even the stoics considered urbanity a virtue.

The last sentence of this passage virtually synonymizes irony and urbanity. As the passage continues, distinguishing between a more narrow conception of rhetorical irony and a broader conception of a more fundamental irony¹³, Schlegel again employs the terms as near synonyms.

Of course there is also a rhetorical species of irony which, sparingly used, has an excellent effect, especially in polemics; but compared to the *sublime urbanity* of the Socratic muse, it is like the pomp of the most splendid oration set over against the noble style of an ancient tragedy. (emphasis added)

One might have expected urbanity to retain for Schlegel its association with the rhetorical tradition from whence, as I shall discuss, it derives as the more ennobling and sophisticated form of humour or criticism in speeches, debates and everyday social discourse. Yet Schlegel here imports urbanity into his expanded conception of philosophical irony, and as its very essence. The later *Athenaeum* 431 will once again reiterate this

fundamental association. "To sacrifice to the Graces means, when said to a philosopher, as much as: create irony and aspire to urbanity."

In some respects an urbane, detached sophistication is a perfectly apt description for the heightened self-consciousness and attempted distantiation characterizing Schlegelian irony, the sense of being "in the know," of seeing several sides of a given situation at once and cleverly staying one step ahead of one's interlocutor. In other respects, however, it seems a very poor description for the vertiginous experience of holding antinomies in play, of constantly contradicting one's position in the "self-creation and self-destruction" of an ironic dialectic. Like nearly every assertion in *The Fragments*, the association of irony and urbanity does contain a certain converse or negation. *Lyceum* 42 concludes by describing irony as: "Internally: the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above its own art, virtue, or genius; externally, in its execution: the mimic style of an averagely gifted Italian *buffo*." Yet this simply contrasts irony's superficial external aspect or mask (epitomized by Socrates' shabby, fumbling demeanour) with its more significant inner core. The urbanity of irony is in effect only exalted by this contrast of form and content.

A key motivation for retaining the centrality of urbanity despite its only partial appropriateness appears, indeed, to be ideological. The association of irony with sophistication and grace is, as Joseph Dane notes, part of a classical tradition stemming from Aristotle within which the use of irony marks distinctions of class and social hierarchy. In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*,

Irony is one of the forms of humour befitting a free man. It is opposed to *bōmolokhia* (vulgar buffoonery). Irony is freer (and thus more noble) than *bomolokhia*, for it creates laughter for its own sake and not for something else. Irony, thus, is not only a descriptive term but an evaluative one. The ironist is socially superior to a buffoon, and uses complex forms of humour (irony among them) which are better suited to a free man (thus an educated man) than direct speech (such as *bomolokhia*). Deception is accorded a higher social status than truth. (45-46)

In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, furthermore, an *eiron*, a self deprecator, is accorded a higher status than an *alazon*, a boaster. "Those who use irony moderately," Aristotle writes, "and those who are ironic openly and not excessive in their use of it seem gracious" (qtd. in Dane 46)¹⁴

Schlegelian irony appears to retain this association with urbanity precisely because it serves to make these distinctions of social hierarchy. Significantly, irony is invoked as a covert means of marking social hierarchy at a post-Revolutionary historical moment in which the older social hierarchy has been thrown into disarray and in which a new hierarchy is, so to speak, up for grabs. Increasingly in the later *Fragments* Schlegel will articulate an elitist view of an exclusive "eternal brotherhood" (*Ideas* 32) of artists which presents a particular version of social hierarchy. "What men are among the other creatures of the earth, artists are among men" (*Ideas* 43). "One of the most important concerns of the brotherhood is to remove all outsiders who have insinuated themselves into its ranks. Bunglers should be thrown out" (*Ideas* 140, Cf *Ideas* 122, 139, 142, 143). An urbane irony, presumably, is one of the chief marks of distinction between "the brotherhood" and "the masses" (Ath 245). To this extent one must grant the moment of truth in Hegel's critique in the *Aesthetics* of the

inherent elitism of the romantics' "divine irony of genius" (66). "On the part of irony," Hegel writes, "there are steady complaints about the public's deficiency in profound sensibility, artistic insight, and genius, because it does not understand this loftiness of irony" (68).

Schlegel's brotherhood of artists is in part a positive vision of a free and equal society.

No artist should be the only, the sole artist among artists, the central one, the director of all the others; rather, all artists should be all of these things, but each one from his own point of view. No artist should be merely the representative of his genre, but should relate himself and his genre to the whole, and thereby influence and control it. Like the Roman senators, true artists are a nation of kings. (*Id* 114)

Yet as we have seen there is a strong desire to limit this society to the few, and the simile in the last sentence of this fragment likening the brotherhood to "Roman senators" and "kings" suggests the ideological content within this limited vision of a non-dominative community: the desire for power and authority over others. Schlegel's "brotherhood of artists" appears indeed to be a distorted idealized representation of an ascendent bourgeois class: the class that never recognizes itself as a class but only as an aggregate of free individuals. In this respect one must emphasize the inherent *competitiveness* in the ironic standpoint as theorized by Schlegel, as the ironist cleverly defeats any attempt to understand him or pin him down, a competitiveness that reflects the increasing competition in the marketplace. "It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a

joke" (Ly 108).

If the urbanity of irony works in Schlegel's *Fragments* to mark class hierarchies within a society, it works as well to distinguish the German from his European counterparts. The early romanticism of Schlegel and the Jena group is, as Behler notes (*German* 33), often distinguished from (and privileged over) its later phases precisely for its cosmopolitan, non-nationalistic outlook. Yet this overlooks the possibility that the nationalistic identity the early romantics posited for Germans was precisely an urbane cosmopolitan one. The German, as I shall discuss in detail below, is superior to both the French and the English because he is not narrowly provincial but able to see the best in other cultures as well as in his own. Which is not to say that the trade balance is necessarily equal; a belief in the superiority of German culture is always evident in the *Fragments*. This suggests that Schlegel's construction of the German is an ironic one not only for its urbanity, but because it paradoxically holds the antinomies nationalistic/non-nationalistic in tension: the German's national identity is his universal international identity.

2. Politics

To consider Schlegel's directly political statements in the *Fragments* is to experience the same vertiginous motion of "contradict[ing] oneself continuously" that Schlegel theorizes under the name of irony. This applies first and foremost to Schlegel's evaluation of the very worth of politics and political discourse. On the one hand, Schlegel lists "a positive politics" as being amongst "the most important desiderata of philosophy"

(Ath 28), and asserts that in a society "antipolitical or unlawful people are the only ones who shouldn't be tolerated" (Ath 272). On the other hand Schlegel asserts: "Wherever there are politics or economics no morality exists" (Id 101); and he enjoins his reader: "Don't waste your faith and love on the political world" (Id 106). Beyond this fundamental antinomy which amounts to a simultaneous embrace and rejection of politics, one finds analogous contradictions with respect to two other key indices to Schlegel's politics: his position with respect to the French Revolution, the support or rejection of which determined the ideological spectrum for his era; and his view of the cultural/political program of the romantic poetry and philosophy he theorized and championed.

In *Athenaeum* 216 Schlegel lists the "French Revolution, Fichte's philosophy, and Goethe's *Meister*" as "the greatest tendencies of the age," a statement that might appear, given Schlegel's high estimation of the latter two elements in this list, forthrightly to endorse the Revolution. The remainder of the fragment, however, qualifies such an assessment. The greatness of the "noisy and materialistic" French Revolution Schlegel suggests is a rather vulgar quantitative greatness, in comparison to which in "the history of mankind . . . many a little book, almost unnoticed by the noisy rabble at the time, plays a greater role than anything they did." Nonetheless, that Schlegel contends that Fichte's philosophy and Goethe's *Meister* should themselves be considered revolutionary indicates that he at least sides with the *idea* of revolution.

Schlegel's sympathies with the Revolution's republican cause and the means it employed are more directly evident in *Athenaeum* 251 where

he derides "the delicate morality of a century that only tried to slander the French Revolution." Schlegel defends the morality of the revolutionaries Honoré Mirabeau and Sebastien Chamfort, contending that while they might be amongst those whom "the rabble considers . . . criminals or examples of immorality . . . a truly moral person would class [them] among the extremely rare exceptions who may be regarded as creatures of his own kind, as fellow citizens of his world" (Ath 425). As late as his last published *Fragments* of 1800, Schlegel asserts a positive impetus behind the revolution.

The few revolutionaries who took part in the Revolution were mystics as only Frenchmen of our age could have been mystics. They legislated their characters and their actions into religion. But future historians will consider it the greatest honor and destiny of the Revolution that it was the strongest stimulus to a slumbering religion. (Id 94)

One could imagine these words to have been penned by Marx in a derisively sarcastic vein. "Mystic" and "religion," however, are not derisive terms in Schlegel's vocabulary. On the contrary, there is a persistent messianic strain in Schlegel's *Fragments* and, thus, to be labelled a mystic is to be paid a compliment generally accorded to an elite of artists and intellectuals dedicated to pursuing the absolute. Furthermore, in invoking "religion" Schlegel is not, at this stage, referring to any orthodox traditional belief system but to an as yet only dimly glimpsed faith that will characterize the coming "organic age . . . of the next solar revolution" (Ath 426). In *Ideas 94*, then, Schlegel suggests that the French Revolution be regarded as contributing to this progressive movement of the *zeitgeist*.

In Schlegel's ironic dialectic, however, the antinomy to this positive support of the Revolution is equally well presented. *Athenaeum* 424 represents the Revolution as "the most frightful grotesque of the age, where the most profound prejudices and their most brutal punishments are mixed up in a fearful chaos and woven as bizarrely as possible into a monstrous human tragicomedy." "There is no greater need of the age," Schlegel later contends, "than the need for a spiritual counterweight to the Revolution and to the despotism which the Revolution exercises over people by means of its concentration on the most desirable worldly interests" (Id 41).

That Schlegel is not simply shifting from earlier radical to later conservative political sympathies in the course of the *Fragments* published over four years between 1797-1800 is well indicated by the contiguous fragments *Athenaeum* 424 and 425 that alternately critique and uphold the morality of the revolution. That he is not, on the other hand simply confused, but is deliberately presenting an ironic doubled perspective on the revolution is clearly established in *Athenaeum* 422.

Mirabeau played a great role in the Revolution because his character and mind were revolutionary; Robespierre because he obeyed the Revolution absolutely, devoted himself entirely to it, worshipped it, and considered himself its god; Bonaparte because he can create and shape revolutions, and destroy himself.

The description of the revolutionaries closely reiterates Schlegel's articulation of irony in *Athenaeum* 51, discussed above, as a dialectic of instinct and intention performed through the process of self-creation and self-destruction. In this dialectic Mirabeau, distinguished by his "character" and "mind," represents the Revolution's conscious idea and

intention; Robespierre--"obey[ing] the Revolution absolutely, devot[ing] himself entirely to it, worshipping it, and considering himself its god"--represents the Revolution's un-self-conscious, instinctive moment in which it is actualized by being enthusiastically and unreflectively embraced. Bonaparte is the true ironist in this schema hovering between the two positions, "continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction" (Ath 51). He can "create and shape revolutions, and destroy himself," a reference to the popular view of Napoleon at this pre-military-dictatorship stage (1798) as simply extending the Revolution to other nations and as such acting merely as an instrument of the Revolution. Once another nation was freed from oppressive government and granted a republican constitution Napoleon's work in that nation would be finished.

The fragment has been interpreted as indicating Schlegel's support of the Revolution (Beiser 242), but in contrast to the other statements we have examined it appears to be positioned in the interstice between an enthusiastic and a critical position, a space within which Schlegel attempts to theorize the condition of the possibility of these actors playing "great role[s]" in an historical and political upheaval. What appears to constitute the condition of such a possibility is the structure of irony. What Schlegel might mean in so proposing a necessary irony in the political sphere will become clearer after further consideration of Schlegel's political position.

Schlegel's perspective on the cultural and political program of the romantic poetry that he champions also enacts this ironic dialectic. Does Schlegel, as Beiser amongst others has contended¹⁵, view romantic poetry/philosophy as extending and radicalizing the German enlightenment

project of *bildung*, of educating and cultivating the masses to become the citizens of some ideal future state? *Athenaeum* 222 is, perhaps, the most programmatic statement to this effect. "The revolutionary desire to realize the kingdom of God on earth is the elastic point of progressive civilization and the beginning of modern history. Whatever has no relation to the kingdom of God is of strictly secondary importance in it." By this view modern poetry and philosophy, given that they are by no means "of strictly secondary importance" for Schlegel, must participate in this revolutionary process. *Athenaeum* 137 affirms the worldly project of Schlegel's own writing. Here Schlegel declares that "there is a material, enthusiastic rhetoric that's infinitely superior to the sophistic abuse of philosophy, the declamatory stylistic exercise, the applied poetry, the improvised politics, that commonly go by the same name." This "rhetoric," one assumes, refers to Schlegel's own experimental critical discourse with its deliberate attempt to combine and juxtapose each of these other elements in a fragmentary form that might succeed in overcoming their traditional shortcomings. "The aim of this rhetoric," he continues, "is to *realize philosophy practically* and to defeat practical unphilosophy and antiphilosophy not just dialectically, but *really annihilate it*" (emphasis added). To "realize philosophy practically" suggests a worldly, political project.

A later fragment again affirms the political mission of a newly construed culture although in more darkly foreboding terms.

We agree on this point because we are of one sense; but here we disagree because you or I am lacking sense. Who is right, and how are we to settle the matter? Only by virtue of a culture that broadens every particular sense

into a universal, infinite sense, and by faith in this sense or in religion. *Then we will agree before we can agree to agree.* (Id 80, emphasis mine)

Echoing Schiller's *Aesthetic Education*, this represents Schlegel's strongest statement in the published fragments on the function of culture in the production of ideological hegemony--the maintenance of social consensus through the eradication of the very grounds of difference.¹⁶

Yet Schlegel will also forthrightly defend the autotelic nature of art, rejecting a lengthy rhetorical tradition that lends art a didactic function.

Chamfort's pet idea that wit is a substitute for an impossible happiness--a small percentage, as it were, of the unpaid debt on the greatest good for which a bankrupt nature must settle--is not much better than Shaftesbury's idea that wit is the touchstone of truth, or the more vulgar prejudice that moral ennoblement is the highest end of the fine arts. Wit is its own end, like virtue, like love and art. . . ." ¹⁷ (Ly 59)

"What if," Schlegel queries putting into question the entire enlightenment project, "the harmonious education of artists and nobility is merely a harmonious illusion?" (Ly 110).

One could argue that these two positions in Schlegel's fragments--that art cultivates the subject and thus allows society to evolve toward a more harmonious, less dominating political order, and that art is primarily autotelic--present no contradiction. By this view what Schlegel is rejecting is the notion that art consistently has any moral *content* that might instruct its audience. It is, rather, its non-instrumental *form* prior to all content that provides the potentially ideal model for the social/political order. Such a position would be close to the political program Schiller theorizes for the aesthetic. Schiller, like Schlegel at certain points, insists

upon the aesthetic as a sheerly empty form prior to all content and function:

for beauty produces no particular result whatsoever, neither for the understanding nor for the will. It accomplishes no particular purpose neither intellectual nor moral; it discovers no individual truth, helps us to perform no individual duty and is, in short, as unfitted to provide a firm basis for character as to enlighten the understanding. (*Aesthetic* 147)

The aesthetic is a nothingness, sheer potentiality and freedom prior to all determination, and yet as such a very pregnant nothingness in so far as it becomes the ground for all determination. As an idealized form bearing a very uncertain relation to the real, the "aesthetic state," Eagleton argues

in short, is the utopian bourgeois public sphere of liberty, equality and democracy, within which everyone is a free citizen, 'having equal rights with the noblest.' The constrained social order of class-struggle and division of labour has already been overcome in principle in the consensual kingdom of beauty, which installs itself like a shadowy paradise within the present. (*Ideology of the Aesthetic* 111)

There is certainly direct textual evidence to support a reading of Schlegel as also drawing the analogy between aesthetic and political form. Yet Schlegel, I would argue, attempts to substitute a quite different aesthetic model in an attempt to circumvent some of the difficulties presented by the attempt to apply the traditional aesthetic model with its harmonious mediation between general and particular to the political world. Schlegel, moreover, remains ironically ambivalent about drawing the analogy between aesthetics and politics in the first instance.

Lyceum 65 indicates a direct analogy between poetic form and a republican political state, suggesting that the former provides an ideal

model of a free and non-coercive public sphere. "Poetry is republican speech: a speech which is its own law and end unto itself, and in which all the parts are free citizens and have the right to vote." *Lyceum 103* is consistent with this analogy and further suggests Schlegel's view of the politics of the particular *fragmentary* aesthetic that he theorizes under the name of romantic poetry in opposition to the more traditional neoclassical aesthetic with its emphasis upon unity, order, and generic purity. Schlegel's position on the fragmentary text anticipates and no doubt influences Benjamin and Adorno's idea of the "constellation" which as Eagleton writes "strikes at the very heart of the traditional aesthetic paradigm, in which the specificity of the detail is allowed no genuine resistance to the organizing power of the totality" (*Ideology of the Aesthetic* 330).

Lyceum 103 commences:

Many works that are praised for the beauty of their coherence have less unity than a motley heap [*bunter Haufen*] of ideas simply animated by the ghost of a spirit and aiming at a single purpose. What really holds the latter together is that free and equal fellowship in which, so the wise men assure us, the citizens of the perfect state will live at some future date; it's that unqualifiedly sociable spirit which, as the beau monde maintain, is now to be found only in what is so strangely and almost childishly called the great world.

Schlegel does not deride such works for being little more than "a motley heap of ideas," but rather criticizes the impulse to turn such a heap into a unity. The fragment (a meta-fragment in effect) continues:

On the other hand, many a work of art whose coherence is never questioned is, as the artist knows quite well himself, not a complete work but a fragment, or one or more fragments, a mass, a plan. But so powerful is the instinct for unity in mankind that the author himself will

often bring something to a kind of completion at least with the form which simply can't be made a whole or a unit; often quite imaginatively and yet completely unnaturally. The worst thing about it is that whatever is draped about the *solid, really existent fragments* in an attempt to mug up a semblance of unity consists largely of dyed rags. (emphasis added)

The "motley heap" Schlegel suggests is analogous to "the perfect state," a rather audacious figure in its very banality when one considers, as Ian Balfour has recently discussed, the rhetorical sublimity many of his contemporaries employed to figure the nation ("Sublime"). The "motley heap" is a configuration in which each individual has its own autonomy and direction and yet loosely connects with the whole through an "unqualifiedly sociable spirit." The supposedly unified work, on the other hand, only achieves its coherence through *unnatural* manipulation. If we were to extend the political analogy Schlegel applies to the fragmentary text to such falsely unified works of the traditional aesthetic the latter would appear analogous to a highly coercive normalizing authority. Significantly Schlegel represents the presentation of unity as a covering over of the particular in its materiality and existentiality, as "dyed rags" thrown over "the solid, really existent fragments," suggesting, in this allegory of governmentality, the ultimately uncodifiable bodies of individual subjects that, as Foucault has suggested, will always present some form of resistance to the wider social totality even as they are constructed within a society's grid of power/knowledge (56).

The falsely unified work, then, is a dissimulation, much as Schlegel has defined irony. Yet unlike irony it does not present its false unity as a "completely deliberate dissimulation" (Ly 108) and herein lies the

potential danger of the "instinct for unity." The fragment concludes:

And if these [dyed rags] are touched up cleverly and deceptively, and tastefully displayed then that's all the worse. For then he deceives even the exceptional reader at first, who has a deep feeling for what little real goodness and beauty is still to be found here and there in life and letters. That reader is then forced to make a critical judgment to get at the right perception of it! And no matter how quickly the *disassociation* takes place still the first fresh impression is lost. (emphasis added)

A later modernist poet and critic like T.S. Eliot, in a classic articulation of the aesthetic ideology, bemoans an epoch of the "disassociation of sensibility," and looks back nostalgically upon an idealized renaissance society when thought and feeling, general and particular were, as Eliot quotes Johnson, "yoked by violence together" (60)--an aesthetic position whose political underpinnings were only too clearly represented in Eliot's fascist sympathies. For Schlegel, by contrast, it is this fundamental "disassociation" or fragmentation that must not be elided. Preferably, it should be presented openly in the work and when it is not it is one of the tasks of criticism (which is, then, always a form of ideological critique) to reveal it.

But a problem presents itself with respect to this coherent position I have attributed to Schlegel vis-à-vis the ideology of the fragmented versus the falsely unified work: the self-evident rhetorical irony in Schlegel's mode of presentation. The analogy between the fragmented text and the "perfect state" is interwoven with a series of what ironologists call ironic *markers* (Booth 3-8 and passim; Hutcheon ch. 6), verbal equivalents of the wink of an eye that distance the speaker's intent from his apparent meaning: "so the wise men assure us . . . as the beau monde maintains .

. . what is so strangely and almost childishly called. . . ." These markers suggest both that Schlegel is hesitant to draw a definite analogy between the aesthetic and the political realms, and that he distrusts any invocation of a finished "perfect state." For even to counter the Schillerian aesthetic state with its subsumption of the general and the particular into a seamless whole with an aesthetic model that presents a greater resistance to totality is still to aestheticize politics with all the dangers that entails. Schlegel's strategy amounts to suggesting an aesthetic analogy that might surmount the difficulties presented in the traditional aesthetic model and yet simultaneously to ironize the analogy such that one views it as imperfect. Furthermore, as Peter Szondi has argued (63-65), history for Schlegel is a progressive movement towards an ideal and thus any attempt to characterize the future "perfect state" from one's own place in time must be inevitably flawed. Irony represents one strategy for expressing an awareness of such limitations. "[W]e have to be content," Schlegel writes, "with brief notes on the prevailing mood and individual mannerisms of the age, without even being able to draw a profile of the giant" (Ath 426).

Thus with respect to these two major indices to his political position: his response to the French Revolution and the cultural program he envisions for Romanticism and his own critical discourse, Schlegel retains a persistently ironic stance, enthusiastically embracing a worldly project of political transformation and critically negating such an intention. Is he, then, as Hegel would imply, being simply and, perhaps, uselessly evasive? The answer, I believe, is that he is not, that his ironic stance

does translate into a more definite political vision of sorts, with a content that we may agree or disagree with, a vision that would be better described as *provisional* rather than evasive. Schlegel raises the idea of provisionality in *Athenaeum* 266, a passage that refers to philosophy but employs the telling political metaphor of the national constitution to articulate the idea. "Couldn't we have a provisional philosophy right now, even before drafting a logical constitution? And isn't every philosophy provisional until that constitution has been sanctioned by acceptance?" For Schlegel, as we have seen, no philosophical system has represented the totality, and thus a general "logical constitution" adequately governing all particulars is not available to us. Schlegel here implies, however, that this does not preclude the necessity of acting in the world as adequately as possible with the best knowledge that one does possess. Schlegel's provisional strategy for such a situation is to combine system and non-system, the necessity of the organizing, generalizing concept, and the recognition of the always insurgent particular--a strategy that, as I have argued above, is one of the chief connotations he gives to the concept of irony. Politically this strategy (which is already a political allegory of governability) translates into an attempt to negotiate between a strong governing authority and democratic freedom, to negotiate between conservatism and liberalism.

Athenaeum 449 most directly indicates Schlegel's attempt to negotiate between the antinomies of a strongly conservative tradition and a liberal radicalism.

As yet there has been no moral author who could be compared with the great masters of poetry and philosophy.

Such a writer would have to combine the sublime antiquarian politics of Müller with Forster's great universal economics and Jacobi's moral gymnastics and music; and combine in his language, too, the weighty, dignified, and enthusiastic style of the first with the fresh hues, the lovable delicacy of the second, and refined sensitivity--so like a distant, ghostly concertina--of the third.

The Swiss historian Johannes von Müller's "sublime antiquarian politics" consisted of a very traditional defence of the Holy Roman Empire (an anticipation, indeed, of the politics the later Schlegel would embrace); Georg Forster by contrast was one of the most radical political voices of late-eighteenth-century Germany, an ardent political reformist and such a strong supporter of the French Revolution as to be widely declared a traitor in Germany. Schlegel published a spirited defense of Forster's work in the form of a *Charakteristiken*, or pen portrait (Eichner 29), but in so doing was, as Frederick Beiser writes, "a voice crying in the wilderness" (154). Forster "recognized that the moral development of a people depends on its material conditions, particularly its economy and distribution of wealth" (Beiser 184), a recognition that would lead Lukacs in the 1940's to revive his reputation as a proto-Marxian dialectical materialist (Beiser 155). Forester's "great universal economics," as Schlegel describes it, came to increasingly emphasize in a socialist fashion that the "problem of the state . . . is to ensure a more equal distribution of resources that would enable everyone to develop their humanity" (Beiser 184).

F.H. Jacobi's "moral gymnastics," as Schlegel's athletic metaphor suggests, straddles the positions of the two former writers. Jacobi was on the one hand, Beiser writes, no defender of the "*ancien regime* whose demise he regarded as inevitable" (151). He supported such liberal tenets

as "free trade, liberty of conscience . . . civil freedom" (151), and a generally *laissez faire* conception of the state. Yet he was in effect "a spokesman for the aristocracy" (141); his economic writings expressed the "physiocratic orthodoxy" (141): agriculture, the land, is the fundamental source of all of society's wealth, all other forms of economic activity (exchange, consumption, transportation) are merely derivative of this productive origin. "Since all wealth ultimately derives from them, the landowners represent the true interests of the state" (141). Jacobi was, furthermore, an early and influential critic of the enlightenment, of what he described as its "tyranny of reason" (qtd. in Beiser 147). One of the leitmotifs of his moral and political writings was a "lament about the egoism and materialism of contemporary life" (Beiser 141), a disposition that would lead him in his later writings to posit religious faith as the basis upon which the state ought to be founded (Beiser 151). He was as equally an ardent critic of the French Revolution as Forster was a supporter, believing that it represented the worst excesses of rationalism and materialistic self-interest. In the Revolution's abolition of aristocratic land holdings, furthermore, Jacobi saw a dangerous precedent.

Such, then, is the peculiar constellation of political ideologies that Schlegel would wish to keep in play--a thoroughly ironic political vision in so far as it is a paradoxical one attempting to maintain apparently contradictory positions without privileging one over the other. It is at the same time, at least partially, a dialectical political vision. Schlegel appears to recognize in the *Fragments* that liberalism as the opposition to more traditional views is partial and incomplete, structurally dependent upon that which it opposes.

A truer political vision would arise from the synthesis of these views, of community with diversity and individual freedom; and a provisionally adequate politics in avoiding the extremes of tyranny and anarchy would at least keep the polarities in tension.¹⁸ Thus Schlegel, on the one hand, makes assertions of a broadly progressive democratic nature. "Wherever a public prosecutor puts in an appearance, a public judge should also be at hand." (Ath 70). "Perhaps no people deserves freedom, but that is a matter for the *forum dei*" (Ath 212), which is to say that in this (political) world one must assume that each individual has as much right to freedom as any other. In a salvo aimed directly at the absolute state Schlegel asserts that far from being democratic it cannot even be described as aristocratic. "A state only deserves to be called aristocratic when at least the smaller mass that despotizes the larger has a republican constitution" (Ath 213). He further warns that the nominal possession of a republican constitution ought not to delude one into believing that one necessarily enjoys a democratic government.

What is it, if not absolute monarchy, when all essential decisions are made secretly by a cabinet, and when the parliament is allowed to discuss and quarrel about the forms openly and ostentatiously? In this way an absolute monarchy might very well have a kind of constitution that to the uninitiated might even appear to be republican. (Ath 370)

Yet at the same time expressing an uneasiness towards "the rabble" (Ath 425) and its "demagogic popularity" (Ath 246) Schlegel supports a hierarchical structure of government based at least in part upon class and inherited privilege.

A perfect republic would have to be not just democratic, but aristocratic and monarchic at the same time; to

legislate justly and freely, the educated would have to outweigh and guide the uneducated, and everything would have to be organized into an absolute whole. (Ath 214)

Such a position may not be reactionary, per se; in Schlegel's Prussian context the adoption of such a governmental structure would have, indeed, constituted a considerable movement toward greater democracy, and given the prolonged violence of the French Revolution such an evolutionary model of government had undeniable appeal. Yet it certainly represents a vitiation of the more radical political impulses that inform many of the fragments and herein we may begin to glimpse the failure of Schlegel's ironic dialectic to keep political conservatism and radicalism in tension.

In two key fragments Schlegel sides strongly on behalf of political authority working against his own theoretical/political concern for the violence of the concept.

In the transactions and regulations that are essential to the legislative, executive, or judiciary powers for achieving their aims, *something absolutely arbitrary, something unavoidable often happens that can't be deduced from the concept of those powers, and over which they therefore seem to have no lawful authority*. Isn't the authority for such extraordinary cases actually derived from the constitutive power and shouldn't that power therefore also have to have a veto and not merely a right of interdiction? Don't all absolutely arbitrary decisions in the state happen by virtue of the constitutive power? (Ath 385, emphasis mine)

The passage fully demonstrates a political manifestation of Schlegel's philosophical concern for the concept and the remainder that eludes it--the ineradicable gap between form and content that Schlegel, through irony, characteristically attempts not to elide. Yet as compared to fragments we have examined above, in which the concept is figured as dictatorial and militaristic in its marshalling of the particular, Schlegel here figures the

particular as threateningly subversive--"something absolutely arbitrary, something unavoidable"--and seeks only to locate the proper authority that with countervailing "absolutely arbitrary decisions" can bring such insurgent elements under control. Significantly Schlegel locates such authority in the veto of the "constitutive power" by which he refers to the monarchy (Beiser 261). Beyond the problematic nature of granting the monarchy a veto over more democratically representative bodies, the very conception of the monarchy as "the constitutive power" is itself profoundly hierarchical and anti-democratic. One might argue that this simply represents another moment in Schlegel's political dialectic of authority and insurgency that I have been outlining, yet there is an absoluteness and a finality to arguing for such a veto for the crown (itself a fully arbitrary power) that suggests, rather, the termination of such a dialectic.

Athenaeum 369 on political representation also touches upon the very heart of the philosophical concerns that inform Schlegel's *Fragments*, yet like 385 it covers over the philosophical problematic of irony, of "the indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative" (Ly 108) in the name of political stability and authority.

A deputy is something quite different from a representative. Representative means only someone who, *whether elected or not*, portrays in his person a political whole that is, as it were, identical with himself; he is like the visible world-soul of the state. . . . The power of the priest, general, and educator is by its very nature undefined, universal, more or less a kind of lawful despotism. Only by virtue of the spirit of representation can it be softened and legitimized. (emphasis added)

In addition to the troublesome indifference to the democratic origin of the political representative--"whether elected or not"--the fragment asserts a

naive view of totality, the "political whole," and the ability of an individual to stand in for such a whole. Such a view of totality is particularly unconvincing given that the entire tenor of both the form and content of the *Fragments* continually subverts it. The assertion, furthermore, that while the offices of power will always represent "a kind of lawful despotism," through "the spirit of representation [it] can . . . be softened and legitimized," is a disturbingly cynical articulation of the need for rule by hegemony. It says in effect that despotism will always continue but that the masses might be made to feel better about it through the recognition that it is being performed in their name. The dominant trope in this view of political representation as "the visible world-soul of the state" is, indeed, not irony but the romantic symbol: a spiritualizing, detemporalizing trope whose ideological consequences will be the object of more detailed inquiry in my discussion of de Man.

The positive political content in Schlegel's *Fragments*, that is, the direct statements about the arrangement of governmental powers and the structure of the constitution becomes, then, troublesomely reactionary. One can see how certain of these statements attempt to propound an "insurgent government," a productive fluctuation between freedom and individualism on the one hand, and communalism and a necessary authority on the other hand. Yet such a dialectic is not successfully maintained and in certain fragments Schlegel fully affirms tradition and authority in a manner that will characterize his later largely reactionary politics. One might well maintain, as we have seen David Simpson suggest, that having a determinate political content necessarily entails the curtailing of irony and

thus of assuming the inevitable shortcomings of any fixed position. After all, for Schlegel to have affirmed the opposite pole in his ironic dialectic, in an affirmation of an anarchic individualism, would have been almost equally unsatisfactory. I have, however, been resisting such a conclusion in the belief that irony might represent a condition for the individual's noncoercive participation in larger political communities, that it might provide a sense of belonging *within* a larger whole, and a sense of the necessity of acting as and for such a whole, while at the same time providing a saving critical perspective upon that whole, a sense of it as artifice and of one's own position *without* it. It is in the numerous fragments that Schlegel devotes to national identity, to a future German nation, and to the idea of nation more generally, rather than in the more concrete statements concerning political structure and organization, that he begins to theorize this more potentially suggestive idea of an ironic view of the political whole.

3. Nation

The fundamental problem is therefore to produce the people.

--Etienne Balibar (93)

Instinct speaks darkly and metaphorically. If it is misunderstood, a false tendency ensues. This happens to ages and nations as often as it does to individuals.

--Schlegel (Ath 382)

"How deeply rooted in man," Schlegel writes, "lies the desire to generalize about individual or national characteristics!" (Ly 50). Is this to imply that individuals and nations are susceptible, ontologically, to such

generalizations? Or does it simply identify such a deep rooted desire to make the generalization as a kind of pathology? The question returns us to the same theoretical problematic of the relation between the general and the particular, as well as instinct and intention, that lies at the core of Schlegel's fragments on aesthetics and government. As will be clear from my reading of Schlegel thus far, I maintain that one can only adequately comprehend his position on nation and nationality if one sees him simultaneously presenting both positions (if I may be allowed to adapt Schlegel's language to context) "to the point of irony, or else to the point of continuously fluctuating between [national]-creation and [national]-destruction" (Ath 51). For if one were to believe that any such generalizations were wholly false one would have no cause to align oneself with any idea of nation, or for that matter with any broader community that relies upon a generalized identity¹⁹; conversely if one were to embrace it instinctively and unreflectively one would be prey to the worst excesses of nationalism the effects of which, two centuries after Schlegel's pronouncements, are only too apparent. We cannot "just say no" to nation. We must remain aware of its falsity even as we shall fail to escape it. For as in his more directly philosophical fragments, Schlegel remains, in his statements on nation and nationality, acutely aware of the power of the generalizing concept. "There are classifications that are bad enough as classifications but which nonetheless have dominated whole nations and eras, and are frequently extremely characteristic--are the central monads--of the historical individuals that nations and eras are" (Ath 55). Thus it is insufficient to say, simply, that such generalizations are wrong, that

they do not reflect the full heterogeneity of the groups living within the same territorial limits and that they therefore must be done away with. Given human's deep rooted desire to make such generalizations they will be made and however wrong or "bad" may well "[dominate] whole nations and eras." In suggesting indeed that even a "bad" characterization may become "extremely characteristic . . . of the historical individuals that nations and eras are" Schlegel would seem to suggest that the characterization in part *produces* the nation, that there is no essential nation preceding its representation, a recognition which considerably problematizes any question of a *misrepresentation* which could be either discarded or corrected. To negotiate between the falsity and the inevitability of generalized conceptions of identity such as nation would appear, for Schlegel, to require from each subject the complex of attitudes articulated in *Athenaeum* 422 examined above on the condition of possibility of playing a "great role" in the French Revolution (however much of an historical misrecognition of these individuals' roles this statement represents): a kind of Mirabeau to imagine it, a Robespierre to embrace it, and a Napoleon who fluctuates between its creation and its destruction--the position that Schlegel, as we have seen, explicitly theorizes as an ironic stance.²⁰

Much as Schlegelian irony in its manifestation as a "permanent parabasis" destroys artistic illusion, foregrounds that the work is indeed a fictional linguistic creation, Schlegel demonstrates an acute awareness of the nation as a discursive construct. "The only thing one can criticize about the model of Germany, which *a few great patriotic authors have*

constructed, is its incorrect placement. It doesn't lie behind, but before us" (Ly 38 emphasis added). The declaration that the nation lies "before" rather than "behind" "us" reads on the one hand as a patriotic affirmation of a brilliant future--much the same patriotic fervour contemporary American political candidates invoke when they pronounce that "there is a new dawn in America." Schlegel's criticism of such a temporally "incorrect placement," of the nation, however, may suggest an awareness of, and negotiation of, the potential ideological entrapments within a certain discourse of nation.

As Ian Balfour has recently argued, the discourse of nation in this period relied in many of its articulations (in Burke and Fichte amongst others) upon a "doubly ghostly narrative of society, past and future . . . [t]he invocation of a hoary past of great antiquity and a spectral future of the unborn." The invocation of such a sublime antiquity functions to ground the nation in an immovable ontology, in origins proceeding, as Burke writes, "from time immemorial" (qtd. in Balfour). The rhetoric of such antiquity is a rhetoric of authority. One possible end that the authority of such a thoroughly grounded nation can serve, as Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution* amply demonstrates, is conservative quietism: such a nation cannot and must not be tampered with as was done in the aberration of the French Revolution. Another end it might serve, as demonstrated by Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* which, as Balfour notes, became inspirational literature for German troops in this century, is a militaristic drive to restore the nation to some imagined originary essence. In either case the rhetoric of the grand antiquity of the nation calls for allegiance

and subservience.

In criticizing the placement of the nation in such an inscrutable past Schlegel effectively denies such a rhetoric of authority, making the concept of nation more flexible and changeable to the extent that it is "constructed," an open ended or (to apply again a word Schlegel uses in other contexts) "provisional" idea of the collectivity, always lying "before us" to be shaped and reshaped as changing political realities demand. "Germany" Schlegel writes, "is probably such a favourite subject for the general essayist because the less finished a nation is, the more it is a subject for criticism and not for history" (Ath 26). Such a "less finished" nation, always open to "criticism" as to what it is and what it should become may well represent the ideal of nation in the *Fragments*.

In keeping with his awareness of the nation as a discursive construct Schlegel elaborates further upon the specific discursive practices through which nation is built and sustained. One of the most fundamental aims of such practices is the production of, in Etienne Balibar's term, "fictive ethnicity," a sense of being a unique "people," which while "not purely and simply identical with the ideal nation which is the object of patriotism, . . . is indispensable to it, for, without it, the nation would appear precisely only as an idea or an arbitrary abstraction; patriotism's appeal would be addressed to no one" (96).²¹ Schlegel at points demonstrates an acute awareness of the fictive quality of any assertion of national and cultural characteristics and of the ends to which such fabrications are employed. "The public," Schlegel insists in a passage I have cited in another context, "is no object, but an idea, a postulate, like

the Church" (Ly 35). One of the key practices he identifies as part of the production of such fictive ethnicities are the representations, in a variety of discourses, of other nations and peoples both ancient and modern as either ideals with which to identify (a position characteristically assigned to the Greek polis and to Rome) or as the *low others*²² against which to define the superiority of one's own nation and people (a position characteristically assigned to other contemporary nations).

"Interpretations," Schlegel asserts in *Athenaeum* 25,

are frequently insertions of something that seems desirable or expedient, and many a deduction is actually a traduction--a proof that erudition and speculation are not quite so harmful to the innocence of the spirit as some people would have us believe. For isn't it really childlike to marvel at the wonder of what one has created oneself?

The interpretation of national characteristics, Schlegel demonstrates, is an instance *par excellence* of such "traduction" of the insertion of what appears "desirable" and-or (politically) "expedient."

Athenaeum 277 humorously reveals the representation of Greek culture to be an idealizing practice that has much to say about how a people wish to see themselves and little to say about its putative object. "To believe in the Greeks is only another fashion of the age. People are rather fond of listening to declamations about the Greeks. But if someone were to come and say, here are some, then nobody is at home." Or as Schlegel affirms in *Athenaeum* 151: "Up to now everyone has managed to find in the ancients what he needed or wished for: especially himself" (Ath 151).

In commenting upon Gibbon's historical writings on classical

antiquity Schlegel suggests that classical scholarship participates in the construction of a British national identity.

In Gibbon the common, English, pedantic bigotry in matters relating to the classics has been exalted to the level of sentimental epigrams about the ruins of a past grandeur, but still it hasn't been able to divest itself entirely of its native character. He shows us repeatedly that he had absolutely no understanding of the Greeks. And what he loves in the Romans is actually only their materialistic pomp. But particularly--in the style of a country divided between mercantilism and mathematics--he loves quantitative nobility. The Turks, it appears, would have served his purpose just as well. (Ath 219)

The Fragment, on the one hand, fully participates in the practice of denigrating another nation by fixing it in a static, monolithic and hence inescapably ridiculous *native character*. It thereby simultaneously exalts the German, for English classical scholarship is here implicitly contrasted with a subtler, more penetrating German classical scholarship to which Schlegel contributed. Yet at the same time Schlegel's observations point toward the inescapably ideological character of all such national and cultural representations, a predicament that applies equally well to his own fragments on nation and national character. Schlegel's point is not simply that historical scholarship will always reflect national prejudices but beyond this that such representations are always interested, that they serve, in his own word, some "purpose"--in this case the legitimization of the "materialistic pomp" and "quantitative nobility" of an ascendant bourgeois class. Thus Gibbon's Greeks and Romans, "in the style of a country divided between mercantilism and mathematics," are peculiarly English constructions, reflecting back to the English nation an idealized image of itself rooted in a timeless antiquity. The object one chooses for

such idealized projections is, Schlegel suggests, almost insignificant, one could have as easily chosen the "Turks." Yet in another sense this closing barb is intended to be humorous in so far as it is precisely wrong. The joke relies upon a shared assumption of the Turks as a vulgar *low other* amongst contemporary European peoples. Thus the idea that one could idealize them in the same fashion as the Greeks and Romans is meant to be ridiculous, a mark of just how arbitrary and prejudiced are Gibbon's historical representations. The practice of *othering* different peoples and nations to establish the identity and superiority of one's own, a practice in which Schlegel's fragments participate, is discussed more fully below.

While Schlegel uncovers the ideologically interested character of representations of peoples and nations, in keeping with his negative dialectic he does not forfeit a critical perspective upon such a situation. His position is not simply some proto-Nietzschean affirmation of interpretation as will-to-power. "The so-called History of States," Schlegel writes in *Athenaeum* 223 in a concise articulation of the power interests that underlie the representation of nation, ". . . represents nothing more than a genetic definition of the phenomenon of the present political conditions of a nation." Schlegel here asserts that the historian of nation retrospectively projects the nation's apparently antecedent origin backwards from the present and thus that the representation of a nation's past is always a product of its "present political conditions." Schlegel thereby uncovers history's sustaining genetic metaphor and disrupts its stable temporality of continuous organic development--a temporal displacement which, as I discuss in the next chapter, de Man will theorize

to be the most fundamental effect of irony.

Schlegel asserts, therefore, that the history of nations "actually can't be considered a pure art or science" (Ath 223). This, however, does not lead him to either dismisses the value of such history nor to affirm its role as ideology. The history of the nation, the fragment continues,

is a scientific trade that gains nobility through its *candor and opposition* to the idea of fashion and to the law of the strongest. Even universal history becomes sophistic as soon as it places anything above the communal education of all mankind, even if the heteronomous principle were a moral idea, and as soon as it chooses to take up the cause of any particular side of the historical universe. (emphasis added)

The double gesture of "candor and opposition," a candor that, as we have seen, reveals the representation of nation to be ideologically implicated in "the cause of [a] particular side," and at the same time an opposition to this idea in favour of a more genuinely universal community, accurately represents Schlegel's ironic stance on nation.

But if Schlegel at points demonstrates an awareness of nation and national characteristics as ideological fabrications, at other points he fully participates in the production of a fictive German ethnicity with little or no such apparent self consciousness. *Lyceum 116* states: "The Germans, it is said, are the greatest nation in the world in respect to their cultivation of artistic sensibility and scientific spirit. Quite so--only there are very few Germans." The fragment, on the one hand, points out the ironic incommensurability of "the German people" with a certain ideal image that is projected for it. To this extent the passage might be read as being once again self-consciously critical of such fictive ethnicities. The "quite so," however, suggests that such an image of the artistically cultivated German

is being affirmed as an ideal to be striven toward. Such an ideal model of the *ethnic type* is, as Balibar suggests, fundamental to the production of a people: "The people is constituted out of various populations subject to a common law. In every case, however, a model of their unity must 'anticipate' that constitution . . ." (94).

In another fragment Schlegel reiterates the model of the discerning, cultivated German as a kind of ideal type.

If anything can justify that rather exalted conception of the Germans that one meets with here and there, then it is our complete neglect of and contempt for such ordinarily good writers as every other nation would receive with pomp and circumstance into their Johnson; and also the rather general tendency to criticize freely and be quite demanding of what we recognize to the best and too good to be appreciated by foreigners. (Ly 122)

Athenaeum 275 again reaffirms this type of the ideal German but with a significant difference.

People are always complaining that German authors write for such a small circle, and even sometimes just for themselves. That's how it should be. This is how German literature will gain more and more spirit and character. And perhaps in the meantime an audience will spring into being.

This fragment with its reference to an appropriate audience "springing into being" implies that literature has a role in the production of the people; it precisely does not posit a pre-existent essence of German national character. Schlegel's process, then, of naively positing a German national characteristic and then destroying such an affirmation by demonstrating it to be a fabrication amounts to another manifestation of his ironic dialectic of "self-creation and self-destruction."

If Schlegel's fragments on nation and national characteristics recall

his aesthetic statements on irony both in their *self-consciousness* of the fictionality of the nation and the people and, relatedly, in their simultaneous creation and destruction of such entities, the specific identity Schlegel proposes for the German people is itself an ironic one. Schlegel's ideal German, as he predicates of irony, "contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative" (Ly 108), the concept and the particular. In the nationalist terms in which Schlegel translates these aesthetic and philosophical concerns the "tasteless universality" (Ath 423) of French political and philosophical radicalism represents an overemphasis upon the universalizing concept. By contrast, the "pathological history of common sense" (Ath 61) provided by British empiricism represents an overemphasis upon the relative and the particular. Like irony, the German national character is proposed as one that can negotiate between these necessary but equally unsatisfactory polarities.

The "strange and rather tasteless universality" that Schlegel attributes to "the modern French national character" (Ath 422) and that he suggests "begins with Cardinal Richelieu" (Ath 422), is criticized, nominally at least, in so far as it is seen to constitute only a "false universality." "False universality is either theoretical or practical. The theoretical type is the universality of a bad lexicon, of a record office. The practical type originates in a totality of involvement" (Ath 447). The attribution of false universality to the French is in one sense consistent with the entire tenor of Schlegel's theory, with his dialectic historicism, according to which one cannot grasp the truly universal in the present. Schlegel's descriptions of

both the theoretical and practical aspects of "false universality," however, evoke the political situation in France that underlie his theoretical concerns: an authoritarian government as represented by "the bad lexicon of a record office;" and, as the French Revolution had come to represent, a violent, overly hasty application of supposedly universal enlightenment principles as indicated in the reference to "a totality of involvement."

Athenaeum 426 is consistent with this idea of the false universality of the French when it describes them as a "chemical nation" and people.

It's natural that the French should more or less dominate the age. They are a chemical nation and in them the chemical sense is most widely developed, and they always conduct their experiments--not least in moral chemistry--on a grand scale. Like wise, the age is also a chemical one. Revolutions are universal, chemical not organic movements. Big business is the chemistry of a great economy, and there's probably an alchemy of the same kind, too.

The French, then, are masters of a merely artificial age, a dominance they achieve by conducting random and violent large scale "experiments" upon it, namely: the Revolution and Napoleonic wars. The French dominance of the age is made more palpable not only because the age is an artificial "chemical" one but because it is a transient one that will give way to a more highly evolved "organic age."

By analogy to what I said before, an organic age will follow a chemical one, and then the citizens of the next solar revolution will probably think much less of us than we do now, and consider a great deal of what we now simply marvel at as only the necessary preliminary exercises of humanity.

And by a further unstated analogy, since the French dominate the chemical age another people will dominate the organic age. The "citizens of the next solar revolution," Schlegel implies, will be Germans, a nation that, as we

have seen, he explicitly conceives of as belonging to the future.

In several fragments the representation of the "tasteless universality" of the French takes the form of an aesthetic criticism of the neoclassicism that dominated eighteenth-century French aesthetics, dictating the form of much of its literary production. In these fragments the French are construed as overly abstract, overly formal, as too cold and correct. Two fragments penned by August Wilhelm Schlegel are the most direct in making these aesthetic criticisms of the French. "Their scientific education very likely tends to be an *abbreviation of an extract*, and the highest production of their poetical art, their tragedy, is merely the *formula of a form*" (Ath 110 my emphasis). In *Athenaeum* 205 he expands upon and reiterates upon this characterization.

They have a habit of calling themselves Criticism. They write coldly, superficially, pretentiously, and beyond all measure vapidly. Nature, feeling, nobility, and greatness of spirit simply don't exist for them, and yet they act as if they could summon these things to appear before their judgement-stools. Imitation of outdated French fashion of society verses are the furthest reaches of their lukewarm admiration. For them correctness is equivalent to virtue. Taste is their idol: a fetish that can only be worshipped joylessly. Who doesn't recognize in this portrait the priests of the temple of *belles lettres* who have the same sex as those of *Cybele*?

Curiously the French are at once overly abstract and coldly detached, attributes that are characteristically gendered male, and yet with their lack of "[n]ature, feeling, nobility, and greatness of spirit" are derided as effeminate. Friedrich Schlegel's comment upon Bernard Fontanelle (who as an "*academicien*" may stand in for "French poetry" as a whole) that he is "strongly hostile to instinct" (Ath 296), echoes this view of the French as detached, in their excessive rationality, from a masculine body.

Friedrich Schlegel's fragments dealing with the French by and large move out of an overtly aesthetic criticism to critique French modes of thought and the "national character" itself, both of which are seen as root causes of the perceived aberrations of recent French history. These criticisms, however, are fully parallel to the aesthetic criticism of French literature and often employ an aesthetic discourse to make their point. *Athenaeum 360* critiques the overly systematic character of French thought.

If any art exists that could be called the black art, then it must be the art of making nonsense fluent, clear, and flexible, and of organizing it into a mass. The French possess masterpieces of this kind. Every great calamity is at its deepest root a serious grimace, a *mauvaise plaisanterie*. Therefore, all hail and honor to those heroes who never tire of struggling against a folly that often carries in its most trivial aspects the germ of an endless succession of horrible devastations! Lessing and Fichte are the princes of peace of future centuries.

Schlegel's thought, as we have seen, represents an attempt to negotiate between system and its pretensions to totality on the one hand, and on the other hand, the "equally fatal" (Ath 53) predicament of having no system, no perspective upon the whole. *Athenaeum 360* clearly indicates the political motivation for the initial moment of this dialectic movement--the critique of system. French thought is here represented as propounding facile systems, constructed too hastily, whose apparent truths and worldly applications are too easily grasped by too many, resulting in "an endless succession of horrible devastations." The "French" furthermore, as David Simpson has also argued of the British representation of the French in this same period, clearly stand in here in for the enlightenment project as a whole, for a belief in the desirability of a broadly disseminated reason and in the desirability of organizing society along such rational lines

(*Romanticism* 82-83). Following the logic of the contrast Schlegel establishes between French and German thought the latter, here represented by the predominantly aesthetic and philosophical writers Lessing and Fichte, is valorized for being, by implication, complex, esoteric, non instrumental, and thus lacking any dangerous revolutionary applications.

Schlegel most profoundly and reductively locates the cause of the social and political upheavals of the French Revolution in a totalizingly conceived "French national character" in *Athenaeum* 424. The fragment commences with a list of the "usual points of view" on the French Revolution, noting that it "may be regarded as the greatest and most remarkable phenomenon in the history of states, as an almost universal earthquake, an immeasurable flood in the political world; or as a prototype of revolutions, as the absolute revolution per se." In place of these historical, political and theoretical perspectives, however, Schlegel suggests that

one can also see it as *the center and apex of the French national character*, where all its paradoxes are thrust together; as the most frightful grotesque of the age, where the most profound prejudices and their most brutal punishments are mixed up in a fearful chaos and woven as bizarrely as possible into a monstrous human tragicomedy. (emphasis added)

Most strikingly notable in this passage is not only the use of aesthetic judgements to critique the French national character and the events attributable to it--"frightful *grotesque*," "monstrous human *tragicomedy*"--but the fact that that the aesthetic criterion invoked to make such a criticism is the thoroughly classical one critiqued by Schlegel elsewhere in the fragments, an aesthetics that derides generic impurity. Given the alternative aesthetic

theorized and championed by Schlegel in numerous fragments under the auspices of a "romantic poetry" and of "irony" itself, an aesthetics that explicitly valorizes mixed, openended genres and, indeed, "paradoxes . . . thrust together," one would not expect Schlegel's critique of the French national character to take the aesthetic form it here takes. Indeed as I have argued in my discussion of *Lyceum 103* above, Schlegel there indicates that a classical aesthetic with its attempted destruction of the "solid really existent fragments in the attempt to mug up a semblance of unity" (Ly 103), is troublesomely authoritative. If an analogy is sought between aesthetics and society--"the free and equal fellowship . . . of the perfect state" (Ly 103)--it lies, Schlegel suggests, in an alternative aesthetics that does not insist upon such unity and purity. In othering the French, then, Schlegel is inconsistent with his own criterion of aesthetic value, demonstrating, unintentionally one presumes, the instability of the difference he seeks to establish between national characters. For as I shall discuss, the German national character in being valorized as a fundamentally ironic identity, also consists of "paradoxes . . . thrust together."

If Schlegel's French with their "strange and rather tasteless universality" are represented as overly abstract, rational and systematic, his English are represented as the binary opposite of this polarity. They are persistently (if not absolutely consistently) associated with a vulgar materiality and a dull "commonsense" empiricism. Thus the French and English are rather arbitrarily placed within the overall structure of Schlegel's philosophical/aesthetic problematic with its attempt to negotiate

between the universal and the particular, system and non-system.

I have already noted Schlegel's reference to Gibbon's love of the Roman's "materialistic pomp, but particularly in the style of a country divided between mercantilism and mathematics. . . quantitative nobility" (Ath 219). Such a picture of a peculiarly English materialism is repeatedly emphasized. In *Lyceum* 69 Schlegel attempts to articulate the value and productivity of a certain "negative feeling which is much better, but also much rarer than an absence of feeling." The passage is crucial in so far as this "negative feeling," described as a disjunction between material form and a spiritual content relates closely to Schlegel's concept of irony and is here explicitly related to national character. This "negative sense" he proposes "is born when somebody possesses only the spirit and not the letter; or the other way around, when he possesses only the material and formal requisites, the dry hard shell of productive genius without the kernel." The former case is clearly valorized by Schlegel as a kind of striving after the infinite that despite one's material incapacity to achieve it remains as a testament to one's affinity with the absolute. "The distinguishing mark of the former type, of the negative spiritual sense, is continual desire combined with continual incapacity, of always wanting to hear, but never hearing." *Lyceum* 79 similarly characterizes specifically German books by their "constant striving toward the absolute," and as we have seen with Schlegel's representation of the French, an aesthetic judgement, especially one framed in nationalist terms, is simultaneously a judgement of "national character." The latter case of the "negative sense," on the other hand, is derided as a kind of soulless materiality and,

Schlegel writes, leads to "that harmoniously shaped artistic banality of which the greatest English critics are such classics" (Ly 69).

Beyond forthrightly pronouncing the vulgar materialism of the English, a primary means Schlegel employs to connote this same idea is to suggest an almost innate connection between the English and money--the representation of material things and their exchange. "One of the most important techniques of the English drama and novel," he writes, in what might very well be the thesis of a twentieth-century cultural materialist analysis, "is guineas. They're used a great deal especially in the first cadenza when the bass instruments begin to have hard work of it" (Ly 49). "That the nobility of patriotic hymns," Schlegel writes in *Athenaeum* 115,

is not desecrated by being well paid for is proved by the Greeks and Pindar. But that money alone isn't enough is shown by the English, who have tried to imitate the ancients in this respect at any rate. So that beauty can't really be bought and sold in England, even if virtue can.

The patriotic hymn or national anthem is one of the primary symbols of nation and thus Schlegel's aesthetic criticism of the hymn is aimed simultaneously at the quality and "nobility" of a nation and its people. Money, he suggests, does not necessarily exclude a nation achieving nobility provided that, as with the Greeks, it does not constitute the nation's sole preoccupation. The English, however, have "money alone;" and the fragment's closing barb concerning English virtue makes it emphatically clear that the aesthetic shortcomings of their patriotic songs is to be seen as directly continuous with a moral shortcoming in the English "national character."

In Schlegel's *Fragments*, then, the English represent the material and the *objective*. While it would be wrong to contend that the English are positioned as occupying a kind of state of nature, a state prior to reason and culture, they are certainly represented as *deficient* in both reason and culture just as the French thought and culture, as the "abbreviation of an extract," is represented as overly rational and abstract. German culture, especially criticism as one highest products of such a culture, is constituted as the desirable inbetween point in these polarities of rational concept and particular thing. Thus the English are not even capable of properly appreciating the aesthetic value of their own great "national author." "Philosophers still admire only Spinoza's consistency," Schlegel asserts, "just as the English only praise Shakespeare's truth" (Ath 301). The German critic's superior appreciation of English culture here implied, allows Schlegel to negotiate the contradiction between deriding the English on the one hand, and on the other hand upholding one of the products of that culture as an ideal. Thus Schlegel's early cosmopolitanism does not escape narrow nationalistic concerns as is sometimes asserted. Like the urbane ironist who remains superior to his interlocutor in his inability to be pinned down to a stable meaning or position, the cosmopolitanism of the ideal German only demonstrates his superiority over more narrowly nationalistic mind sets and thus, paradoxically, upholds the superiority of that oxymoronic idea: the cosmopolitan nation.²³

In terms of a "national mind set" the association of the English with the material object is consistent with associating them with an *atheoretical* empiricism, a way of thinking that remains fixated upon the

merely particular and thus fails to achieve any generalized understanding. Like the "false universality" of the French, however, English thought is not truly and radically empiricist in a fashion that might represent a genuine skepticism approaching Schlegel's own thought. It is rather a partial empiricism which refuses the challenge of theory in order to uphold dogmatic "commonsense" truths. "Consistent empiricism," Schlegel writes in the fragment directly preceding the one concerning false universality, "ends in contributions toward settling misunderstandings, or in a subscription to truth" (Ath 446). By these accounts even a "consistent empiricism" is of rather secondary importance. It can at best settle misunderstandings arising from a given postulate about the world, yet it has no part in the creation or theorization of that postulate. At worst it merely upholds one's atheoretical "subscription to [commonsense] truth," a subscription that may indeed precede and determine the putatively empirical encounter with the object. "[O]ne flatters oneself that one has established a pure solid empiricism quite a posteriori, when what one actually has is an apriori outlook that's highly one-sided, dogmatic, and transcendental" (Ath 226). Thus "English criticism," Schlegel asserts, "consists of nothing but applying the philosophy of common sense (which is itself only a permutation of the natural and scholastic philosophies) to poetry without any understanding for poetry" (Ath 389). In a style reminiscent of contemporary critics of the Leavisite tradition in English letters, such as Terry Eagleton (*Literary* vii), Schlegel indicates that the apparently atheoretical, "commonsense" position is itself a theory with historical antecedents.

Athenaeum 61 also derides the merely "commonsense" attitude of the "English mind" but even more significantly it does so in a manner explicitly articulating a nationalist struggle between English and German thought. The fragment thus forms a counterpart to *Athenaeum* 360 which, as discussed above, contrasts French and German thought.

The few attacks against Kantian philosophy which exist are the most important documents for a *pathological history of common sense*. This epidemic, which started in England, even threatened for a while to infect German philosophy.
(Ath 61 emphasis added)

In direct contrast to French thought which in its excessive universalizing is "strongly hostile to instinct" (Ath 296), divorced from the body, the figuration of English commonsense as a "pathological" disease threatening to "infect" German thought confirms its material bodily status but as an equally unhealthy excess. Given the context of Schlegel's project in representing the character of these nations, Kant stands in very appropriately here for German thought as a whole. Kantian philosophy in this sense attempts to negotiate between (French) rationalism and (English) empiricism, proposing as a middle term a system of transcendental categories through which a universal subject mediates the world. Schlegel's own thought is concerned less with an a priori synthesis than with a continuous interplay between concept and particular theorized at points as irony, but the *inbetweenness* of his position is similar to Kant's, and thus he can affirm the latter's theory as properly German. "Critical philosophy is always thought of as if it had fallen from the sky. It would have originated in Germany even without Kant, and might have done so in a variety of ways. Still, it's better the way it is" (Ath 387).

The model of the German national character in Schlegel's *Fragments* is determined, then, by its carefully constructed inbetweenness to the French and English national characters, between the "philosophical grotesques" of "formal logic and empirical psychology" (Ath 75). It is epitomized in the figures of the critic and the artist, or most ideally (as Schlegel fashioned himself and romantic poetry as a whole), in that which is at once both creative and self-reflectively critical which is to say, by one of the several senses of the term I have traced in the *Fragments*, that which is ironic. I have already discussed how the model of the ideal German in the *Fragments* is that of a cultivated and discerning individual which is to suggest that he is a critic of sorts. Critical reflection, A.W. Schlegel asserts moreover, is indicative of the German national character. "It is a sublime taste always to like things better when they've been *raised to the second power*. For example, copies of imitations, critiques of reviews, addenda to additions, commentaries on notes. This taste is very characteristic of us Germans whenever it comes to making something longer " (Ath 110 my emphasis). While A.W. Schlegel allows that this taste is also characteristic of the French it is so for them only "when it promotes brevity and vacuity" (Ath 110); only the German is associated with such critical reflection, or distantiation, in a valorized sense.

In *Ideas* 120 Friedrich Schlegel most emphatically posits the German artist's character as an ideal type.

The spirit of the old heroes of German art and science will remain ours for as long as we are Germans. The German artist either has *no character at all* or else that of an Albrecht Dürer, Kepler, Hans Sachs, or of a Luther and Jacob Böhme. *Righteous, guileless, thorough, precise, and profound is this character, but also innocent and*

somewhat clumsy. Only with the Germans is it a national characteristic to worship the arts and sciences simply for their own sakes. (emphasis added)

Both these accounts of the German artist's character, and by extension the German national character of which it is the model, are consistent with Schlegel's theorization of irony in *Athenaeum* 51: "Naive is what is or seems to be natural, individual, or classical to the point of irony, or else to the point of continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction. . . .The beautiful, poetical, ideal naive must combine intention and instinct." In "combin[ing] intention and instinct" the ironic German will either have "no character at all" as one cancels out the other in a dialectic of "self-creation and self-destruction," or he will have a character that brings both together, that is "righteous, guileless, thorough, precise, and profound . . . but also innocent and somewhat clumsy." It would seem that the German national character, no less than the French, consists of "paradoxes . . . thrust together" (*Ath* 424).

In its modern beginnings in the writings of Friedrich Schlegel the theory of irony is as much a political as an aesthetic and philosophical discourse. I earlier argued that Schlegel's directly political statements on the distribution of governmental powers and on political representation are structurally homologous to his theory of irony in their attempt to negotiate between the necessity of a governing concept and the equal necessity not to marshall violently the individual under the concept in the name of consistency and unity; and thus that Schlegel's theory of irony was itself

already a political, historical allegory of sorts as well as the suggestion for a political program. As the rudiments, or fragments, of a positive political theory, however, I concluded that while one can sympathize with the impetus for such a theory in the desire to avoid such political violence as represented by the French Revolution its vision is finally a disturbingly reactionary one. Schlegel is unable to conceive of a necessary authority in any other terms than the very traditional ones of monarchy and aristocracy--thoroughly essentialist, unironic identities in their claim to a natural authority based upon origin and tradition. This authority, in contradiction to much of his aesthetic-philosophical theory, is enjoined to arbitrarily control any insurgent individuals into an "absolute whole" (Ath 214) that carries disturbing implications.

Schlegel's discussion of nation and nationality, I then suggested, might potentially provide a more suggestive example of the interactions of irony and political theory. I began my discussion of nation and nationality in Schlegel's *Fragments* by arguing for an ironic self-conscious awareness in these texts of nation and national character as discursive constructs, constructs which the texts nonetheless persistently posit. I suggested that Schlegel thereby presents a potentially productive model for politics, for negotiating between the necessity and inevitability of assertions of generalized identity such as nation and national character on the one hand, and the equal necessity of demonstrating the falsity, or only partial validity, of such assertions. If as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have argued, we must recognize "the illusory prospect of a perfectly unitary and homogeneous collective will that will render pointless the moment of

politics" (2) we must also recognize the necessity of provisional collective identities that are the very condition of politics. An "irony of nation" or of any collectivity is one way to conceive of such a double necessity.

Lastly I traced the production of a specifically German national character in these texts through the process of *othering* the national characters of the French and the English and situating the German as, in a manner homologous with Schlegel's theorization of irony, the negotiation of the polarities represented by these other nations. The question is, then, does this process also suggest an analogously productive model for politics? On the one hand the most obvious and immediate reply to such a question must certainly be no. Schlegel's production of "national characters" participates in the othering of different nations and peoples in a troublesomely totalizing fashion that rehearses the nationalistic xenophobia and racism characteristic of his era and our own, a fact that is perhaps made more clear when the representation of a particular national character does not concern the relatively familiar peoples of Western Europe.

The Arabs have highly polemical natures; they are the annihilators among nations. Their fondness for destroying or throwing away the originals when the translations are finished characterizes the spirit of their philosophy. Precisely for that reason it may be that they were infinitely more cultivated but, with all their culture, more purely barbaric than the Europeans of the Middle Ages. For barbarism is defined as what is at once anti-classical and anti-progressive. (Ath 229)

Nor can the fact that the German national character eludes such reductive homogenization in being represented as more subtly inbetween the polarities represented by the French and the English, elevate this process. For in this respect Schlegel's texts simply participate in what Ian

Balfour has described as

a paradigm of reading the nation doubly: first, the nation of the other is construed in reductive, violent ways, whether in negative or positive terms; second, one's own nation is read as complex and heterogenous, and in such a way as to elevate that nation, sometimes to a height above all others.

Even Schlegel's most suggestive assertion that the German artist, as ideal type of the German national character, has "no character at all" echoes David Hume's assertion of the English in his essay on "National Characters": "the ENGLISH, of any people in the universe, have the least of a national character, unless this very singularity pass for such" (Hume 207). Hume's claim, as Balfour notes, is intended to reflect positively upon the freedom and religious tolerance promoted by English institutions. National character, like body odour, always belongs to the other guy.

Yet Schlegel's contention that the ideal of the German national character is fundamentally ironic, is "no character at all" or one which fluctuates between "instinct" (that which spontaneously embraces its identity as real) and "intention" (a conscious realization of itself as a discursive construct or, in Schlegel's own words "postulate"), partially negates the very ideology of national character it employs to establish the ideal German national identity, an identity which is, paradoxically, a non-identity. As we have shown, moreover, there is ample evidence to argue that Schlegel treats the process of othering different nations and peoples with irony: his remarks on interpretation generally as "traduction" and "crea[tion]," as the insertion of what is "desirable" and "expedient" (Ath 25); on the Greeks as idealized constructs that participate in the

establishment of contemporary national identities; on the "model of Germany which a few great patriotic authors have constructed" (Ly 38); and on "the so-called History of States, . . . repress[ing] nothing more than a genetic definition of the phenomenon of the present political conditions of a nation" (Ath 223). Even expressing "how deeply rooted in man lies the desire to generalize about individual or national characteristics" (Ly 50), suggests that the national characteristic is not a natural attribute of the object of interpretation but a product of the interpreter's desire to make the generalization. The remainder of this fragment, *Lyceum* 50, reinforces this point by way of an analogy: "Even Chamfort says: '*Les vers ajoutent de l'esprit à la pensée de l'homme qui en a quelquefois assez peu; et c'est ce qu'on appelle talent.*' Is this common French usage?" As poetry adds spirit to the man's thought who sometimes has little enough of it, so does the predication of national character lend attributes to the other where no such essential identity exists.

Finally, the inherent instability of Schlegel's ideal German also works to subvert the ideology of national character upon which it is predicated. The German's fluctuation between the antinomies of conscious intention defined primarily as French, and spontaneous instinct defined primarily as English, already indicates the unstable hybrid quality of this character. We have seen, furthermore, how the texts fail in this respect adequately to distinguish the French and the German, how both are articulated in a manner homologous to the trope of irony as "paradoxes . . . thrust together." Even the representation of "the Arabs," which seems to exist outside the continuum of Europeans within which Schlegel defines

the German, betrays a certain identity with the German that disrupts this project. Schlegel derides "the Arabs" as "the annihilators among nations," (Ath 229) yet, as we have seen, he describes the "aim" of the "material enthusiastic rhetoric" which I associated with his own texts as being "to defeat practical unphilosophy and antiphilosophy not just dialectically, but really annihilate it" (Ath 137). Furthermore when Schlegel predicates that "the Arabs" are "infinitely more cultivated but, withal their culture, more purely barbaric than the Europeans" (Ath 229) we are reminded of only a more extreme version of the German character as "righteous, guileless, thorough, precise, and profound . . . but also innocent and somewhat clumsy" (Id 120)--both consist of the paradoxical combination of intention and instinct. Thus despite engaging in the highly objectionable process of othering different peoples and nations, Schlegel's texts continue to suggest a non-essentialist open-ended model for the predication of communal identities, nationalist or otherwise.

Three

"Sclerotic Bureaucracies": Irony and Ideology in Paul de Man

The wretched myths that surround us are no sooner born
than they degenerate into sclerotic bureaucracies.

Paul de Man,
"Montaigne and Transcendence"

. . . the eagerly assured nothingness of the subject, a shadow
of the state in which each person is literally his own
neighbour.

Theodor Adorno,
The Jargon of Authenticity

1. Politics and Rhetoric: "The de Man Affair"

With Paul de Man my central question concerning the ideology of selected theoretical statements on irony has been preceded by a good deal of parallel critical inquiry and journalistic (mis)representation. Corrosive nihilist, quietistic conservative, proto-Marxist materialist, liberal pluralist, ex-Nazi on the prowl--the politics of Paul de Man's life and work have been the subject of varied and contradictory speculation.¹ Initially the interest in determining the politics of de Man's theories arose seemingly simultaneously from various points on the ideological spectrum in so far as his name became virtually synonymous with the deconstruction that, in the seventies and eighties, made significant inroads in North American departments of literature. The sensationalized if little understood "attacks"

on subjectivity, history, and meaning articulated by this "theory" were perceived as a challenge not only to the time honoured verities of a liberal humanist education, but as well, to more recently ascendent socially orientated methodologies. Thus de Man's work became the subject of ideological scrutiny from traditional humanists, Marxists, feminists and the newly arisen Foucauldians alike. Although seldom articulated, such inquiry was thus political in more than one sense: at an institutional level it represented a struggle for power and position amongst various critical methodologies and for the integrity of the careers that individuals had invested in these methodologies.

The revelation in 1987 that de Man in his twenties had written for collaborationist journals in occupied Belgium greatly intensified interest in the politics of his writings, in many cases simply confirming previously held opinions about these politics. Indeed, despite an ostensible interest in de Man's wartime journalism the primary goal in the heated debates surrounding these writings remained, as Rodolphe Gasché amongst others noted, "a settling of accounts with 'deconstruction'" (208). The presumed continuity between de Man's wartime writings and his later work that such a settling of accounts often depended upon struck many readers as naive, even ironic, given that in these writings de Man articulated the very positions in the name of which the critique of deconstruction was frequently made, namely, a view of literature as the expression of lasting cultural values, and a certain historicism that saw literature as participating in nationalistic narratives of progress (see Waters xiv-xxx).

Given the centrality accorded to "The Rhetoric of Temporality," the

curious fact that it is frequently taken as a synecdoche for de Man's work as a whole², this ideological inquiry has frequently approached very close to my specific concerns, for this essay contains de Man's only sustained consideration of irony published in his lifetime. Furthermore, in the wake of the revelation of the wartime journalism all three tropes that de Man considers in this essay (symbol, allegory, irony) have, explicitly and implicitly, played significant roles in figuring and emplotting relations between de Man's earlier and later writings. Each of these various roles implies a particular interpretation of the ideological function of these tropes in de Man's work that will inescapably bear upon my reading of de Man's theorization of irony.

The *symbol* functions in these disputes as the dominant trope of the aesthetic ideology to which de Man did or did not fall prey. In emphasizing the discontinuity between de Man's wartime writings and his later work Ian Balfour notes that the former writings remain in an evaluative *aestheticizing* mode, a mode that de Man will later tirelessly critique. With its elision of the distinctions and discontinuities between the cognitive, ethical and political realms, such as when de Man in his most notorious article considers the formation of a Jewish colony in the form of an aesthetic judgement (Balfour "Difficult" 9), the trope articulating such criticism is the symbol. On the other hand, writers such as David Lehman who assert an unproblematic relation between de Man's wartime writings and his mature work themselves implicitly rely on the organic, synecdochal continuity characterizing the symbol.

For de Man's critics, and most emphatically for his former student

Stanley Corngold, de Man's later writings are *allegorical* of the earlier writings in so far as they gesture towards an ideologically complicitous position in an *other*, disguised or displaced language.

I stress that the persons whose real decomposition de Man's early hackwork may have helped bring about appear in his later writing as only the masks of a rigorous literary operation--objects of "coercive displacements" that occur, to be sure, only "tropologically." What Nazis and their collaborators once accomplished in fact, literature is seen as accomplishing figuratively. ("On Paul de Man's" 82)

For de Man's defenders such as J. Hillis Miller or Christopher Norris on the other hand, the later writings are *allegorical* of the earlier writings in so far as they, in a similarly displaced fashion, negate positions previously held in the earlier writings. The relation between the earlier and later writings is, Miller asserts, "one of reversal or putting in question" (337). Norris claims that de Man's first hand knowledge of what the aesthetic ideology could lead to "echoes like a subdued but obsessive refrain through the essays collected in *Blindness and Insight*" ("Heidegger" 257). These opposing positions implicitly rely on two differing views of the function of allegory. Corngold's position depends upon a traditional view of allegory as the positing of a *unity* or sameness between two discourses, in this instance de Man's wartime writings and the later essays. Miller and Norris's position on the other hand depends upon a view of allegory closer to de Man's own (and, indeed, closer to irony) as a negative mode that establishes the non-coincidence of a sign and a previous sign of which it is a repetition.

Irony is invoked more explicitly and once again on opposing sides in this debate. In a recent essay by Corngold a certain shifty, morally

dubious irony is seen as the dominant trope guiding de Man's entire career in America.

In [de Man] a pride of negative Intellect (as a critique of Life) joined with his political cunning into an Irony that kept him going, although it must have robbed his going of the certainty of any particular direction. His irony was not inconsistent either with opportunism or with keeping a low profile. ("Remembering" 183)

In Corngold's interpretation, then, de Man's theorization of irony as the unveiling of the ontological discontinuity between the fictional, linguistic self and the empirical self are to be understood (allegorically) as self-serving strategies of evasion--as the "temptations of a confidence man" ("Remembering" 189).

Even sympathetic readers of de Man's work have viewed his occasional invocations of the ironic as ideologically suspicious. Ortwin de Graef, in a study of de Man's essays of the 1950s that pays considerable attention to questions of ideology in these texts, entitles one chapter "The Temptation of Irony." For de Graef (29-42), a certain serene and tranquil irony that seeks in the aesthetic a transcendence of ethics, history, and politics, is the constant temptation that de Man's work of this period must resist even as it, on occasion, invokes such an irony. Christopher Norris, who in general champions de Man as an ideological critic in the tradition of Theodor Adorno (*Paul de Man* 149-52), concedes that in his middle period essays de Man "most often strikes this note [of disavowing guilt over his wartime articles] in connection with the topic of romantic irony, a topic that can likewise be seen as an 'excuse' for strategies of self-evasion masquerading as vigorous philosophical argument" ("Heidegger" 260).

Ian Balfour, on the other hand, invokes what we might understand

as irony when he suggests that "the proposals [Leo] Strauss makes for a hermeneutic that accounts for the double-encoding of writing under political pressure may help in deciphering de Man's wartime writings" ("Difficult" 7). Balfour here cites De Man's own statement from a late essay on Bakhtin in which de Man refers to the "double-talk, the necessary obliqueness of any persecuted speech that cannot, at the risk of survival, openly say what it means to say" (7) as evidence of de Man's awareness of such politically subversive strategies and, hence, a possible clue that such a strategy might have been operative in his own wartime writings. Jacques Derrida's emphasis upon a "*double edge* and a *double bind*" (135) in de Man's newspaper articles amounts, in part, to just such a reading attuned to an ironic, potentially subversive level of meaning.

Within the debate over the politics of de Man's writings, then, the ideological functions of allegory and irony are both implicitly characterized in contradictory ways. Allegory can appear as a strategy for dissimulating an unchanging politics of coercion and violence, a strategy that enables one to continue to talk about what was once performed on people under fascist regimes in terms of what gets performed on texts. Conversely, however, this same analogy can be interpreted as a sign, not of complicity with such a politics, but as a critique of the inherent violence of totalizing modes of thought and the directions in which they can ultimately lead. Irony in turn can appear as a morally ungrounded strategy of evasion of responsibility for one's actions that also permits of opportunistic reinventions of oneself, and as a quietistic, ultimately conservative attempt to transcend entirely the political realm. Alternately it can appear as a

politically subversive form of "double talk" aimed at articulating the unsayable and destabilizing the ossified truths of a dominant discourse. In the representations of the politics of de Man's irony we have something of a rehearsal of the ideological spectrum traversed in the critical representations of romantic irony that I outlined in my first chapter.

What these contradictions point to is the absence in these tropes of an *essential* unchanging ideological content. As de Man points out, both allegory and irony are constituted by a certain gap between signifier and signified ("Rhetoric" 203). As the history of the critical discourse on irony testifies, this constitutive gap permits the trope to be interpreted and used in a multitude of ways, the ideology of which will depend upon, among other determinants, the specific interpretation of the trope and the context in which it is employed, i.e., on how one understands and uses irony.³ My purpose in reading "The Rhetoric of Temporality," will be to consider the possible ideological implications of this particular interpretation of irony, a task that has largely been left undone in the gesturing toward the politics of irony in de Man's work.⁴ Toward this end it will be necessary to contextualize de Man's essay, to consider the dense intertextuality, most emphatically with the writings of Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger, that informs this statement. The consideration of these pre-texts can allow us to glimpse the ideological horizon before which de Man's reading of irony was articulated and the ideology it in turn articulates.

As we will see, de Man's reading of irony is itself double edged and ideologically contradictory. If, as Adorno conceived, the identity of

concept and phenomenon is "the primal form of ideology" (*Negative* 148), then both allegory and irony in de Man's reading resist such ideological affirmations of identity. Such resistance has an undeniably political dimension when one thinks of the processes--most obvious in twentieth-century totalitarian regimes but present in profound and perhaps ultimately more enduringly effective ways within the so-called western democracies--whereby the will of the state and the will of the individual (the whole and the part) are made identical along the lines of an organic entity. What de Man's theory may unreflectingly presuppose, however, is the ultimate identity of all forms of ideology. Accepting Louis Althusser's dictum that there is no outside ideology⁵--a position consistent with the Heidegger of *Being and Time* who, as we shall see, has a profound influence on de Man's discussion of irony--we must then conclude that de Man's total ideological resistance leaves us with nowhere to go, with no criteria for choosing any less violent or repressive forms of ideology over any others. Such a putatively positionless ideological resistance is itself of course an ideology, one perhaps unwittingly complicit with an individualistic liberal philosophy that arises out of and reproduces the very structures of domination it critiques. But while irony in de Man's reading appears as a potentially endless process of pure negativity whereby the individual is increasingly isolated from his empirical self, from others, and the world, reading de Man against himself we see that this escalating isolation is by no means the necessary result of the disjuncture irony establishes. On the contrary, such a disjuncture can be read more convincingly as leading the subject to an increased awareness of the

constitutively social, collective nature of its being.

2. Allegory and Benjamin

In "Paul de Man: Life and Works," Lindsay Waters asserts that "The Rhetoric of Temporality" finds de Man "betwixt and between Heidegger and Benjamin" (lvi). I will have to devote a considerable space to more fully articulating precisely how this is so, a project that Waters only begins to sketch out, albeit in a highly condensed and suggestive manner (particularly with respect to Benjamin) to which I shall remain indebted. More problematically, however, Waters reads the essay as signalling a move beyond Heidegger toward Benjamin. "With his title 'The Rhetoric of Temporality,' de Man gestured two ways, *backward* with the Heideggerian word 'temporality' and *forward* with the word 'rhetoric'" (lii emphasis added). Waters goes on to make clear that "rhetoric" should be associated with Benjamin as "temporality" is with Heidegger. As a statement broadly addressing the thematic concerns of de Man's writings preceding and following this essay, Waters' statement is accurate enough. As is perhaps inevitable in a narrative of "life and work," however, Waters' 'backward' and 'forward' entails an idea of intellectual progress.

De Man had seen the considerable limits of Heidegger in the mid-1950's, as his essays "Heidegger's Exegeses of Holderlin" and "The Temptation of Permanence" show, and yet he had felt it necessary to fall back on his categories in a fairly uncritical way as late as 1967. He was bogged down, and Benjamin provided the way forward. (lvi)

This oversimplifies matters and exaggerates the difference and incompatibility between the Heideggerian and Benjaminian strands of de Man's argument in this essay. Furthermore, given the historical

overdetermination of the names "Heidegger," and "Benjamin" (the Nazi rector versus the Marxist jew whose suicide was precipitated by the Nazis) the assertion of a movement "beyond" Heidegger to Benjamin has the ring of an apology or atonement.

To suggest, as the title of de Man's essay does, that there is a rhetoric of temporality, is to imply that language precedes temporality as a ground of human being. As I shall examine in more detail, irony and allegory, in their non-coincidence of signifier and signified, establish the disjunctures we experience as temporality. On the other hand, it is not as though rhetoric were free to do as it wished with temporality. The romantic symbol is "inauthentic" precisely because it attempts the impossible task of eliding temporality. If temporality were merely a function of rhetoric there would be no possibility for this to be the case. This predicament, then, would appear to lend ontological priority to temporality. Hubert Dreyfus has noted Heidegger's own hesitation, manifested as early as *Being and Time* and becoming more marked in his later writings, between having established, as Heidegger writes, "the Interpretation of Dasein in terms of temporality, and the explication of time as *the* transcendental horizon for the question of being" (*Being* 63), *and* a realization that any supposedly final horizon is always in fact open to further interpretation (Dreyfus 38). Thus the similar hesitation we see in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" may not in fact be indicative of a movement away from Heidegger. That a consideration of rhetoric does not lie outside a Heideggerian problematic is supported by a suggestive statement by Otto Pöggeler. Noting that Heidegger described the project of his later works as the creation of a

"topology of being" (delineating the being proper to the separate spheres of art, politics, science and technology) Pöggeler writes:

This understanding of topology ties Heidegger's new impetus with a tradition which Heidegger does not heed or repel, that is, with rhetoric in which the notion of topic has its place. Rhetoric appears as the shadow which accompanied metaphysics and from which one can ask about the rights and limits of the metaphysical tradition. (xvi)

De Man himself cautions against any over hasty assumption that his "turn" represents a fundamental or incompatible change in direction and invokes the possibility that he may be "just restating, in a slightly different mode, earlier and unresolved obsessions" (BI xii).⁶

In fact, de Man is more "betwixt and between Heidegger and Benjamin" than Waters' assertion of a movement from one toward the other would suggest. De Man works out of both and is in turn implicitly critical of the recuperative aspects present in both, particularly of the explicitly apocalyptic temporality of Benjamin's theory of allegory, and the monistic tendencies in Heidegger's thought. Though the force of both is present throughout the essay, one can roughly assert, contra Waters, that the first division, "Symbol and Allegory," is more Benjaminian, the second division, "Irony," more Heideggerian.

While irony is my topic at hand, there will be two advantages to first considering at some length the intricate relations between Benjamin's and de Man's discussions of allegory. In the first place, from the perspective of an ideological reading, the placement of "The Rhetoric of Temporality" within a constellation of texts that powerfully includes the "Marxist Rabbi," as Terry Eagleton has dubbed Benjamin (*Ideology of the*

Aesthetic 316), complicates the usual pictures of de Man in interesting and productive ways. Secondly, and more fundamentally, allegory and irony are closely related tropes for both writers, a position indeed that they share with classical and medieval rhetoricians. Thus in apparently digressing into a discussion of allegory I will not, indeed, be straying far from my central interest in irony.

"The Rhetoric of Temporality" refers only passingly to Walter Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. The initial reference occurs in the first footnote listing several critical trends developing independently in France, Germany, and America that demonstrate a renewed interest in rhetorical terminology. The second, and final, reference is somewhat more pertinent though no more extensive. "After such otherwise divergent studies as those of E.R. Curtius, of Erich Auerbach, of Walter Benjamin, and of H.G. Gadamer, we can no longer consider the supremacy of the symbol as a 'solution' to the problem of metaphorical diction" (191). Neither reference suggests that Benjamin's work has any particular pertinence to de Man's argument beyond certain broad affinities that it shares with a number of these other "divergent" critical statements. In other essays of the 1960's, however, de Man is more explicit about his debt to Benjamin, particularly to his work on allegory.⁷ In "Lyric and Modernity" de Man refers to "the traditional term of allegory that Benjamin, perhaps more than anyone else in Germany, helped to restore to some of its full implications" (*Blindness* 173). In "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism" de Man quotes Benjamin as defining allegory "as a void 'that signifies the non-being of what it represents'" (*Blindness* 35).

Most significantly, de Man's Christian Gauss lectures delivered at Princeton in 1967, and later reworked into "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (see Waters liv), also at points explicitly engage Benjamin's work.

In "Allegory and Irony in Baudelaire," the sixth and final Gauss lecture, Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire is juxtaposed with Sartre's. Sartre, de Man argues, through a misguided reliance on the subject-object model of interpretation misreads Baudelaire as a poet who seeks to identify consciousness with nature.⁸ In characteristically Sartrean fashion, the philosopher criticizes the poet for this inauthentic attempt to confound the *pour soi* and the *en soi*. De Man invokes Benjamin to counter what strikes him as an erroneous reading. "Perhaps the Baudelaire image furthest removed from Sartre's and closest to the poet's consciousness," de Man writes, "is that suggested by Walter Benjamin when he stresses Baudelaire's language as destructive of organic, sensory relationships and as predominantly allegorical" (RCC 105). In a statement that should, however, be savoured by readers of de Man's famously dense prose, de Man then states that Benjamin's comments on allegory are "too cryptic" (105) to provide a "firm basis" (105) for understanding the allegorical aspect of Baudelaire's work. Cryptic or otherwise, Benjamin's writings on symbol and allegory are a fundamental presence in "The Rhetoric of Temporality." De Man borrows freely, reworks considerably, and implicitly rejects various aspects of Benjamin's theory of allegory.

"Where man is drawn towards the symbol, allegory emerges from the depths of being to intercept the intention, and to triumph over it" (*Origin* 183). Benjamin's characteristically aphoristic statement from

"Allegory and Trauerspiel," the concluding section of *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, expresses very succinctly the central idea that de Man takes from Benjamin's theory of allegory. Whereas the symbol represents the inauthentic attempt to elide temporality, allegory fully expresses this ontological ("from the depths of being") condition. The quotation contains the idea of a conflict between the two rhetorical modes that de Man places at the centre of his essay's discussion of symbol and allegory.

The dialectical relationship between subject and object is no longer the central statement of romantic thought, but this dialectic is now located entirely in the temporal relationships that exist within a system of allegorical signs. It becomes a conflict between a conception of the self seen in its authentically temporal predicament and a defensive strategy that tries to hide from this negative self-knowledge. On the level of language the asserted superiority of the symbol over allegory, so frequent during the nineteenth century, is one of the forms taken by this tenacious self-mystification. (208)

De Man then interprets the conflict between symbol and allegory, in Heideggerian terms, as the inevitable one occurring between inauthentic Dasein's attempt to understand itself in spatial terms as an immutable nature, and authentic Dasein's recognition of the nothingness and temporality constitutive of its being.

In *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (a text contemporary with *Being and Time*, the former was published in 1928, the latter in 1927), Benjamin set out to revive the critical reputation of the sixteenth-century German *trauerspiel*, literally, "mourning-play." Offensive to both neo-classical and romantic sensibilities, the baroque drama had been long neglected (see McCole 126). Benjamin identifies the form proper to the *trauerspiel* as allegory and locates the denigration of the form in "the

tyranny of a usurper," that has held sway "for over a hundred years [in] the philosophy of art . . . a notion of the symbol which has nothing more than the name in common with the genuine notion" (*Origin* 159). Although de Man's rhetoric is considerably less coloured, he is in basic agreement with this historical schema. Beginning with French romanticism, de Man contends, "[o]ne can point to a certain number of specific texts in which a symbolic language, based on the close interpenetration between observation and passion, begins to acquire a priority that it will never relinquish during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (BI 200).

By way of eliminating certain historical prejudices that have stood in the way of an understanding of the *trauerspiel*, Benjamin sets out, as will de Man, upon a re-reading of the neo-classical and romantic critical debates over symbol and allegory. Like de Man after him, he is less interested in merely rehearsing the arguments as a lesson in historiography than in examining, as de Man notes, "how contradictory the origins of the debate appear to be" (BI 189). Benjamin does not simply accept the characterization of symbol and allegory given in the debates of the time and then seek to reverse this hierarchy. Allegory was constructed from neo-classicism onwards in a deliberately denigrating and polemic fashion so as "to provide the dark background against which the bright world of the symbol might stand out" (*Origin* 161). Benjamin first rejects the claims made for the romantic symbol, then, reading against the grain in a manner parallel to de Man's strategy of Heideggerian destruction in the essays collected in *Blindness and Insight*, demonstrates that romanticism did contain a latent understanding of allegory but one that

was expressed in the mode of error.

"[M]an is drawn towards the symbol," Benjamin asserts, because it presents "an immeasurably comforting" (*Origin* 160) myth, namely, that the work of art can present a seamless and self-sufficient totality containing the full plentitude of being. In the symbol "the beautiful is supposed to merge with the divine in an unbroken whole" (*Origin* 160); it would express "the unlimited immanence of the moral world in the world of beauty" (*Origin* 160). For the defenders of the symbol its strength lies in this expression of organic wholeness.

"The measure of time for the experience of the symbol," Benjamin writes "is the mystical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and, if one might say so, wooded interior" (*Origin* 165). In "the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption" (*Origin* 166). Thus the symbol attempts to eradicate both the temporality and materiality of human existence, and it is for these reasons that Benjamin is critical of it. De Man picks up on both these points. In the monistic world of the symbol where it is "possible for the image to coincide with the substance, since the substance and its representation do not differ in their being but only in their extension," the relationship between sign and substance "is one of simultaneity, which, in truth, is spatial in kind, and in which the intervention of time is merely a matter of contingency" ("Rhetoric" 207). Similarly, de Man's discussion of the tension between symbol and allegory in Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* refers to the values associated with a symbolic diction as those belonging to a "a cult of the moment" ("Rhetoric"

204), a cult in which time is devalued. Furthermore, the proponents of the symbolist ideology may emphasize the symbol's sensuous materiality--its "mountain and plant-like quality" (*Origin* 165) as Benjamin parodically paraphrases the romantic theorists--yet such materiality is clearly destroyed as the object partakes of the numinous. Of Coleridge's description of the symbol de Man writes: "In truth, the spiritualization of the symbol has been carried so far that the moment of material existence by which it was originally defined has now become altogether unimportant" (BI 192).⁹

Benjamin rejects the claims made for the artistic symbol on the grounds, as Michael Jennings writes, "that it is bad theology. . . it makes false claims about the relationship between this world and the absolute" (167). Its asserted continuity between the beautiful and the divine is based on an analogy to "the unity of the material and the transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol" (*Origin* 111). The theological symbol, however, depends upon faith and miracle for its realization; whereas the artistic symbol claims self-sufficiency.¹⁰ Benjamin's exposition implies that the romantic symbol is an artificial isolation of the nostalgic impulse within allegory toward unity, one that becomes particularly acute as the consciousness of this ontological gap becomes unbearable. "Under Benjamin's analysis," Bainard Cowan writes, "the Romantic symbol relinquishes its oppositional stance to allegory and becomes merely its false mirror-image, an *ignis fatuus*" (112). De Man expresses much the same idea in trying to show "that the term 'symbol' had in fact been substituted for that of 'allegory' in an act of ontological

bad faith" (BI 211).

It is similarly the burden of much of de Man's writing to displace any such claims to "a genuine and working monism" ("Rhetoric" 195), as when he states in "The Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image" that "[c]ritics who speak of a 'happy relationship' between matter and consciousness fail to realize that the very fact that the relationship has to be established within the medium of language indicates that it does not exist in actuality" (8). As we shall see, however, for de Man there is no escape from this negativity in an apocalyptic temporality that is already suggested in Benjamin's acceptance of the theological symbol.

The theoretical discussions of symbolism by the romantic cultural philosopher Friedrich Creuzer in the first volume of his *Symbolik und Mythologie* (1819), a work that intentionally at least continued to privilege symbol over allegory are, Benjamin notes, "*indirectly*, of immense value for the understanding of the allegorical. Alongside the banal older doctrine which survives in them, they contain observations whose epistemological elaboration *could have led Creuzer far beyond the point he actually reached*" (*Origin* 163 emphasis added). Creuzer at one point explains the "difference between symbolic and allegorical representation" in the conventional terms of the time:

The latter signifies merely a general concept, or an idea which is different from itself; the former is the very incarnation and embodiment of the idea. In the former a process of substitution takes place . . . In the latter the concept itself has descended into our physical world, and we see it itself directly in the image. (Creuzer qtd. in *Origin* 164-65)

As this passage (along with the others that Benjamin cites from a variety

of writers such as Goethe and Schopenhauer) establishes, symbol is opposed to allegory as substance is to sign, the concrete to the abstract, unity to division, the whole to the fragment, presence to distance (or absence), the organic and the necessary to the mechanistic and the arbitrary, indeed (Benjamin emphasizes) as speech is to writing.¹¹ Creuzer, Benjamin notes, even gives the "old prejudice" against allegory a "linguistic coinage" in the term *Zeichenallegorie* [sign-allegory] (OGT 163).

As we have seen, Benjamin denies the artistic symbol its claim to the higher ground in this hierarchical arrangement of binaries. Yet he generally accepts the characterizations made of allegory within this tradition, turning them into the very terms of its defense, and de Man picks up on several of these terms, namely and relatedly, the *arbitrariness* and the *distance* constitutive of the allegorical. With qualifications de Man also adopts Benjamin's emphasis on the *fragmentariness* of the allegorical and on its foregrounded status as *sign*.

The arbitrariness of the allegorical for which it has been traditionally derided becomes for Benjamin fundamental to a true understanding of the form. Unlike the symbol, meaning in the allegory is not claimed to be immanent in the object itself. Commenting on "the antinomies of the allegorical" (*Origin* 174), Benjamin writes: "Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else" (*Origin* 175). Since all modes of representation are necessarily based on arbitrary conventions, the allegory, in foregrounding rather than covering over this condition, provides "an *ur*-history [or originary history] of signification" (Benjamin qtd. in McCole 135). De Man picks up on the arbitrariness

fundamental to allegory at two points: when he defines the relationship between "the reflection and its source" as based on "the organic coherence of the synecdoche" ("Rhetoric" 192) in the case of the symbol, and on "a pure decision of the mind" ("Rhetoric" 192) in the case of allegory; and when he notes that the "relationship between the allegorical sign and its meaning (*signifié*) is not decreed by dogma . . . " ("Rhetoric" 207).

The fact that there is no fundamental or necessary relationship between sign and meaning in the allegory points to the *distance* between these terms. Like any form of re-presentation allegory could not exist if the meaning it sought to represent were not *absent*. Allegorical representation for Benjamin "means precisely the non-existence of what it presents" (*Origin* 233). De Man, as we have seen, takes up this line in "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism," in a slightly altered translation, as comprising *in itself* Benjamin's definition of allegory. This is, inevitably, an interpretation, one that lends one aspect of Benjamin's theory pride of place; yet precisely for this reason it is highly useful for our understanding of what de Man takes from Benjamin. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality" de Man returns to the emphasis upon distance as constitutive of the allegorical.

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. (207)

De Man, then, seizes upon allegory as an engine of negation. He associates it with "a controlled and lucid renunciation" (214) of either the values associated with a cult of the moment (as in Rousseau) or the seductiveness

of a world of natural correspondences (as in Wordsworth). Negation is indeed a dominant feature of allegory for Benjamin but, as we shall discuss, its negative moment is one that exists to be transcended in an ultimate denegation.

Arbitrariness and distance, then, are two characteristics within the romantic construction of allegory that Benjamin seizes upon and resignifies with a notably influential effect upon de Man's understanding of the trope. Other aspects, however, de Man accepts only with qualifications. Benjamin, for example, emphasizes the fragmentariness of the allegorical in opposition to the symbol's claim to totality. "But it is as something incomplete and imperfect that objects stare out from the allegorical structure" (*Origin* 186). Here Benjamin's understanding of the allegorical is in some respects specific to the *trauerspiel* which is resplendent with images of ruins, dismembered bodies and death's heads. Benjamin's emphasis on the fragmentary is enough to convince Michael Jennings that allegory "has for Benjamin little to do with the traditional understanding of the concept, which treats allegory as a form of narrative. . . ." (170). This takes matters too far. De Man's implicit qualification of Benjamin is more helpful. The allegorical certainly does side with the fragmentary in so far as its arbitrariness and mechanicalness--what Benjamin describes as its "awkward heavy handedness" (*Origin* 187)--resist any false totalizations. Yet allegory, de Man qualifies, "*appears* as a successive mode capable of engendering duration as the illusion of a continuity that it *knows to be illusionary*" ("Rhetoric" 226 emphasis added). This allows one to comprehend how strongly narrative (and thus apparently finished) works such as the poems

collected in *Lyrical Ballads*, or an entire genre such as the novel, might be considered fragmentary.¹² Clearly Benjamin intends some such application for the allegorical when he suggestively, if cryptically, remarks that "there is an affinity between the romantic genius and baroque spiritual make-up in the field of the allegorical" (*Origin* 187), and that "a genuine history of the romantic style could do no better than show," that "even irony" is a "variant of the allegorical" (OGT 188).¹³ I shall return to the question of the relation between allegory and irony, a relation that de Man also views as central to any proper understanding of the tropes.

Benjamin also emphasizes that in baroque allegory "both externally and stylistically--in the extreme character of typographical arrangement and in the use of highly charged metaphors--the written word tends toward the visual" (*Origin* 175-76). The viscosity of baroque allegory finds no direct counterpart in de Man's attempt to understand, through Benjamin, the significance of the allegorical within romanticism. Indeed, de Man's crucial emphasis upon allegory as a non-perceptual mode opposed to the (illusory) perceptual basis of the symbol's subject-object dialectic, might be interpreted as directly opposed to Benjamin's claims for baroque allegory's "tend[ency] toward the visual." In arguing that Rousseau's description of Julie's garden in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* employs an allegorical as opposed to a symbolic diction, de Man writes: "Rousseau does not even pretend to be observing. The language is purely figural, not based on perception, less still on an experienced dialectic between nature and consciousness" (BI 203). Nevertheless, while the baroque allegory is undoubtedly more visualistic than what de Man understands romantic

allegory to be, there is initially no fundamental conflict between the two writers on this point. What each is getting at from different angles appropriate to their divergent objects of inquiry is an emphasis upon allegory as a form of writing. For Benjamin the ornate lettering in the baroque texts as well as their highly charged visual metaphors reinforce the materiality of the signs and the gap that exists in writing between sign and meaning and sign and speech. Allegory "immerses itself in the depths which separate visual being from meaning" (*Origin* 165). "This poetry was in fact incapable of releasing in inspired song the profound meaning which was here confined to the verbal image. Its language was heavy with material display. Never has poetry been less winged" (*Origin* 200, see McCole 144-145). For de Man allegory is non-perceptual because, as writing, it repeats and foregrounds its repetition of what Barthes called "the already written." "The meaning of the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition* (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign . . ." ("Rhetoric" 207). Thus, for de Man, in allegory there is no pretension to be representing a subject looking at an object which implies that there is no pretension within this conventionalized system of signs to be gesturing to an outside. (This also explains why de Man includes mimesis/realism amongst the mystified languages). This latter implication does, as we shall see, point to a genuine conflict between the two theorists.

Benjamin, then, takes several of the traditional pejorative characterizations of allegory implicit in the passage from Creuzer, and supported and elaborated in numerous other statements of the era

(arbitrariness, distance, fragmentariness, sign), and turns them into the terms of its defence. De Man adopts or qualifies these aspects in his own understanding of the form. Creuzer, however, goes on to make what is, for Benjamin and de Man, the most profound observation about the distinction between symbol and allegory. "The distinction between the two modes is therefore to be sought in the momentariness which allegory lacks . . . There [in the symbol] we have momentary totality; here we have progression in a series of moments" (qtd. in *Origin* 165). This observation is elaborated upon in a remarkable letter to Creuzer by Joseph Von Gorres included in Creuzer's text and cited by Benjamin.

I have no use for the view that the symbol is being, and allegory is sign . . . We can be perfectly satisfied with the explanation that takes the one as a sign for ideas, which is self-contained, concentrated, and which steadfastly remains itself, while recognizing the other as a successively progressing, dramatically mobile, dynamic representation of ideas which has acquired the very fluidity of time. They stand in relation to each other as does the silent, great and mighty natural world of mountains and plants to the living progression of human history. (*Origin* 165)

"Within the decisive category of time," Benjamin concludes, "the introduction of which into this field of semiotics was the great romantic achievement of these thinkers, permits the incisive, formal definition of the relationship between symbol and allegory" (*Origin* 166). We must now consider the distinct ways in which this "decisive category" is taken up by Benjamin and de Man. Broadly speaking the distinction between the two theorists is, respectively, their interpretation of this category in terms of *history* and in terms of *temporality*.

The symbol misrepresents human historical experience, chiefly in

its attempted elision of the temporality and materiality of human existence but also, as John McCole writes, in its potential

idealization of something in the negative sense of distortion or even falsification; memory may transfigure the past by bathing things in a sentimental glow, making the good old days appear more beautiful than they actually were. The aesthetic symbol's transgression, in a word, is *Verklärung*, a falsifying transfiguration. (137)

The name Benjamin gives for this seductive but ultimately illusory radiance is *aura*, in some senses, as Michael Jennings contends, a term synonymous with the symbolic (167). Both terms also suggest what we might understand as one central aspect of the ideological, namely, the smoothing over of difference and contradiction in a putatively seamless totality that is in fact constructed to cover over an historical condition of domination and divisiveness. Indeed, Benjamin in a more Marxian phase will claim, most notably in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," that the theoretical defense of auratic art was and is central to the maintenance of power by the bourgeoisie.¹⁴

For the structural reasons we have been exploring, allegory appears to Benjamin more uniquely suited to the authentic expression of human history. Time is the constitutive element of its narrative movement, and the fragmentariness, distance from transcendent truth, lack, and failure to capture stable meaning that it foregrounds, are truer to a painful historical experience than the glimmering aura of the symbol. The inherent violence of the allegorical in taking up any person or thing and transforming it into an allegorical sign likewise mimes the violence of human history.¹⁵ The name Benjamin gives to the process whereby the allegory disrupts the auratic totalities of the symbol with the brute

facticity of history is *shock* (see Eagleton *Benjamin* 35). As opposed to the "timelessness" of auratic art, "allegories become dated because it is part of their nature to shock" (*Origin* 183). In "The Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man, in discussing the temporal (and thus allegorical) structure revealed in one of Wordsworth's *Lucy* poems, emphasizes--as he had done earlier in the Gauss Lectures (108)--the word *shock* with its Benjaminian overtones: "the curious shock of the poem, the very Wordsworthian 'shock of mild surprise' . . ." (224). The word is used in a sense parallel to Benjamin's as pertaining to the disruption of a mystified view of the self as timeless and immutable.

For Benjamin, the baroque allegory, as John McCole explains¹⁶,

acts out "an extraordinary crossing of nature and history" to which Benjamin gives the awkward name "nature-history" (*Naturgeschichte*). Allegory captures an experience of nature that was necessarily inaccessible to classicist symbolism: the "lack of freedom, the imperfection, the brokenness of the sensuous, beautiful physical world." Nature remained the school of art for the baroque, as it had been for Renaissance classicism, but with a decisive difference: to the allegorist, nature "appears not in bud and bloom but in the overripeness and decay of its creations . . . as eternal transience." The baroque vision of history--the "philosophy of history" inherent in its version of the allegorical form--results from assimilating the conception of human history to this experience of nature. History is "subject to nature [*naturverfallen*]," meaning that it is "a process not of eternal life but rather of irresistible decay [*Verfall*]" and "subjection to death [*Todesverfallenheit*]." (135)

Benjamin does not, as it might appear at first sight, propose a naive identity between the human and natural worlds. Nature is read by the baroque artist in purely allegorical terms as emblems of a human historicity. (De Man is careful to make much this same point in his *Gauss* lectures when discussing the river as emblem of historicity in Wordsworth's

sonnet cycle *The River Duddon* [88]). This accounts, in part, for the emphasis upon decaying nature in the baroque allegory. "Death," Benjamin writes in a comment with resounding Heideggerian overtones, "digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance" (*Origin* 166). It is where nature is most subject to death, then, that it is most allegorical of a human historicity. While Benjamin attributes this saturnine and thoroughly metaphysical view of history to the baroque period, he clearly regards it as authentic, one very close to his own (see Wolin 48-63, Eagleton IA 325-326). The baroque allegory's suitability to the expression of the historical is, in this respect, thematic rather than structural: it best expresses history because, in a Judeo-Christian fashion, its themes represent the death and decay of a fallen world.

De Man's understanding of the temporality of allegory is certainly not free from such thematic considerations. His fourth *Gauss* lecture "Time and History in Wordsworth," ends with the complete quotation of Wordsworth's "Mutability" cantos, a poem, as de Man describes it, that "comes as close as possible to being a language that imagines what is, in essence, unimaginable" (94). Thus the poem comes as close as possible to expressing temporality because it is thematically concerned with dissolution, the most preeminent effect of time. When de Man reworks this material into "The Rhetoric of Temporality," however, this very thematic example of the expression of temporality is omitted. He attempts, rather, to emphasize the structural manner in which the allegory opens up a temporal void as the repetition "of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is

of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority" ("Rhetoric" 207). Thus an allegorical passage that does not thematically address the issue of temporality, such as the description of Julie's garden in Rousseau's novel, will still articulate this temporal predicament. The sense of temporality as the void between the allegorical sign and the previous sign of which it is repetition is very much de Man's own. The idea is arguably derivable from Benjamin's work but this is not where Benjamin's emphasis lies in theorizing allegory as a form of historical expression.¹⁷ For Benjamin, one senses, it is the allegory's movement in time, its "successively progressing, dramatically mobile" quality as described by Johann Gorres, that accounts for its expression of the historical. (Although this is certainly not for Benjamin a march of progress in any qualitative sense). For de Man, on the other hand, the movement allegory presents on this level is only imaginary. "The fundamental structure of allegory reappears here in the tendency of the language toward narrative, the spreading out along the axis of an imaginary time in order to give duration to what is, in fact, simultaneous within the subject" ("Rhetoric" 225). De Man's revised position would seem to represent a resistance to the more thematic, tragic elements of Benjamin's theory of allegory. Similarly, as we shall see in our discussion of de Man's treatment of irony, de Man explicitly warns against the thematic interpretations of Heidegger. Benjamin's interpretation of allegory as expressive of an unremittingly negative historical experience is reworked by de Man through Heidegger. Allegory is simply expressive of the self's ontologically temporal predicament. Theoretically such a predicament is devoid of any qualitative

evaluations. Significantly, however, de Man, like Heidegger, expresses Dasein's putatively neutral temporal predicament in a language that continues to evoke pathos.

Finally, and perhaps most centrally, the messianic, recuperative aspect of Benjamin's theory of allegory is resisted by de Man. For Benjamin baroque allegory ultimately turns upon itself in an affirmative negation of the negation. Benjamin initially describes the process of allegory in its "arbitrary rule over things" as "the triumph of subjectivity" (*Origin* 233). De Man echoes this sentiment when he notes that the words of Rousseau's Julie expressing her "domination and control over nature (*'il n'y a rien là que je n'aie ordonné'*)" (BI 203), appropriately express the allegorical relation to nature as opposed to the attempted fusing together of nature and passion in a symbolic diction. As John McCole notes, however, the tenor of Benjamin's account as he describes the relationship of the allegorist to his object changes rapidly until ultimately in his fascinated degradation of the object, the allegorist is likened to a sadist (McCole 146). The end point of the allegorical process that negates its objects in making them into signs pointing to something else is a "frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins" (*Origin* 232). And this "reveal(s) the limit set upon allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality" (*Origin* 232). The pretensions of the allegorical to rule over such a world of ruins are now seen as completely empty, valueless. At the point that the allegorical has reached its limit, however, a radical turnabout is effected. If allegory "means precisely the non-existence of what it presents" than the dark fallen world

of the *Trauerspiel* must also be subject to this negation. Transitoriness and death become the allegory of its opposite--redemption.

And this is the essence of melancholy immersion: that its ultimate objects, in which it believes it can most fully secure for itself that which is vile, turn into allegories, and that these allegories *fill out and deny the void in which they are represented*, just as, ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection. (*Origin* 232-232 emphasis added)

This would appear to be the same kind of leap from language to faith that, as de Man argues in the second part of "The Rhetoric of Temporality," marks the end of Friedrich Schlegel's and Soren Kierkegaard's insight into the ironic.¹⁸ The negations of the allegorical become prefigurative of a future reconciliation, as does irony for the critics with whom de Man contends such as Jean Starobinski and Peter Szondi. In this respect it may not be so much a question of de Man "disagreeing" with this aspect of Benjamin's theory as simply resisting it in favour of staying firmly housed within language. An ultimate negation of the negation, if possible, would certainly be the end of allegory and thus be beyond the concerns of a philosophical tropology. Clearly, however, there is an ideological dimension to de Man's resistance and one that cannot be construed as simply reactionary.

If one contends, as seems to be the consensus amongst scholars of Benjamin, that his thinking on such central questions as history and allegory does not undergo a fundamental shift with his later engagements with Marxism, then the messianic strain of the early work on allegory is later placed on a worldly, historical plane. Millenarian destruction is substituted for revolutionary violence. The defence of all forms of

destructiveness as somehow clearing the ground for a utopian resurrection has of course dangerously nihilistic consequences. "The abundant fertility of Benjamin's historical imagination," Terry Eagleton writes,

is blighted by its catastrophism and apocalypticism; if for the human being in extreme danger history has been reduced to the fortuitous flashing up of an isolated image, there are others whose emancipation involves a less aestheticized, more sober and systematic enquiry into the nature of historical development. (*Ideology of the Aesthetic* 334)

De Man appears to be on the side of this "sober and systematic enquiry," in what he takes up and declines to take up from Benjamin's theory of allegory. The value of the theory, for de Man, lies in its power of negation over the false totalities of the symbol, totalities that are always ideological constructs ready made to serve specific political ends. The moment one posits an end to this process, however, one has in fact capitulated to some version of totality and while this is, perhaps, inevitable, de Man's work struggles to resist this compulsion.

The resistance in de Man to the tragic overtones in Benjamin's historic outlook is also potentially politically progressive. As various critics and writers such as Roland Barthes, Lucien Goldmann, Bertolt Brecht and Alain Robbe-Grillet have noted, the tragic outlook frequently upholds a bad status quo under the sign of necessity. Robbe-Grillet writes:

Wherever there is distance, separation, doubling, cleavage, there is the possibility of experiencing them as suffering, then of raising this suffering to the height of a sublime necessity. A path toward a metaphysical Beyond, this pseudo-necessity, is at the same time the closed door to a realistic future. Tragedy, if it consoles us today, forbids any solidier conquest tomorrow. Under the appearance of a perpetual motion, it actually petrifies the universe in a sonorous malediction. There can no longer be any question of seeking some remedy for our misfortune, once tragedy

convinces us to love it. (61)

Despite the fact that Benjamin distinguishes between *trauerspiel* and tragedy, much of this criticism could be levelled at the theory of allegory he expounds in this study. De Man's frequently voiced criticisms of theoretical systems relying upon some version of an apocalyptic temporality would seem to echo and reinforce Robbe-Grillet's position. Such a temporality, de Man notes in his *Gauss* lectures, "separates a totally inauthentic past from a totally enlightened present by means of a revelation that reduces the past to the ashes of sheer falsehood" (16). Thus such "apocalyptic systems" (23) in "degrad[ing] and bypass[ing] the constitutive power of time" (23) are incapable of imagining, in Robbe-Grillet's words, any "realistic future . . . some remedy for our misfortune."

One must ask, however, as I will in turn ask of de Man's theorization of the related trope of irony, about the ideology of such an unlimited and seemingly positionless resistance to totality. Does it in fact empty out of allegory the glimpse of revolutionary potential Benjamin saw in the trope's destructive fervour? Does de Man's view of the subject deny the kind of agency for which the allegorist's arbitrary rule over things is, for Benjamin, the model? One way to pose this question is to inquire about what is at stake in the shift from Benjamin's understanding of allegory as expressive of *history*, to de Man's understanding of allegory as expressive of *temporality*, or to say much the same thing, of the more fundamental historicity that makes any history possible.

On the one hand, the path to which de Man seems drawn is troubling and potentially reactionary. Lukács, in his well known gloss on

the Heideggerian thematic of temporality and historicity, stated that Heidegger's "'authentic' historicity is not distinguishable from ahistoricity" (21).¹⁹ Much the same criticism could be levelled at de Man. For de Man, the subject's realization of its authentically temporal predicament (its finitude or mortality) is ontological; it exists prior to any particular history. This knowledge, furthermore, is construed as an end in itself for the subject. While de Man is careful to avoid saying that this knowledge benefits the subject in any qualitative sense by allowing it to live a better life, the knowledge does allow the subject to glimpse the undeluded truth of its existence and this, however painful it might be, is accepted as the best one can achieve. In his *Gauss* lecture de Man goes so far as to imply that history is only significant in so far as it

awakens in us a true sense of our temporality by allowing for the interplay between achievement and dissolution, self-assertion and self-loss . . . History like childhood is what allows recollection to originate in a truly temporal perspective, not as a memory of a unity that never existed, but as the awareness, the remembrance of a precarious condition of falling that has never ceased to prevail. . . The imagination engenders hope and future not in the form of historical progress, nor in the form of an immortal life after death that would make human history unimportant, but as the persistent future possibility of retrospective reflection on its own decay. . . . [as] the persistent power of mind and language after nature and history have failed. (88-89)

Brimming with pathos, de Man's perspective here is individualistic and politically quietistic. History, in the stations of its inevitable decline, is placed in the service of a heightened self-reflective consciousness--albeit of a particularly limiting variety. De Man appears to condemn to failure in advance the possibility of any progressive collective political action in the world. Such world weariness is, perhaps, unsurprising in one from a

European mandarin caste. For de Man the history witnessed by age fifty included the degeneration into Stalinism of the socialism passionately supported by his uncle and mentor Heinrich de Man, the rise of Fascism, the Second World War, the Death Camps, and in his adopted America, a right wing ideological polarization and two wars abroad in the name of freedom and democracy.²⁰

In a certain respect de Man's turn away from the historical implications of allegory explored in Benjamin's *trauerspiel* study toward a concern with allegory's relation to the subject is consistent with Benjamin's observation in "Central Park" that in "the nineteenth century allegory left the surrounding world, in order to settle the inner world" (49). De Man's rejection of history, however, is founded in part upon a totalizing view of it that his own insights subvert. In one respect, to posit an originary historicity prior to any particular history is to resist such history as constituting a final ground. One sees history, rather, as a construct built upon and allowed by the originary historicity. De Man's statement that allegory "appears as a successive mode capable of engendering duration as the illusion of a continuity that it knows to be illusionary" ("Rhetoric" 226) articulates this view. His rather infamous concluding statement in "Literary History and Literary Modernity" that "the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions" (*Blindness* 165) supports a view of history as a construct dependent upon interpretation and rhetorical emplotment.

Such a resistance to history commonly understood as the rational

explanation for the continuous development from an earlier state of affairs to a later state of affairs, is on the one hand liberating and progressive when one considers the various "meta-histories" (in Hayden White's terminology) of modernity propounded by Christianity, liberalism, Marxism and the varieties of fascism. Such histories are in a certain respect themselves auratic, symbolic constructs in which origin and *telos* are made seamlessly one. They can be, and are, used to rationalize conditions of domination by a particular class and or race by reference to "the larger picture" of where things started and where they will end up. Liberal history forms, perhaps, the most predominant example for the last several hundred years. The putative march toward worldwide democracies, individual rights and freedom, perpetually reproduces an effectively static state of domination by an increasingly wealthy and increasingly disproportionate caste of monied and propertied individuals. History, de Man notes, cannot as it would often claim to do, "provide the memory of a unity," because such a unity "never existed" (*Gauss* 88).

Such histories, as de Man states in "The Concept of Irony," present "history as hypostasis" (184). They are not historical enough, and to puncture their auratic closure with the shock of a more originary historicity is to invite one to critique the kinds of claims they make and the ideological ends for which they make them--although here I am suggesting a possibility opened up by de Man's discourse rather than claiming that such a move is a necessary consequence of his position. The destruction of any totalizing view of history within such a perspective would also invite the construction of ideologically positioned counter-

histories. Like allegory, such histories might need to rely for their effectiveness, as I have argued Schlegel's account of nation and national character does and as I will show Richard Rorty's promotion of narrative does, on the rhetorical construction of the "illusion of a continuity that it knows to be illusionary" ("Rhetoric" 226).

In the shift from history to temporality in de Man's reworking of Benjamin's theory of allegory there is, then, no necessity for the movement toward the quietistic and individualistic stance toward which de Man, contra Benjamin, appears drawn--another quite different interpretation is open to the dialectical reader. Our reading of de Man's discussion of irony will both challenge and deepen this interpretation. On one level irony for de Man names the process whereby in an escalating act of self-reflection the subject becomes increasingly isolated from the world, even from its own body. On another level, however, such an "unravelling of the self" as de Man describes the ironic process, demonstrates the self's constitutively social nature.

3. Irony and Heidegger

De Man segues into his discussion of irony, the second section of the "Rhetoric of Temporality," by noting "the implicit and rather enigmatic link between allegory and irony which runs through the history of rhetoric" (208). The link may, indeed, be enigmatic but the rhetorical tradition is fully *explicit* about there being such a relation. Quintillian establishes the tradition of including irony as a species of allegory: "Allegory (which in latin they call *inversio*) shows one thing in words and

another in its sense, or even the contrary. . . in that type where contraries are shown, we have irony (called *illusio*)" (qtd in Dane 49). Medieval grammarians such as Isidore, Donatus, and Pompeius all follow Quintillian in grouping irony amongst the several types of allegory (Dane 55, 64).²¹ De Man notes, as Quintillian does, that there is certainly

a structure shared by irony and allegory in that, in both cases, the relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous, involving an extraneous principle that determines the point and the manner at and in which the relationship is articulated. In both cases, the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning, and has for its function the thematization of this difference. But this important structural aspect may well be a description of figural language in general; it clearly lacks discriminatory precision. ("Rhetoric" 209)

De Man, then, implicitly refers to the traditional association between irony and allegory and explicitly rejects it as an inadequate theorization of their relation. Significantly, however, de Man does not consider the rhetorical tradition's distinction that in allegory the sign points to an *analogous* sense whereas in irony the sign points to an *opposing* sense. The idea that a sign and previous sign could ever coincide to form a unified meaning on two levels, despite the reader or writer's desire that it do so, is already rejected in the theorization of allegory in the essay's first section. In contradistinction, then, to a tradition that implicitly understands allegory and irony in terms of, respectively, identity and difference, de Man brings allegory and irony closer together as equally negative modes. "Allegory and irony" de Man argues, "are . . . linked in their common discovery of a truly temporal predicament" ("Rhetoric" 222). Irony

reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no

totality. . . . The temporal void that it reveals is the same void we encountered when we found allegory always implying an unreachable anteriority. ("Rhetoric" 222)

Allegory and irony "are also linked in their common demystification of an organic world postulated in a symbolic mode of analogical correspondences or in a mimetic mode of representation in which fiction and reality could coincide" ("Rhetoric" 222).

The most fundamental distinction between the two tropes is that allegory is a diachronic structure while "irony is a synchronic structure" (226). Allegory, as in the Lucy poem discussed by de Man, "tends toward narrative" (225): "first there was error, then the death occurred, and now an eternal insight into the rocky barrenness of the human predicament prevails" (225). In irony, by contrast, the same realization is represented as taking place instantaneously within the subject. In this respect irony might be regarded as the more authentic of the two modes. Allegory provides an "ideal self-created temporality" (225). Its representation of a movement from error to wisdom within a "unified self" (224) is "not possible within the actual temporality of experience" (225). Irony on the other hand "comes closer to the pattern of factual experience and recaptures some of the facticity of human existence as a succession of isolated moments lived by a divided self" (226). De Man, however, had earlier suggested that in certain non-ironic writers such as Wordsworth and Hölderlin, allegory might be viewed as "the overcoming of irony" (223) in a higher wisdom. Thus he admits of the temptation "to play [the two modes] off against each other and to attach value judgements to each, as if one were intrinsically superior to the other" but cautions that "both

attitudes are in error. The knowledge derived from both modes is *essentially the same*" (226 emphasis added). The "two modes, for all their profound distinctions in mood and structure, are the two faces of the same fundamental experience of time" (226). One could perhaps say that for de Man irony comes closer to the facticity of experience lived by the divided self, but allegory both knows this truth and knows it will inevitably find expression in the narrative of a unified self. The two modes, in terms of their respective knowledge and demystifying power, are alike. Irony momentarily unveils the truth and must ceaselessly undercut itself to prevent this truth from being covered over; allegory shows how the truth is simultaneously veiled and unveiled.

The underlying similarity of allegory and irony for de Man indicates that in my lengthy digression into allegory and ideology in de Man's reworking of Benjamin I have really not strayed from my central concern with irony. Taking up Benjamin's dictum that "even irony . . . [is a] variant of the allegorical" (*Origin* 188), de Man is really talking about two ways of approaching the same truth--the subject's authentically temporal predicament. I need now closely consider the ideological implications of de Man's theorization of irony with its equally unstated reworking of Heidegger.

In discussing irony, de Man contends, one can no longer use the kind of historical terminology relied upon when he noted the historical predominance of a symbolic over an allegorical diction.

In the case of irony one has to start out from the structure of the trope itself, taking one's cue from texts that are de-mystified and, to a large extent, themselves ironical. For that manner, the target of their irony is

very often the claim to speak about human matters as if they were facts of history. It is a historical fact that irony becomes increasingly conscious of itself in the course of demonstrating the impossibility of our being historical. In speaking of irony we are dealing not with the history of an error but with a problem that exists within the self. ("Rhetoric" 211)

Since allegory constructs the illusion of a diachronic continuity it is permissible to discuss it in the historical terms intrinsic to its own mode. Irony, on the other hand, is fully destructive of even such an illusion and thus an historical perspective will falsify the understanding of the term. De Man's perspective here strongly indicates the primacy he wishes to lend to rhetoric. History appears, and disappears, as simply an effect of its operations. While de Man had in the essay's first section relied upon a minimal historical narrative of sorts when he "tried to show that the term 'symbol' had in fact been substituted for that of 'allegory' in an act of ontological bad faith" (211), we have already noted how he ontologized allegory, the trope that for Benjamin enjoyed a privileged access to historical expression. De Man now announces that even such a minimal reliance upon history is unnecessary. This would seem to mark in part the shift from Benjamin to Heidegger.

De Man's attempt to jettison history at this point, however, gives rise to certain difficulties and inconsistencies within his argument as a whole. The logic of de Man's argument that allegory and irony are "the two faces of the same fundamental experience of time" (226) and that rhetoric is more originary than history, would suggest that allegory should also be historically unchanging. Yet there is a considerable tension in the essay between the assertion that the allegory upon which he is elaborating is the

same as that from earlier periods and the assertion that it is historically specific. On the one hand de Man notes that we are dealing "with the rediscovery of an allegorical tradition" (205), and that the apparent description of locale is "controlled by 'a traditional and inherited typology,' exactly as in the case of the poems from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (206). De Man, however, then introduces an historically specific distinction.

The typology is no longer the same and . . . the poet, sometimes after long and difficult inner struggle, had to renounce the seductiveness and the poetic resources of a symbolic diction. . . The secularized thought of the pre-romantic period *no longer allows* a transcendence of the antinomies between the created world and the act of creation by means of a positive recourse to the notion of divine will; the failure of the attempt to conceive of a language that would be symbolical as well as allegorical, the suppression, in the allegory, of the analogical and anagogical levels, is one of the ways in which this impossibility becomes manifest. (206-07 emphasis added)

De Man here suggests an historical fracturing of a unified worldview, such as the Christian cosmogony, that had allowed allegory to function, as in *The Divine Comedy*, coherently and convincingly. One could perhaps argue for the consistency of de Man's position by maintaining that the difference between these earlier and later allegorical modes are not structural but simply a question of content, of a changing typology and of a movement (much as Benjamin suggests) from the outward to the inward. In this respect the later allegorical mode would simply foreground what was always already the impossibility of a sign and an anterior sign coinciding. The allegory de Man speaks of "renounce[s] the nostalgia and the desire to coincide" (207), not the coincidence itself. Yet, if so, why does de Man speak of a "no longer"? Given the very limited role de Man lends history

vis-à-vis rhetorical tropes in his opening discussion of irony, it is difficult in any event to see how history could effect any qualitative changes upon their operations, structural or otherwise. De Man will also refer to "our sense of the term allegorical" (223), and to "what is here being referred to as 'allegorical' poetry" (223), reinforcing the impression of an historically specific allegory. If de Man can suggest an historically shifting allegory why is this inconceivable for irony when he contends that both tropes are at bottom the same? History, one suspects, might be responsible for creating its own irony in de Man's text by "demonstrating the impossibility of our being [a]-historical."²²

One potentially productive take on de Man's position would be to say that just as for Althusser "on the one hand ideologies have a history of their own . . . and on the other ideology in general has no history . . . ideology is eternal" (86), so too for de Man ironies have a history but irony in general does not; it is likewise eternal. Thus human affairs will never reach a permanent non-ideological, non-ironic state of reconciliation. Ideology will continuously close over contradictions in human affairs and irony (amongst other things) will disrupt that closure. This would not necessarily condemn us to a bad status quo but would simply deny any end to the vicissitudes of human history. But both the uses and the interpretations of irony that I am examining in this thesis will always partake of various histories of ironies; there can be no final determination of "irony in general." Part of my task in examining de Man's discussion of irony will be to establish the historical nature of his own theorization of the trope.

De Man's understanding of irony arises most directly out of an explicit engagement with Baudelaire's essay "On The Essence of Laughter," as well as with certain key statements by Friedrich Schlegel. As with the earlier implicit engagement with Benjamin, however, these texts are read within a Heideggerian problematic that significantly shapes de Man's discussion. Underlying and informing de Man's discussion of irony (as it had done with his discussion of allegory) is Heidegger's fundamental precept that humans, in their everyday existence, understand their own being (Dasein) inauthentically. This inauthenticity arises from the covering over, fleeing from, or forgetting of the true nature of their being. For Heidegger, paradoxically, the true nature of Dasein is that it has no fixed immutable nature. Dasein is in essence a nothingness, a gap or hole in Being that we attempt to fill with self-interpretation. In effect Dasein *is* simply such self-interpretation. "Its ownmost being is such," Heidegger writes of Dasein, "that it has an understanding of that being, and already maintains itself in each case in a certain interpretedness of its being" (*Being* 36).

The authentic realization of Dasein as such a nothingness, however, is persistently covered over by Dasein. In order to hide the inessentiality of Dasein, Dasein needs to interpret itself as having a fixed and self-sufficient nature such as it believes it sees in the world of objects around it. "Dasein itself . . . gets its ontological understanding of itself in the first instance from those entities which itself is not but which it encounters 'within' its world, and from the Being which they possess" (*Being* 85). The Cartesian ontology underlying most scientific enquiry,

wherein human consciousness, like the universe as a whole, is understood in terms of the lawlike operations of elements such as atoms or sense data, is perhaps the most strongly entrenched attempt to comprehend Dasein in such an inauthentic manner.

Heidegger wavers between being critical of such an "inauthentic" cover-up (largely in Division II of *Being and Time*) and viewing it more neutrally as a structurally necessary part of everyday existence. On the one hand, to elide the distinction between Dasein and natural being is to pass over what makes our being unique and significant. Dasein thereby substitutes death--the inert thing-like quality of objects--for the groundless inessentiality it seeks to overcome. On the other hand, the perpetual realization of Dasein's nothingness could only lead to paralysis and even madness. In order to live in the world at all, Dasein must take an interpretive stand on what it positively is and on what matters to it.

One tempting way to seek to resolve this contradiction between a delusive but necessary inauthenticity is to conceive of the moments in which Dasein is grasped authentically as therapeutic for Dasein. According to this view, in gaining true knowledge of its predicament, Dasein is somehow strengthened and sustained. Heidegger, as Hubert Dreyfus notes, "claims that the realization that nothing is grounded and that there are no guidelines for living gives Dasein increased openness, tenacity, and even gaiety" (38). In de Man, however, we will see a marked resistance to any such recuperation of authenticity as therapy. The resistance parallels in certain respects de Man's refusal of the ultimate denegation that concludes Benjamin's discussion of the baroque allegory.

From this very broad schematic outline of Heidegger's concerns one can nonetheless begin to appreciate how irony would assume a central position in de Man's attempt to theorize an "intentional rhetoric" ("Rhetoric" 188) along Heideggerian lines. In the first place if irony is, as de Man would maintain along with Kierkegaard, "infinite, absolute negativity" (Kierkegaard 26), then it is closely allied with the inessentiality of authentic Dasein. In "What is Metaphysics?" Heidegger "assert[s] that the nothing is more original than the 'not' and negation" (99), but also that negation "compellingly" "testifies to the constant and widespread though distorted revelation of the nothing in our existence" (107). Heidegger's insistence that negation can testify to the nothing without, so to speak, being it, undoubtedly forms the basis for de Man's insistence that irony can know inauthenticity without itself constituting an authentic mode of knowledge (BI 214). In the second place, the kind of irony (frequently named a "Romantic irony" but which de Man appears to equate with irony as such) that de Man refers to after Schlegel as an endless "dialectic of self-destruction and self-invention" (220), would appear to foreground the process of self-interpretation that for Heidegger is constitutive of Dasein. Given irony's seeming affinity to the problematic of Dasein, I will examine in closer detail three Heideggerian themes taken up and transformed in de Man's theorization irony: *anxiety*, *equipmental breakdown*, and *falling*.

The Heideggerian quality of de Man's theorization of irony is evident in its very tone, in its rather darkly foreboding quality. As Dominick LaCapra has noted, de Manian irony "seems able to invoke a

rictus but never a belly laugh" (117). The ironic disjunction, de Man confirms, "is by no means a reassuring and serene process, despite the fact that it involves laughter" (BI 214). De Man's theory is akin to Baudelaire's "On the Essence of Laughter," a work in which humour is seen as aggressive and destructive. The peculiarly dark colouration de Man applies to his discussion of irony is related to, although a significant adaptation of, Heidegger's notion of anxiety.

In *Being and Time* and "What is Metaphysics?" Heidegger searches for a mood that will disclose the nothingness constitutive of Dasein. From his reading of Kierkegaard (see Dreyfus 176) Heidegger takes up "the fundamental mood of anxiety" ("Metaphysics" 103). "Anxiety reveals the nothing" ("Metaphysics" 103). Heidegger conceives of anxiety as a peculiar kind of paralysis that momentarily but repeatedly creeps over us for no determinant reason. It is thus distinct from fear which has a definite object. In anxiety the everyday world within which Dasein conducts and understands itself slips away; "the world has the character of *completely lacking significance*" (*Being* 231 emphasis added). Anxiety is thus an experience of the limit of Dasein, of the nothingness which both annihilates Dasein and provides the opening within which Dasein may appear at all. "Without the original revelation of the nothing," Heidegger asserts, "no selfhood and no freedom" ("Metaphysics" 106). In Heidegger's reference to anxiety as a disclosure of a *complete lack of significance* one can glimpse the possibility of describing the experience as a linguistic predicament. De Man begins to do this in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" and will do it explicitly in the later "Concept of Irony" in which irony is described as

disclosing "the total arbitrariness" (181) of language.

Irony for de Man is clearly an analogous expression within language of this same limit of Dasein. With irony, de Man notes, "the entire texture of the self is unravelled and comes apart" (215). Anxiety, however, does not properly characterize irony's quality. As Heidegger writes: "anxiety robs us of speech . . . [and] a negating assertion remains foreign to anxiety as such . . ." ("Metaphysics" 103, 104). De Man (along with Michel Foucault in a more Heideggerian phase²³) names this limit madness and sees its place in language as the realm of the ironic: "absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection of madness from the inside of madness itself" (BI 216). Whereas for Heidegger anxiety is Dasein's limit as silence, for de Man madness is Dasein's limit as language.

If "anxiety reveals the nothing," broken equipment (such as the broken hammer) reveals what Heidegger calls "the worldhood of the world" (*Being* 91). "Worldhood," "worldliness," and "world" are overlapping concepts Heidegger employs in his destruction of the subject-object model of representation that, as he argued, underlies western metaphysics and obscures the authentic comprehension of Dasein.²⁴ To get our thinking on the right path we must not, Heidegger maintains, begin from the premise of an isolated subject seeking to gain knowledge in the form of an adequate proposition or representation of an equally isolated object. Everyday Dasein does not find itself confronted with such isolated "occurrent" objects which it must contemplate abstractly to comprehend. Dasein, rather, confronts such objects within a world in which they have

been already endowed with significance and purpose. Dasein is "being-in-the-world." To this extent objects in the world have more the quality of being "ready to hand" as already meaningful pieces of equipment to be put to certain predetermined uses, than they have the quality of being "present at hand" as isolated indeterminate objects.

One way in which the worldhood of objects is made manifest is when a tool breaks down or somehow fails to do its job. Prior to such an occurrence Dasein would have no occasion to reflect upon this object but would simply continue to use it for its predetermined purpose. In the equipmental breakdown, however, such as an inadequate screwdriver, one is forced to stop and reflect upon the screwdriver's purpose, to consider why it is inadequate to the task at hand and what sort of screwdriver or other tool would better accomplish the job. Such breakdowns then bring to light the relational wholes (in this case carpentry) within which objects and the task at hand are given significance.

But when an assignment has *been disturbed*--when something is unusable for some purpose--then the assignment becomes explicit When an assignment has been thus circumspectively aroused, we catch sight of the "towards this" itself, and along with it everything connected with the work--the whole 'workshop' as that wherein concern always dwells. The context of equipment is lit up, not as something never seen before, but as a totality constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection. Within this totality, however, the world announces itself. (*Being* 105)

Let us note here in passing that Heidegger's position implies the constitutively non-isolated social and historical basis of the self. The individual is not the basis for itself as is the isolated self-determining subject of a liberal philosophical tradition (Macpherson 3 and passim) but

is, rather, "thrown into being," preceded by social and historical structures of significance that determine its ways of being, as well as its comprehension of reality in the most minute detail. I will later need to consider how in his discussion of irony de Man (like Heidegger) both assumes and resists the implications of this fundamental sociality.

De Man's discussion of Baudelaire's "On the Essence of Laughter," which commences his detailed consideration of irony, is framed in terms that strongly recall Heidegger's discussion of equipmental breakdown in *Being and Time*. De Man fastens upon *dédoublement* (dividing or splitting in two) as constituting Baudelaire's central insight into the ironic. *Dédoublement* is "the characteristic that sets apart a reflective activity such as that of the philosopher, from the activity of the ordinary self caught in everyday concerns" ("Rhetoric" 212). Baudelaire distinguishes between a simple, intersubjective form of comedy and the *comique absolu* that de Man describes as irony. The simplest way to grasp the notion of *dédoublement* is to begin with the former.

A man falls in the street. In general this event will not be experienced as comic by the man himself, the object of the fall, but by a spectator, an upright individual who feels affirmed in his or her superiority over the fallen man. "Within the realm of intersubjectivity," de Man writes, "one would indeed speak of difference in terms of the superiority of one individual over another, with all the implications of will to power, of violence, and possession which come into play when a person is laughing at someone else--including the will to educate and improve" (212). The purview of the intersubjective comic would appear to include

much that has been written on irony: what Wayne Booth describes as "stable irony" (6), Fredrick Garber as "classical irony" (120), D.C. Muecke as "specific irony" (120), and Alan Wilde as "pre-modernist" "mediate irony" (9, 10). What each of these terms in effect refers to is a gap between appearance and underlying truth. In an intersubjective relation one individual or more (reader and implied author for example) will possess the knowledge of this truth of which another individual (a certain character in a novel say) is ignorant. The knowledge of this truth to which the deluded individual may or may not be educated supports a stable norm of values held by the reader and the implied author. For de Man, however, the intersubjective comic is not properly described as ironic at all. The recuperation it implies between truth and appearance, reality and fiction, turns away from the ironic mode. De Man's shorthanded dismissal of so much of what has been considered to constitute irony could well be regarded as arbitrary and illegitimate or simply unhelpful. Our concern, however, will be to consider not only the ideological implications of this attempted dismissal of the intersubjective realm within the ironic, but also whether such a dismissal is achievable within the terms that de Man sets out for discussion.

Irony in de Man's reading of Baudelaire is the realm of the *comique absolu*. The one who falls will not experience his predicament as cause for laughter unless, Baudelaire writes, "he is a philosopher, a man who has acquired by habit the power to double himself rapidly and to witness as a disinterested spectator phenomena involving his own ego" (trans LaCapra. 117). This rapid doubling of the self that permits the

philosopher to laugh at his own predicament approaches even in this crudest of situations, the *comique absolu*. Through this doubling we have, rather than a relation between two or more individuals, a relation within one subject between a previously mystified self and a subsequently (though only momentarily) demystified self--one who recognizes the essential split between the self and "the non-human world" (213).

Following Heidegger, de Man describes this linguistic disjunction and the reflection it occasions in terms of an equipmental breakdown in the everyday working of language. For the philosopher and the poet

language is their material, just as leather is the material for the cobbler or wood is that of the carpenter. In everyday, common existence, this is not how language usually operates, there it functions much more as does the cobbler's or the carpenter's hammer, not as the material itself, but as a tool by means of which the heterogeneous material of experience is mor-or-less adequately made to fit. (213)

For Heidegger, as we have seen, the broken tool illuminates the culturally determinate relational structures that constitute Dasein's world. Irony, as a linguistic sign with its thematizing of the gap between signifier and signified, is in essence a broken tool, one that illuminates one such particularly significant relational structure--language.

Equipmental disturbance, I must also point out, explains for Heidegger one way in which objects become isolated from their equipmental contexts in the first place. That is, it explains how they "occur" to us as detached *things* that we may then reflect upon as equally detached subjects. In this sense as well Heidegger is concerned to show that the epistemological relation of subject and object is not primary, but assumes its significance only against a background of involved, worldly activity.

Thus if a hammer is "too heavy" for a particular assignment one is made suddenly aware of this heaviness as a material property of the hammer conceived now as an isolated object. Thus equipmental disturbance is a means by which the *materiality* of objects is made available for circumspection (see Dreyfus 70-83). Likewise for de Man, as we see in the above passage, irony is a disturbance that reveals the materiality of language.²⁵

Language, as de Man suggest, is not simply "one entity among others" ("Rhetoric" 213) but enjoys a privileged position both in the constitution and disclosure of world. Following his discussion of equipmental breakdown in *Being and Time* Heidegger turns to a consideration of signs (*Being* 107). While Heidegger is not considering specifically linguistic signs his discussion is certainly applicable to such an analysis. The broken tool lights up only very context-specific equipmental totalities. In signs Heidegger seeks to discover a "broader and firmer . . . phenomenal basis on which the world-phenomenon may be laid bare" (*Being* 107). By their nature signs do the work of making equipmental totalities conspicuous in the fashion that happens only occasionally and accidentally in equipmental disturbances. Thus the flashing left turn signal on an automobile is on the one hand one piece of equipment amongst others (the steering wheel, the road) in the equipmental totality of driving. At the same time, however, it serves to make this totality conspicuous in a manner that would not occur if one were, say, proceeding straight ahead away from any intersection and thus not employing the turn signal. The car poised at an intersection signalling left

indicates not only the direction it will go but, hopefully, that it will yield to through traffic, either until such traffic has cleared or until the traffic light turns yellow. Thus it explicitly brings to light the complex network of rules that are always operative in driving.

A sign is not a Thing which stands for another Thing in the relationship of indicating; it is rather an item of equipment which explicitly raises a totality of equipment into our circumspection so that together with it the worldly character of the ready to hand announces itself. (*Being* 110-11)

Heidegger's view of the sign here fits well with de Man's understanding of the ironic sign as a disturbance in the everyday referential function of language that brings language as a system into view.

Significantly, in examining various kinds of signs and how they free up the world for circumspection, Heidegger passingly considers the case of an opaque ambiguous sign that might be seen as a kind of prototype for de Man's ironic sign. One might, for example, tie a knot in a handkerchief as a sign reminding oneself of several things that need to be accomplished in a day: the groceries, the laundry, a meeting with a colleague, a lecture, and a dinner date. But of course, as Heidegger notes,

the wider the extent to which [the sign] can indicate, the narrower its intelligibility and its usefulness. Not only is it, for the most part, ready to hand as a sign only for the person who 'establishes' it, but it can even become inaccessible to him, so that another sign is needed if the first is to be used circumspectively at all. (*Being* 112)

But for Heidegger, while such referential ambiguity may undermine the sign's usefulness as equipment, it only enhances the sign's conspicuousness, its purely sign-like character. "So when the knot cannot be used as a sign it does not lose its sign character, but it acquires the

disturbing obtrusiveness of something most closely ready-to-hand" (112). Of such a sign one might only recall that it was supposed to be a sign for something. And anyone else stumbling across such a knotted handkerchief might guess that it is a sign but could have no idea of what it is a sign. Thus it refers to nothing so much as sign making itself, meaningfulness as such, and to this extent it reveals Dasein's worldliness all the more fundamentally. When de Man writes that irony "dissolves in the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from its meaning"²⁶ (BI 222), one can conceive of it as an opaque indeterminate sign in a sense similar to Heidegger's. Following Heidegger, then, we will suggest in our conclusion such a linguistic process cannot be conceived as isolating the self but, rather, revealing its constitutive worldliness.

In Heidegger's movement from equipmental disturbance, to signs, to the equipmental breakdown in the sign there is an ascending order toward "a broader and firmer . . . phenomenal basis on which the world-phenomenon may be laid bare" (*Being* 107). The linguistic sign is broader and more fundamental still than the context specific non-linguistic signs Heidegger examines in this section. "As an existential state in which Dasein is disclosed" Heidegger writes further on in *Being and Time* "discourse is constitutive for Dasein's existence" (204).²⁷ Thus irony as the equipmental breakdown in the linguistic sign provides an opening within which the relational system of language is made open for circumspection. In this reflective circumspection Dasein grasps that it is constituted in language. De Man writes:

The reflective disjunction not only occurs *by means of* language as a privileged category, but it transfers the

self out of the empirical world into a world constituted out of, and in, language--a language that it finds in the world like one entity among others, but that remains unique in being the only entity by means of which it can differentiate itself from the world. Language thus conceived divides the subject into an empirical self, immersed in the world and a self that becomes like a sign in its attempt at differentiation and self-definition. ("Rhetoric" 213)

De Man's reference to the self being "transferred" from the empirical to the linguistic world is somewhat misleading. Indeed one suspects that de Man is either blinded to the full implications of his argument in so far as it works out of Heidegger's notion of equipmental breakdown or else (in a not uncharacteristic fashion) he has done some deliberate hermeneutic violence to this idea. For Heidegger at least, what the equipmental breakdown allows one to glimpse are the relational structures constitutive of the "world" (in Heidegger's sense of Dasein's already meaningful dwelling) *already* in place and simply covered over in everyday Dasein. In this respect, then, the world and the self would have already been constituted in language. De Man's reference to "the language-determined man . . . laughing at a mistaken, mystified assumption he was making about himself" (BI 214) seems to support this view. In this respect, however, it becomes difficult to see how de Man can posit, as we will examine in detail below, an unbridgeable gap between the "language determined" self and the "world-bound" self, as if the latter actually could have existed outside of language. Furthermore, if the equipmental breakdown in Heidegger's thought allows Dasein to glimpse the relational structures constitutive of its world, on what basis does de Man make such a disturbance in referential language the occasion for transferring the self out of the

intersubjective realm into one of increasing individuation and isolation? It would appear, on the contrary, that such an unravelling of the self into larger systems such as language would reveal its inextricably intersubjective texture.

De Man finds "more important still" than Baudelaire's notion of *dédoublement* (which as we have seen de Man reads in terms of an equipmental disturbance) the fact that for Baudelaire "the division of the subject into a multiple consciousness takes place in immediate connection with a fall" (BI 213). In de Man's emphasis upon the fall one again notes the presence of Heidegger, whose philosophy articulates a secularized notion of the fall. "Falling" as an existential structure is Heidegger's term for the way Dasein is by its very nature drawn away from its primordial sense of what it is. "Falling-away," Heidegger writes in *History of the Concept of Time* "is a kind of falling constitutive of Dasein itself insofar as it is Being-in-the-world" (282). Heidegger elaborates upon several versions of such a fall. Of these, two are of particular significance in our context. The first, as I have already suggested, is a kind of unselfconscious reflexivity (contrasting the selfconscious reflexivity of irony) whereby Dasein reads back onto itself the being of the entities with which it deals, thus closing itself off by understanding itself in terms of occurrent objects. The second, relatedly, is the falling away produced in everyday language.

The mystified self in de Man's reading of Baudelaire is in precisely such a fallen state in this first sense. "In a false feeling of pride the self has substituted, in its relationship to nature, an intersubjective feeling (of

superiority) for the knowledge of a difference" ("Rhetoric" 214). In feeling superior the self has understood itself in the same terms as the objective world. In a physical fall, however, one literally experiences one's body as an object--as a "dead weight" connecting with the ground according to the law of gravity. "The Fall, in the literal as well as the theological sense, reminds him of the purely instrumental, reified character of his relationship to nature" ("Rhetoric" 214). In thus momentarily experiencing one's body as an occurrent object one recognizes the essential discontinuity between the objective world and the self. This is a fall, then, that brings home one's prior fallenness. This momentary realization represents a more authentic relation to one's being seen now, in its essential nullity and temporality. A certain reflexivity in our everyday coping with things leads to a distorted interpretation of Dasein. An opposing reflexivity in language (named irony) can provide us with a momentarily undistorted view. If Heidegger describes the inevitable process of everyday inauthentic Dasein as a *falling away* from authentic Dasein, then de Man would seem to understand irony as a *falling toward* this realization. The inevitable oscillation between these two movements--like some inflatable punching doll rocking backwards and forwards--would be simply another spatial metaphor to describe the ironic process that de Man conceptualizes, after Schlegel, in terms of a spiralling escalation.

The second aspect of falling significant for de Man's discussion of irony is that produced in everyday language characterized by Heidegger as "idle talk [*Gerede*]" (*Being* 211). Everyday language closes off the possibilities open to Dasein for grasping its being authentically. "In

language," Heidegger writes, ". . . there is hidden a way in which the understanding of Dasein has been interpreted" (*Being* 211). Thus even in the most rigorous and exacting language Dasein is always already cut off from a primordial relation to Being and to its own being. In idle talk the passing along of conventional understanding and commonplace wisdom in which everything is already understood further exacerbates Dasein's uprootedness. "Idle talk is constituted by just such gossiping and passing the word along--a process by which its initial lack of grounds to stand on becomes aggravated to complete groundlessness" (*Being* 212). Although idle talk has this uprooting effect, given "the obviousness and self-assurance of the average ways in which things have been interpreted . . . the uncanniness of this floating remains hidden from [Dasein] under . . . their protecting shelter" (*Being* 214). One might conceive of Heidegger's idle talk, then, as a kind of naively referential language, a language which everyone unreflectively assumes matches up with reality. Thus when de Man, as we have seen, conceives of irony in terms of a breakdown in everyday referential language, we may also understand him to be referring to a process which destroys this "protecting shelter"--the illusion of a stable identity of consciousness and nature passed along by such idle talk.

Heidegger's critique of the ossified commonsense interpretations of the self and the world unconsciously passed along and further entrenched in everyday language approaches a critique of ideology that we can in turn apply to de Man's theorization of irony.²⁸ In terms strongly invoking ideological critique, Heidegger describes the fallen condition produced in everyday language as "tempting," "tranquillizing" and yet "alienating"

(*Being* 222). Although Heidegger maintains that his concerns are ontological and "far removed from any moralizing critique of everyday Dasein" (*Being* 211), his own language belies this claim. What he is attempting to emphasize in distancing himself from a moralizing critique is that there is, much in Louis Althusser's sense, no outside of ideology.

This everyday way in which things have been interpreted is one into which Dasein has grown in the first instance, with never a possibility of extrication. In it, out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed. (*Being* 213)

Yet as Heidegger here suggests, this realization need not entail a passive acquiescence to the dominant ideology. The realization of how deeply entrenched one is within such an ideology may be the condition of the possibility of working against it to produce some less "tranquillizing" and "alienating" forms of ideology. But while Heidegger's work would seem to open up this path of ideological critique, in terms of suggesting any realizable social and political alternative to the alienating falling of the "They" (Heidegger's shorthand for the social totality outside the individual) his own philosophy does not follow this path.

The main effect of Heidegger's ontologizing of Dasein's fall is to make it permanent. There is a profound ambivalence toward the social in Heidegger's thought whereby he indicates on the one hand how constitutively social Dasein is, and yet on the other hand makes this the root of the problem. Having indicated how thoroughly Dasein is enmeshed in society right down to its very understanding of reality, Heidegger asserts: "Nor has it been understood that understanding itself is a potentiality-for-Being which must be made free in one's *ownmost* Dasein

alone" (*Being* 222). In the search for some aspect of existence that would transcend the "they" and belong uniquely to the individual, Heidegger, as is well known, seizes upon death.

In Stendhal's *The Scarlet and the Black* one of the central characters, Mathilde de la Mole, remarks to herself that of all the gentlemen at an evening's ball the only one who stands out as a true individual is Count Altimara, a political exile under sentence of death in his native Spain. He is thus singled out because a sentence of death is "the only thing that can't be bought" (298). In Mathilde's musings Stendhal anticipates Heidegger's thematic of being-toward-death. Heidegger privileges death because it appears to him to be that which is absolutely one's own, that which as Adorno notes "is supposed to be absolutely removed from the universal exchange relationship . . . which he sublimates in the They" (*Jargon* 152). What Heidegger, however, "does not realize," Adorno contends, is "that he remains caught up in the same fated cycle as the exchange relationship Insofar as death is absolutely alien to the subject, it is the model of reification. Only ideology praises it as a cure for exchange" (152). De Man's theorization of irony is on the one hand an attempt to resist certain of the more obvious reifications in Heidegger's thought. We must now focus our analysis on the extent to which he is successful in this attempt. Thoroughly enmeshed as it is within the Heideggerian problematic, de Man's discussion of irony inherits certain of its contradictions and ambivalences. Irony in de Man's figuration both resists ideological closure and is itself an ideology that seeks to transcend the social, intersubjective realm.

4. Demystification, Transcendence, and Intersubjectivity

As a resistance to ideological closure irony, like allegory, demystifies "an organic world postulated in a symbolic mode of analogical correspondences or in a mimetic mode of representation in which fiction and reality could coincide" ("Rhetoric" 213). That de Man conceived of such demystification in explicitly political terms is made manifest in certain scattered statements throughout his career. "Montaigne and Transcendence" published in *Les Temps Moderne* in 1953 is of particular significance for its treatment of Montaigne's "tranquil irony" (11). To a considerable extent de Man conceives of Montaigne's irony in terms consistent with his later elaboration of the trope in "The Rhetoric of Temporality." Irony is already seen here in terms of a self-division and self-reflection upon that division.

Between the living Montaigne, whom a corn on the foot renders inaccessible, and the Montaigne who notes the absurdity of his inconsistency [sic], there is a distinction: the former remains an object for the latter's reflection; he imposes his law on this reflection down to its last details; and he strips it of any force of consistency and absolute truth, but not of its reflecting character. (7-8)

De Man's representation of Montaigne's irony in terms of the transcendence of an Husserlian reflection is an explicit critique of existentialist appropriations of Montaigne. "Our contemporaries who vaunt the proposition that existence precedes essence claim Montaigne as one of their party" (3). For the Sartreans, Montaigne appeared to be an existentialist *avant la lettre*, a writer who made the rejection of transcendence his first principle and de Man wishes to refute this assertion. In the era of the politically *engagé* French intellectual, however, de Man clearly feels he must answer for the apparent political quietism of his representation of Montaigne as a

writer predominantly engaged in detached reflection. De Man 's comments provide some essential insight into his conception of the ideology of irony.

Montaigne's irony, de Man asserts, "make(s) a patient inventory of the dangerous structures men have produced in hopes of achieving some sort of rule . . . always asserting their ultimate absurdity, but delighting as a connoisseur in the spectacle of their beauty" (10). This ironic detachment, however, does not lead to an impotent nihilism. "But just as reason's functioning must be preserved as an integral part of our vitality, the ethical sense cannot dissolve into a pluralistic cynicism that would leave us in an impoverishing stagnation" (9). Thus Montaigne's ironic detachment counsels him to side "with a half-serious half-humorous eye" (9) with what he takes to be the best ethical system of his day--Catholicism. Indeed such detachment may be the condition of the possibility of being able to choose one system over another. While such Catholicism may have been a relatively conservative choice for Montaigne, "his conservatism," de Man asserts

is, as we say nowadays, entirely "situational." In the perspective of his moment, Catholicism appears as the tested and tolerant doctrine, Protestantism as a fanatical movement. A hundred years later, can we doubt that Montaigne would have sided with Pierre Boyle? If the prevailing orthodoxy hardens, crystallizes into sharp points, becoming massive and opaque, wounding anyone who comes up against it; if it has no concern but to perpetuate itself as an institution and if its rituals become a police regulation, Montaigne will be the first to detest it, and it remains for us to imagine what rebellions he is capable of. (9)

De Man's evocative "hypothetical" gesturing toward a much more oppressive system than that represented by post-medieval christianity is, undeniably, a thinly veiled reference to his own times, to both fascism and the cold-

war politics that followed upon it. The following passage could not make this more explicit.

The wretched myths that surround us are no sooner born than they degenerate into sclerotic bureaucracies. They must appeal to the most factitious loyalties--those to race and nation--in order to gain any vitality at all. Imagine Montaigne among such surroundings, no doubt he would be on the side of the rebels. . . . He would be on their side, but without, for all that, taking himself seriously. (10)

The degeneration from myth to bureaucracy is precisely the elision of the difference between fiction and reality as in the symbol or in realism that de Man in both "Montaigne and Transcendence" and "The Rhetoric of Temporality" sees irony uncovering.

"Myth," furthermore, is not simply a synonym for fiction but is a fiction (closely allied to the symbol) structurally prone to the assertion of identity and totality. As in the myths of the golden age (parodied in ironic literature at least as early as *Don Quixote*) myth often asserts the organic unity of humans amongst themselves and of the human and non-human worlds. Various nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual and political movements motivated by anti-rationalism have asserted the abiding truth of myth and its determining effect on human thought and action. History in such assertions is merely contingency and accident; the truth of the myth remains even if one must, through whatever violence, restore it to its pristine purity. (The aporia of a timeless truth that must nonetheless be restored to itself is left unexamined.) Irony in de Man's understanding would appear to be, much as Benjamin characterized allegory: "The antidote to myth" (*Central* 46).

While there is a marked parallel in de Man's understanding of

irony in "Montaigne and Transcendence," and "The Rhetoric of Temporality," a parallel that permits us to glimpse de Man's explicit conception of irony as a resistance to violent, closed and totalizing ideologies, the differences are at least as significant for our discussion. Irony in the latter essay is anything but "serene" and "tranquil." It is never associated with anything like the aesthetic delight that de Man invokes in the first essay. It seems most likely that the differences represent a shift in De Man's theoretical understanding of the trope. One cannot help wondering at the same time, however, whether this does not indicate, against de Man's own statement that irony cannot be examined historically, an historical shift in irony as one moves from the Renaissance to the Romantics. In this respect the shift from serenity to madness would represent an historically changing social reality, or at least de Man's perspective on that change.

Two related factors contribute to the very different characterization of irony in the later essay: a greater resistance to recuperating a positive value for irony's negativity, and a further evacuation of the subject. In "Montaigne and Transcendence" de Man asserts of the "lucid mind" (7)--which appears to be synonymous with a serenely ironic mind--that though it has little power but to take stock of its own failures to find true knowledge, this "power is asserted, thanks to an amazing change of sign, as a *positive* force; just when the mind falls into the despair of its impotence, it regains all its elasticity in perceiving this very impotence" (7 emphasis added). We have already seen how de Man translates this "positive force" into political terms as the freedom and

detachment both to critique the "dangerous structures" men have produced and to choose the least dangerous amongst them. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality," by contrast, de Man explicitly resists any recuperation of irony's negativity, resists any notion of it as either individual therapy or social knowledge. As I shall discuss in greater detail, de Man's rejection of any social value for irony is implicit in his exclusion from irony of the intersubjective realm. At the individual level, de Man admits whereby

irony as a "*folie lucide*" which allows language to prevail even in extreme stages of self-alienation, could be [construed as] a kind of therapy, a cure of madness by means of the spoken or written word . . . The temptation at once arises for the ironic subject to construe its function as one of assistance to the original self and to act as if it existed for the sake this world bound person. (216, 217)

The critics Jean Starobinski and Peter Szondi are, for de Man, the explicit representatives of such a recuperative view of irony and he deals with each in turn. At a level more fundamental to de Man's thought, however, the real argument is with Heidegger.

As early as Division II of *Being and Time* Heidegger begins to seek for some positive value for Dasein's negativity, for the authentic realization of its temporality and groundlessness. Heidegger seeks this value in such ideas as an "impassioned freedom towards death" (311), and "resoluteness" (343), wherein by accepting its finitude and nullity as the essential structure of its way of being, Dasein no longer views such a condition as a threat to its projects. When Dasein resolutely faces its predicament it discovers a more challenging and liberating existence. Such ideas provide the opening for Sartre's humanistic appropriation of Heidegger's negativity as constituting a freedom for the self to create

itself *ex nihilo* through its unconditional commitments. A later Heidegger will go beyond the attempt to recuperate a positive value for Dasein's negativity to even suggest, at points, that such negativity can be overcome as when he asserts, in a thoroughly traditional restatement of the aesthetic ideology, that a supreme poetic language such as Hölderlin's can fully capture Being.²⁹

De Man by contrast notes the "temptation" to construe irony's negativity as an "assistance to the original self" ("Rhetoric" 217), a temptation to which we can see Heidegger yielding with his own forms of negativity. But de Man asserts (in a peculiarly coloured phrase) that "this results in an immediate *degradation* to an intersubjective level . . . into a *betrayal* of the ironic mode" ("Rhetoric" 217 emphasis added). The "degradation" of the "intersubjective level" certainly has a Heideggerian ring, echoing his often disparaging representations of the "They," and reproducing, more generally, his suspicion of the subjectivization of philosophy. It is as if, then, de Man were out to salvage Heidegger's best insights against Heidegger's own tendency to elide them. In a refusal to close off the trope's negativity de Man contends that irony allows "for no end, for no totality" (222).

Instead, the ironic subject at once has to ironize its own predicament and observe in turn, with. . . detachment and disinterestedness . . . the temptation to which it is about to succumb. It does so precisely by avoiding the return to the world . . . by reasserting the purely fictional nature of its own universe and by carefully maintaining the radical difference that separates fiction from the world of empirical reality. (217)

De Man finds his support for this view in Schlegel's characterization of irony as "a permanent parabasis" (218)--a potentially endless process

wherein an authorial voice interrupts the fictive discourse as if to act as its ground, or source. The intrusion, however, in its failure to ground the text in the "real," only confirms that this voice is also fictional. Thus the intrusion merely confirms the distance between fiction and reality.

De Man's move here parallels for irony his implicit refusal of the ultimate denegation that for Benjamin makes baroque allegory similarly prefigurative of a future reconciliation of the antinomies it holds apart. As we had suggested with allegory, de Man's position is susceptible, on the one hand, to a structural, seemingly value-neutral interpretation. In this sense one can say that once a text reconciles any of the ironic disjunctions it has established (between, say, illusion and reality) it has simply ceased to be ironic; to remain ironic it must continue to hold the oppositions apart: "the very moment that irony is thought of as a knowledge able to order and to cure the world the source of its invention immediately runs dry" (218). Clearly, however, the use of such words as "degradation" and "betrayal" to describe the movement toward reconciliation indicates that more is at stake here. In his strongest terms de Man asserts that "the instant [the ironic self] construes the fall of the self as an event that could somehow benefit the self, it discovers that it has in fact substituted death for madness" (218).

De Man's marked resistance to any form of reconciliation is ideologically double edged. As a "dialectic of . . . self-destruction and self-invention . . . an endless process that leads to no synthesis" (220), irony is in one sense a productive resistance to reification: to the "wretched myths" that "degenerate into sclerotic bureaucracies." In this respect it

resembles Adorno's negative dialectic, a dialectic that similarly allows for no synthesis because (in Adorno's reversal of Hegel's dictum): "the whole is the false" (*Minima Moralia* 33).³⁰ The "whole" whether it be conceived as aesthetic artifact, or a concept of nation or race modelled on much the same lines as the aesthetic artefact, is always a partial ideological construct that does violence to the particular both in terms of what it includes as "parts" of that whole and what it excludes as other. Historically de Man would appear to have good reason for resisting the recuperation of negativity suggested in Heidegger's thought, given the forms such recuperation eventually assumed for Heidegger. "In Heidegger's later Nazism" Terry Eagleton writes, " . . . the thrown decentered subject will become the self humbly submissive to earth while authentic, self-referential Dasein will emerge as the elitist vocation of the *Herrenvolk* for the glorious self-sacrifice of death" (*Aesthetic* 297).

It is difficult to ascertain, however, how much better off we are with the Hobson's choice presented by de Man between the "madness" of an endlessly ironizing subject and the "death" of reconciliation. The subject would appear to have been spared falling prey to dangerous ideological structures only at the cost of a radical isolation, of having no relationship with the world and with others whatsoever. De Man's position would seem to give rise to at least three questions deserving of exploration: what is the status of this ironizing subject? Why is the condition subtending it characterized as madness? And why must any form of reconciliation between self and world be characterized as a death? In each case it appears that de Man has ontologized what is in fact an

historical condition arising from specific economic and social structures. I would suggest, after Adorno's critique of Heidegger, that my "quarrel with [de Man's] language is not the fact that it is permeated, like any philosophical language, with figures from an empirical reality which it would like to transcend, but that it transforms a bad empirical reality into transcendence" (*Jargon* 116).

The status of the subject in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" is itself contradictory. On the one hand de Man at the very outset of the essay contrasts the "intentional rhetoric" (188) he will begin to theorize with a "subjectivist critical vocabulary" (187) that has predominated since the nineteenth century. De Man would appear to understand his project, then, as one of outlining a non-subjectivist rhetoric of consciousness, as delineating the operation of rhetorical structures in language that precedes the subject and determine its consciousness. Yet throughout the discussion of irony de Man predominantly refers to a "self" with its inevitable connotations of the liberal humanist subject. One might simply argue that Heidegger's putatively non-subjectivist "Dasein," while more appropriate, would have been too awkward for de Man's largely Anglo-American readership.³¹ Yet clearly other terms would have been available to de Man had he wished to thoroughly decenter the subject. The term "subject" itself has fewer subjectivist connotations than "self."

The relation of this self to language exhibits the same fundamental contradiction. On the one hand language is a tool for the self with which "it can differentiate itself from the world" ("Rhetoric" 213). On the other hand the self becomes merely an effect of language; it becomes "like a sign

in its attempt at differentiation and self-definition" ("Rhetoric" 213). De Man seems to be aware of this contradiction when he notes that irony can be experienced on the one hand as "exhilarating . . . [as] the freedom of a self-engendering invention" (220) and yet on the other hand can be experienced as a "lucid madness" (221). The difference lies in whether the self is controlling irony or, as in Schlegel's essay on incomprehensibility cited by de Man, irony has taken control of the self. There can be little doubt, however, that for de Man the latter case represents the self's more authentic condition. To the extent that the self persists at all, it persists only in the self-consciousness--usable to no end--of this process of its undoing. Yet it appears of the utmost importance to de Man at this stage of his thought to preserve this minimal emptied-out self.³²

The predicament of de Man's self in this essay recalls the predicament of Dasein in *Being and Time*: both are shown to be produced within larger structures that precede it (language for de Man, the equipmental totalities constitutive of "world" for the early Heidegger) yet both struggle against the potentially levelling effect of such structures to achieve uniqueness and transcendence. Such a predicament arises historically at the point at which the ideology of the free self-engendering subject is no longer sustainable in terms of negotiating social and economic contradictions. As C.B. Macpherson argued long ago in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, the autonomous liberal subject with its *inalienable rights* arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the ideology of an ascendent bourgeois class. Adorno postulated, furthermore, that the degree of freedom accruing to such a subject seems to grow in

inverse proportion to the real encroachments upon the individual's freedom. The ideology of the subject finds one of its most fruitful manifestations in the tradition of German idealism within and against which both Heidegger and de Man work. "There is no mistaking" Adorno writes in the late essay "Subject and Object,"

the ideological function of the thesis. The more individuals are really degraded to functions of the social totality as it becomes more systematized, the more will man pure and simple, man as a principle with the attribute of creativity and absolute domination be consoled by exaltation of his mind. (500)

But precisely because in this century "there is no mistaking the ideological function of the thesis" as monopoly capitalism further erodes the autonomous subject, the thesis no longer functions effectively as ideology. The predicament de Man, after Heidegger, would seem to inherit would be both to account for the thoroughly decentralized subject that can no longer be denied in an increasingly administered world, and yet to salvage some form of transcendence out of that very condition.

For Heidegger the saving principle of individuation is the "mineness" of Dasein--that in the last analysis Dasein is one's own. "We are ourselves the entities to be analyzed. The Being of any such entity is *in each case mine*" (*Being* 67). Yet significantly, with "mineness" Heidegger resorts to the very language of the market place he would seek to transcend. As Adorno notes, by thus bestowing "the title deed" of property ownership "once and for all" upon Dasein, "the subject, the concept of which was once created in contrast to reification, thus becomes reified" (*Jargon* 114, 115). But for Macpherson the language of ownership and property rights underwrites the whole conception of the liberal subject

from its inception: "the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them" (3).

De Man's theorization of irony is understood as a process by which the self can authentically *own up* to its condition. Thus it is related to Heidegger's "mineness" as a process by which one makes one's condition one's own. But de Man's resistance to the recuperative aspects of Heidegger's thought is, I have argued, also a resistance to the kind of reification implicit in the concept of mineness. For de Man, by contrast, the transcendent principle for the self lies only in the reflection upon its own predicament, in the "*detachment and disinterestedness*" ("Rhetoric" 217) with which the self observes its own undoing. This emptied-out detached and disinterested self, however, is the very model of the formal abstract individual of the market society. Furthermore, far from being transcendent, the endless dialectic "of the self-invention and self-destruction which . . . characterize(s) the ironic mind" ("Rhetoric" 220), mirrors the commodity form itself as it endlessly refashions itself anew to attract its buyer on the open market.

The entire Heideggerian thematic out of which de Man's theory of irony works can be convincingly understood as a description of an historical rather than an ontological state of affairs. As Adorno noted with his characteristic mixture of high seriousness and audacious overstatement, the crucial emphasis upon uprootedness in Heideggerian philosophy expresses "the fear of unemployment lurking in all citizens of high capitalism" (*Jargon* 34). And by this token does not de Man's radically uprooted ironic subject, constantly inventing itself anew, recall the

contemporary labourer in almost every field of endeavour? Heidegger's "fundamental mood of anxiety" of which we have argued that de Man's "madness" is a transformation, is also, for Adorno, "historical, it appears in fact that those who are yoked into a society which is societalized, but contradictory to the very core, constantly feel threatened by what sustains them" (*Jargon* 34).³³

De Man's qualitative description of the ontological condition uncovered by the ironic disjunction in language as "madness" is an analogously historical description.

Sanity can exist only because we are willing to function within the conventions of duplicity and dissimulation, just as social language dissimulates the *inherent* violence of the actual relationships between human beings. Once this mask is shown to be a mask, the authentic being underneath appears *necessarily* on the verge of madness. ("Rhetoric" 216 emphasis added)

As a characterization of an advanced capitalist society in which a violent instrumental reason governs almost all forms of human relations, de Man's depiction of such an underlying social reality has an undeniable validity. It appears even more valid when one recalls, as David Simpson reminds us with respect to de Man's "Literary History and Literary Modernity" (published as was "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in 1969) that the historical context in which de Man evokes such "violence and madness" includes the Vietnam war and, closest to home for de Man, the campus revolts across North America and Western Europe ("Going" 63).

To the extent, however, that de Man ontologizes such an historical reality as "inherent" and "necessary," his perspective is itself ideological--affirming and eternalizing a dominating status quo. By identifying authentic

being with madness de Man would also have appeared to reify a concept that, as we have seen, he posits as a resistance to reification. Even Heidegger's anxiety would seem to have less positive content than madness. Once recuperated, of course, such a view of authentic being is usable, just as de Man would seem to have feared, for various political ends. At least since Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* such a view of human being as fundamentally chaotic and violent has been extended into arguments for authoritarian political regimes. Elsewhere de Man himself evocatively points out the danger of supplanting history with ontology, a danger into which "The Rhetoric of Temporality" appears to have fallen. The remark appears in "The Inward Generation," another of the early critical writings in which de Man is more willing to address questions of politics and ideology.

If we feel that our being is threatened, and we want to keep the hope that this threat may subside, then we must admit that even the all-encompassing concept of being is susceptible to change and that it has an existence in time: that in other words, the ontological itself is historical.
(15)

If one must question why de Man characterizes the ontological condition uncovered in irony as "madness," one must also inquire as to why he characterizes any form of reconciliation between the ironic self and the world as a "death." I have partially suggested the answer to this question in my exploration of the Heideggerian problematic that informs de Man's essay. When the self inauthentically identifies itself with objects it covers over that which is unique to it: temporality, groundlessness. To the extent that such a cover up is successful, the self becomes in effect as dead as the thing-like objects with which it identifies. Implicit as well in de Man's characterization of reconciliation as death is a critique of what he would

later come to call "the aesthetic ideology," the propagation and application of political ideologies based on a model of the aesthetic artifact, itself (as in the Romantic symbol) based on an analogy with the natural world.

Once again, one of the early critical writings contains de Man's most explicit statement on the ideology of such reconciliation. In "The Temptation of Permanence" de Man considers, by way of the work of André Malraux, the politics of organicist models of history and aesthetics. Drawing upon the later Heidegger's views as elaborated in "The Origin of the Work of Art" de Man notes that the individual's "world" (or what appears to be synonymous for de Man--consciousness) is founded and sustained in the eternal struggle between earth, "this physical entity that is given to him," (31) and sky, "the model of total liberty for which he searches" (31). In an era of cultural fatigue in which history has become painful, the mind seeks repose from this conflict, this endless non-synthetic dialectic; it is thus inclined to see earth as triumphing over sky. This view finds its support in a model of the aesthetic artefact, and of history, based on an analogy with organic nature. In one example from Malraux, man's permanence in history is compared to the growth of a walnut tree (31). In covering over the essential "rift" between earth and sky, in asserting a kind of mythic oneness with the soil, man in fact substitutes death for impermanence and struggle. ". . . We have lost our precarious situation of being *on* the earth to become creatures *of* the earth" (32). History in such a view is a process of slow and steady growth fully continuous with its past. Indeed if the history of a nation, say, is as the growth of a tree, than it can never really be any different than it was, it can only be

larger. In some respects such a view is, in Benjamin's words, "immeasurably comforting" (*Origin* 160), as the nation like the tree "rise(s) splendidly toward a sky that one will not be long in reaching" ("Temptation" 32). The organic model, however, would seem to eliminate all possibility of positive political change aimed at creating a structurally different political order, one discontinuous with its past. To the extent that the nation exists in a timeless state of self-identity, history and human agency are eliminated.

Reflecting upon his still relatively recently adopted circumstances in a United States of the cold war Eisenhower era, de Man states of such a "temptation of permanence":

This fatigue has found its political doctrine in a nationalistic conservatism, which it can seem curious to see establishing itself most solidly in the Western country that has the least to conserve, the United States of America. Because the protective sediment, which is the residue of the past, is there so thin, and since consequently man is more exposed in his profound division, conservatism there is proclaimed almost desperately--to the point of importing what has to be conserved. But what constitutes the value of this sediment? . . . To conserve it by leaving it as it is, in the hope of establishing a suprahistorical continuity in transmitting it from age to age, is to watch over a dead thing, to conserve the earth. . . . To conserve being in its truth is to conserve the incessant struggle that constitutes it, and it is consequently to think in a necessarily insurrectionary mode. (33)

That such a self-identity with the past must be "proclaimed almost desperately--to the point of importing what has to be conserved," gives the lie to the affirmation and shows up its ideological content. The affirmation of self-identity is a form of violence reconciling an idealized and partially invented past with a heterogenous present--a form of

violence that always serves the interests of a particular class or group. De Man's view on nation in this passage closely parallels the position I have argued is evident in Schlegel's *Fragments*. Schlegel similarly rejects the grand antiquity of the nation in favour of a "less finished . . . nation" that is "a subject for criticism and not for history" (Ath 26).

But must we accept de Man's implicit position in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" that all forms of reconciliation are equally deadly? Is it not possible, even as de Man had suggested in "Montaigne and Transcendence," that of the "dangerous structures men have produced in hopes of achieving some sort of rule," some such structures may be less violent and oppressive than others?³⁴ The Hobson's choice between the madness of irony and the death of reconciliation would appear, indeed, to be a false problem based in large part upon a static non-dialectical opposition: "the radical difference that separates fiction from the world of empirical reality" ("Rhetoric" 217). The monistic identity of these two elements might indeed represent a death; but could the same be said of a dialectical interplay between fiction and a socially constructed reality? The latter may, after all, be the only opposition that we can meaningfully discuss. De Man's "radical difference" between fiction and empirical reality is in a certain respect surprising given Heidegger's elaborate argument in *Being and Time* that Dasein is first and foremost "being-in-the world"--"world" being understood, much as de Man notes in "The Temptation of Permanence," as a constitutively social and historical reality. As Heidegger argues against the classical epistemological view of the subject confronting a separate empirical reality: "What we 'first' hear is never noises or complexes of

sounds but the creaking wagon, the motor-cycle" (*Being* 207). An "empirical reality" is thus always already a social reality. In de Man's words the "structures men have *produced*" ("Montaigne" 10 emphasis added) are constitutive of this reality. These structures are *analogous* to fictions as even de Man's reference to our everyday social interactions "function(ing) within the *conventions* of *duplicity* and *dissimulation*" ("Rhetoric" 216) would suggest.

When de Man argues that the ironic self must avoid "the return to the world" (BI 217) because of the radical difference between this world and the "purely fictional nature of its own universe" (217), it would seem important, but at the same time difficult, to ascertain the sense of "world" being employed. Does he intend, as Frank Lentricchia would suggest (284-86), a kind of Sartrean *en soi*: the natural non-human world? De Man certainly suggests as much when he describes *dédoublement* as "the activity of a consciousness by which a man differentiates himself from the non-human world" (213). In this case the question of a return to such a world would appear to be a false problem in so far as the self was never within it. Although to the extent that the self had mistakenly identified its social condition with a natural condition the realization that its predicament is not natural can be highly edifying-- in some respects the very model of ideological demystification. To this extent it is difficult to know how this knowledge can *not* be construed as an assistance to one's self and others, unless one argues that we must inevitably go on being mystified. Yet even this is insufficient, as one form of mystification may well be preferable to another. De Man, in any event, by characterizing the reconciliation of self

and world as a "death" would not appear to be so acquiescent.

Does de Man, then, refer to the socially constituted "world" of Heidegger's *Being and Time*? As we have explored in some detail, de Man's theorization of irony in terms of a Heideggerian equipmental disturbance by which such worldliness is revealed would strongly suggest such a conception of world. But in this case it becomes difficult to see what supports de Man's "radical difference" between fiction and such a socially constructed world. While one can well understand the danger in collapsing fiction and reality into identity, it is difficult to see why de Man allows no dialectical interplay between these terms. Does such a "radical difference" truly keep the rift between them open as de Man desires? Or does it abolish the conflict, allowing each to exist in the self-identity of its own sphere?

De Man, I would argue, sees irony opening up and maintaining the "radical difference" between fiction and the world in both these senses of world, and this may explain why he is not particularly careful to distinguish between them. The ambiguity, however, amounts to a contradiction that subverts de Man's claim that irony transcends the intersubjective realm even while it allows such an assertion. The reconciliation of the self and the non-human world would indeed represent a death, yet short of actually dying--becoming literally *of* the earth in the manner that de Man discusses in reference to Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Steal" ("Rhetoric" 223-225)--such reconciliation is an impossibility: a question of false consciousness. By contrast the reconciliation of the self and the social world is not an impossibility nor

need it be a death--only an overly individualistic ideology represents it as necessarily such. The impossibility, indeed, lies more convincingly in the converse proposition (as does death): in isolating the self from its constitutively social texture. By way of emphasizing this point I will conclude my discussion of de Man's theorization of irony by critically examining his position that irony transcends intersubjectivity. My purpose will not be to demonstrate that another intersubjective view of irony better describes the trope, but that the terms of de Man's own theorization of the trope do not allow it to be anything other than intersubjective.

In "Irony and Allegory in Baudelaire," the sixth of de Man's Gauss Lectures and the one whose material he most closely reworked into "The Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man comes particularly close to describing irony as an intersubjective phenomenon. Arguing, as he will do in the later essay, that irony disrupts an organic world of analogical correspondences, de Man notes that certain of Baudelaire's later poems and stories can be read as ironic repetitions of his earlier poems, poems that *had* asserted the unity of human consciousness with the natural world, or at least had not been explicit enough in their disruption of such a correspondence. The dominant impression one receives from these ironic poems de Man asserts, is of "a very particular self in its relation to others" (106). In his first example, de Man reads Baudelaire's "Obsessions" as an ironic repetition of the earlier "Correspondences." What the repetition of the earlier work brings out, its specifically ironic quality, is that

what was presented as a relationship toward nature was in fact a relationship towards other human beings that we projected into nature. The familiar glances that are forever looking at us are not nature, but are aspects of

our own past, of our own self in its involvement with others, which record our undoing. (103)

In his second example de Man notes how Baudelaire's "*L'invitation au voyage*" attributes the qualities of luxuriousness, calm and voluptuousness (*Luxe, calme et volupté*) to an unnamed country. Thus the poem's language is both mimetic and symbolic; it both describes and humanizes its referent. In the poem's ironic repetition in the later *Petits Poems en Prose*: "The country becomes a very specific and explicitly named Holland, the 'luxe' of the early refrain . . . becomes the economic reward of the hard working burgher, the 'ordre' the proverbial cleanliness of the Dutch housewife, the 'volupté' the lavishness of a cuisine . . ." (115). In these examples de Man presents irony in terms that strongly recall the Marxian critique of reification wherein one uncovers in the self's dealings with an apparently external reality a more primary social relation that had been covered over or forgotten.³⁵ This idea would itself be consistent with de Man's description of irony in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in terms that recall Heidegger's equipmental disturbance through which Dasein's worldliness is revealed.

It is not surprising to find, however, that for de Man such intersubjective relations of self and other in Baudelaire's poetry are interpreted as "allegorical tales illuminating" (107) a more primary doubling within the self:

A great variety of human types appear throughout the work, individual human beings as well as groups (*les artistes, les amants, les chiffonniers, les petites vieilles*, etc), and their main function is not so much to act as mediators between the poet's subjectivity and a world of external or natural objects, but rather to dramatize conflicts and tensions that exist within the self. (Gauss 106)

Curiously de Man's argument moves us from one polarity in the subject object dialectic (which he is supposedly subverting) to another without considering the possibility that the function of Baudelaire's "human types" might be to "dramatize conflicts and tensions that exist" between the self and others. Yet to describe this inner split within the self de Man, as we have seen, must rely upon a vocabulary of the very intersubjectivity that the ironic self purportedly transcends. Nothing could more strongly suggest that the split within the self is itself an intersubjective relation: a social otherness at the core of the self. In a passage from "The Essence of Laughter" cited by de Man in both the Gauss lecture and "The Rhetoric of Temporality" Baudelaire puts this very succinctly when he points to "in the human being, the existence of a permanent duality, the power of being at the same time oneself and someone else" (Baudelaire 160, Gauss 112, "Rhetoric" 212). Such an otherness would then be the condition of the possibility of an ethical relation towards empirical others. Only because the self can experience itself as other is it capable of comporting itself toward other individuals as other subjects rather than merely as other empirical objects.

Significantly, in the Gauss lecture de Man does not emphasize, as he will in the "The Rhetoric of Temporality," Baudelaire's distinction between a lower intersubjective comic and the higher "*comique absolu*" he subsequently equates with irony. De Man's discussion of irony in the earlier lecture depends so thoroughly upon a language of intersubjectivity that to assert that irony somehow transcends such a realm would be

contradictory. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality" by contrast, de Man considerably tones down the language of intersubjectivity in its relation to irony, omitting his earlier examples of Baudelaire's ironic repetition wherein an apparent relation between self and object is shown to be a relation between self and other. The doubling of the self that constitutes the ironic is, de Man now emphasizes, "a relationship, within consciousness, between two selves, yet it is not an intersubjective relation" (BI 212). As this quotation illustrates, however, despite the change in emphasis de Man cannot extricate his discussion of irony from a terminology that continues to invoke the very intersubjective relation he wishes to deny.

In de Man's understanding the ironic doubling is not an "intersubjective *relation*," not simply because it is situated within the self, but more fundamentally, because there is no *relation* between these two selves other than the discontinuity of a negation. The former is an empirical "world-bound" self, the other a linguistic self. Yet de Man, as we have argued, employs a slippery sense of "world" in order to assert the "absolute difference" between these two selves. The former self was always already in part a linguistic self, produced in language amongst other social practices that constitute its world and thus the two selves are very much related. De Man's reference to the "language determined man, laugh(ing) . . . at a mistaken mystified assumption he was making about himself" (BI 214) indicates this clearly. Borrowing a familiar rhetorical move from de Man himself we can assert that irony's transcendence of the intersubjective realm is simply a mark of desire--a desire motivated by an historically dominative and alienating empirical reality. Nothing in the logic of de Man's

argument convincingly establishes the condition for such a transcendence. The effect of his argument, indeed, is to show how irony persistently unravels the self into the system of language.

But can one, as I have been implying, interpret the unravelling of the self in language as an indication of the self's social texture? This of course depends upon a view of language as social interaction that de Man does not explicitly invoke. Like the subject in this essay whose contradictory status we have explored, language appears alternately as a tool of consciousness and as a rhetorical system that produces consciousness. Whether or not the latter system is conceived as fundamentally social in nature is left unexamined. De Man's position that the "language determined man" (214) transcends the intersubjective realm would seem to suggest, indeed, that he would not view language as a social system. As Gary Handwerk has commented: "De Man writes out from the start any communicative power of language, but instead polarizes it between its representational and figural roles" (13). The idea of language as fundamentally social is, however, consistent with Heidegger's view of language in *Being and Time*. Thus de Man's thoroughly Heideggerian problematic that I have outlined may import such a view against his own explicit intentions.

Heidegger broaches the question of language in the fifth chapter of Division One of *Being and Time* entitled "Being-In As Such." The placement of the discussion itself underlies the sociality of language in Heidegger's thought. In the previous chapter Heidegger had explored "Being-in-the-World" as Dasein's ontological condition. In this chapter he

explores more thoroughly what is involved in such "Being-in." "*The existential-ontological foundation of language*," Heidegger emphasizes, "*is discourse or talk*" (*Being* 203).

Discoursing or talking is the way in which we articulate 'significantly' the intelligibility of Being-in-the-world. Being-with belongs to Being-in-the-world, which in every case maintains itself in some definite way of concerned Being-with-one-another. Such Being-with-one-another is discursive as assenting or refusing, as demanding or warning, as pronouncing, consulting, or interceding, as 'making assertion', and as talking in the way of 'giving a talk.' (*Being* 204)

Thus language for Heidegger (in a manner that recalls the Russian linguist V.N. Volosinov's position in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*) is social interaction. One can, Heidegger concedes, certainly isolate language as an abstract system and study its operations as such, yet this is to repeat the errors of the Cartesian subject-object paradigm: to approach as "present-at-hand" (occurrent), what is more primarily, which is to say existentially, "ready-to-hand." As we have explored in some detail, de Man's elaboration of both allegory and irony works out of Heidegger's critique of the subject-object model. It would thus be to some extent an inconsistency in our reading of de Man not to apply this critique to language itself and to see (much as de Man implies in the *Gauss* lecture) beneath the apparent duality of subject and object a more primary intersubjective relation.

Having defended the intersubjective character of the irony elaborated by de Man, what, we must ask, is the effect of such an intersubjective irony? Might one such effect be to eradicate any distinction between irony and the lower forms of intersubjective humour

de Man refers to wherein one individual, or group, is simply laughing at another, or others, out of some sense of superiority? While there may no longer be any basis for positing an absolute opposition between these two forms of intersubjective humour, one would certainly not wish to collapse entirely the distinction between them, for one does in practice make distinctions between the ironic and, for example, the merely "slapstick." It would not be inconsistent with de Man's theorization of the trope in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" to suggest that irony would be reserved for those linguistic disjunctions wherein the self is forced to realize that it is not an isolated autonomous individual but dependent upon intersubjective relations such as language for its constitution--a view of the self which I argued was an integral aspect of the negative dialectic of Schlegelian irony. To this extent, as Gary Handwerk has argued, irony is intimately connected to ethics. "Irony is a form of discourse that insists upon the provisional and fragmentary nature of the individual subject and thus forces us to recognize our dependence upon some mode of intersubjectivity that exceeds the furthest extension of any individual subject" (viii).

I began my exploration of the ideology of allegory and irony in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" by invoking the critical debates surrounding the politics of de Man's writings. More specifically I invoked the contradictory ways in which both allegory and irony have been figured in these debates as alternately reactionary and insurrectionary rhetorical modes dominating de Man's life and work. The result of my analysis (as the

reader will no doubt have concluded) has not been to settle this debate, as though by returning to the author's own theoretical statement one could determine once and for all some essential unchanging ideological content within the tropes. In the first place, as de Man's own criticism has taught us, one cannot assume that the allegory and irony theorized in this essay necessarily describe the operations of these tropes in de Man's own work. In the second place, de Man's understanding of irony, at least, underwent significant changes throughout his career and the ideology articulated by these statements will necessarily be different.

I have already considered the transformation from the "serene" and "tranquil" irony of the early "Montaigne and Transcendence" to the "madness" of "The Rhetoric of Temporality." While de Man never published another sustained theoretical consideration of irony, his later statements forthrightly proclaim a further transformation in his understanding. In both the posthumously published 1977 lecture "The Concept of Irony" and in a later interview with Robert Moynihan, de Man speaks of irony in terms that are in many respects consistent with "The Rhetoric of Temporality." De Man continues to see irony as "a break, an interruption, a disruption" (Moynihan 136, cf. "Concept" 179, 182) in coherent meaning, which is to say in narrativized meaning ("Concept" 179, 184). He continues to oppose irony to history and to insist that irony has no end ("Concept" 182-84). "The Concept of Irony" continues to name the "total arbitrariness" of language which irony discloses "madness" (181, 184). On the other hand, in the Moynihan interview de Man might be seen to step away from essentializing irony as madness, suggesting that such a characterization can only belong

to the critic. "Most commentators have in effect said, let's put an end to it, because this is madness" (141).

Most fundamentally, however, turning away from the phenomenological problematic that dominates his work to the end of the 1960's, the later de Man will no longer consider irony in terms of "a dialectic of the self as a reflexive structure" ("Concept" 169). Dialectic, whether of history or of the self, he comes to regard as simply one more attempt to enclose irony by narrativizing it. Irony's disruption, however, is too fundamental to be so enclosed. "Irony comes into being precisely when self-consciousness loses its control over itself. For me at least, the way I think of it now, irony is not a figure of self-consciousness" (Moynihan 136). Irony, indeed, as de Man notes in the penultimate sentence of *Allegories of Reading* is "no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding" (301).

Whereas in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" de Man keeps in tension the self and the rhetorical structures that to some extent produce the self, his later comments seem to collapse this opposition in favour of the overpowering machine-like force of rhetoric. The result is a diminution in the complexity and suggestiveness of the model of irony. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality" the ironic subject, in its dialectic of self-destruction and self-invention, struggles for some kind of freedom. However minimal and precarious de Man insists that such freedom is, it is the condition of the possibility of any form of individuation and of a non-instrumental relation with others and is therefore essential. For the later de Man there is no

subject, or at least the subject is only an effect of rhetoric. In "Subject and Object" Adorno argued, against the anti-subjectivist tenor of much twentieth-century thought (both positivism and existentialism as well as structuralism), and for the crucial importance of keeping this term in play. "If it [the subject] were liquidated rather than sublated in a higher form, the effect would be regression--not just of consciousness, but a regression to real barbarism" (499). Such barbarism finds its echoes in de Man's later work: "Writing always includes the moment of dispossession in favour of the arbitrary power play of the signifier; and from the point of view of the subject, this can only be experienced as a dismemberment, a beheading, or a castration" (*Allegories* 296). As in the earlier characterization of irony as madness, de Man's position expresses an historical truth: in the increasingly administered world the subject has indeed to a great extent been liquified. Only ideology extols its freedom under such conditions. But to the extent that one posits such a liquidation of the subject as inevitable and ahistorical, cancelling in advance any potential for a productive resistance to those liquidating forces, de Man's position itself becomes ideologically complicitous with them.

What this brief foray into de Man's later work is intended to show is simply the shifting nature of de Man's views on irony and hence the shifting ideological content of these views. The most fundamental reason, however, that a reading of "The Rhetoric of Temporality" cannot settle the question of the politics of allegory and irony in de Man's own work is that, as I have shown, de Man's theorization of these tropes is, within this essay itself, ideologically contradictory: potentially quietistic and insurrectionary.

The central importance de Man lends to both allegory and irony derives from their ability to thematize both time and language as fundamental constitutive elements of human consciousness. To this extent the tropes have, as Benjamin clearly foresaw, affinities with historical materialism. While these tropes may gesture toward a metaphysical beyond at the level of their content, their structural operations ceaselessly return us to this world--the mirror opposite of the sensuous materiality of the symbol that exists only to be transcended. Furthermore, allegory, with its arbitrary power over the signification of objects, and irony with its ceaseless dialectic of self-invention and self-destruction, suggest an active interventionism directed at refiguring this world rather than accepting it as what it is, or what amounts to the same thing, searching for signs of the numinous within it. But while it is productive to read temporality and rhetoric in terms of history and materiality, this is to a certain extent to read de Man against himself. In de Man these terms gesture equally toward more restrictive conceptions of time and language that underwrite the subject's isolation and deny the possibility of effective political action.

Have I simply shown at best, then, how de Man's own statement allows for two contending perspectives on the politics of irony in his work, such as Stanley Corngold's opportunistic and evasive irony and Ian Balfour's politically subversive irony? While I *have* shown this much, I hope to have achieved something further. The picture of de Man that arises out of this analysis is of a critic intimately, if not always explicitly, concerned with questions of ideology and ideological resistance. We may question the point at which, and the extent to which, the kind of total

resistance to ideology de Man posits becomes an overreaction to and a problematic totalization of ideologies which are themselves heterogenous--by no means equally violent and oppressive. Within de Man's elaboration of allegory and irony, however, it no longer seems possible to assert that there is an essentially reactionary evasion of the political sphere.

Four

"Poeticized Culture": Richard Rorty's Liberal Ironist in the Post-Romantic Rhetorical Tradition

The individual becomes convinced that he can do just about anything and can manage almost any role, and everybody experiments with himself, improvises, makes new experiments, enjoys his experiments; and all nature ceases and becomes art.

--Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

If one considers the critical and theoretical scene of the last two decades or more, *irony*, in one or other of its several conceptions, appears to be invoked only more frequently and the significance afforded to its perceived presence once invoked appears only to have increased. One might have well expected that a trope regarded as central by Friedrich Schlegel and the Jena Romantics in the late eighteenth century, and by the American New Critics in the mid twentieth century would have fallen out of favour in the variety of more recent intellectual and artistic movements or tendencies which often explicitly define themselves in contrast to the assumptions held in these earlier periods. Yet with irony this is patently not the case. And works such as Wayne Booth's *A Rhetoric of Irony* and Joseph Dane's *The Critical Mythology of Irony* have attempted to stem the proliferation of this word and its connotations much as did Hegel and Kierkegaard in their own times.

In the closing lines of *Allegories of Reading* the later de Man, as we have seen, conceives of irony as "no longer a trope but the undoing

of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding" (1979 301). He thereby elevates irony to the status of *prime mover* (or prime undoer) in the sorts of deconstructive readings that he was so influential in disseminating within literary and cultural criticism. De Man's statement might well support Ernst Behler's position that irony is central to poststructuralist theory more broadly and to Jacques Derrida's work in particular. For Behler, irony both characterizes the style and form of Derrida's writing, and a key Derridian term such as *différance* reintroduces the concept of "universal irony" under a different name.¹ At the very least Behler, like Richard Rorty amongst others, demonstrates how irony persists as a key figure for interpreting texts whose authors might well wish to have their writings elude description under such a seemingly conventional, even recuperative, sign.²

Irony has been invoked much more explicitly and forthrightly as a dominant trope characterizing *postmodernism*, sometimes described as the cultural artistic counterpart to poststructuralist theory. Yet by virtue of the claim that postmodernism constitutes an at least partially distinct period of cultural production, theorists of the postmodern, most notably Alan Wilde and Linda Hutcheon, have engaged in the attempt to distinguish postmodern irony from earlier manifestations of irony in modernism, romanticism and earlier. Postmodern irony Hutcheon asserts

in many ways is the earlier form's [romantic irony's] very antithesis in political ethos. Romantic Irony has been defined as 'an avenue to the infinite, the expression of man's appetite for the boundless; it was expansiveness, it was megalomania' (Wimsatt and Brooks 380). Postmodernist irony is suspicious of any such claim to transcendence,

universality and power. To pretend that it is otherwise--implicitly to confuse it with Romantic Irony--not only is historically inaccurate but is also proof of a lingering nostalgia and even antiquarianism of the first order. ("Lightness" 68)

Postmodern irony, then, is centred less around the creative subject; it is less about individual freedom, power and control. Yet curiously, Hutcheon's language lends a heightened consciousness to this privileged trope and thereby sneaks the subject in again through the back door. Referring favourably to Wilde's view of postmodern irony Hutcheon writes: "Postmodern irony differs from both [pre-modernist and modernist irony]: it is 'suspensive' in that it is more radical in its *awareness* of contingency and multiplicity . . . postmodern irony is the structural *recognition* that discourse today cannot avoid acknowledging its situation in the world it represents " ("Lightness" 69 my emphasis). Hutcheon's historical sketch of the development toward a postmodern irony is in some respects a familiarly Hegelian narrative of the movement away from more naive forms of consciousness toward a heightened self-consciousness of one's true predicament.

What Hutcheon asserts of Marxists' and the mass media's critical even "trivializing" response to what she has defined as postmodern irony applies equally well to her own response to romantic irony: "Both to reject and to reduce are defensive moves, signs perhaps of a fear of the power of irony--or of its doubleness that refuses facile resolution" (1990 69). For Hutcheon first *reduces* romantic irony to a brief explanatory blurb from Wimsatt and Brooks' influential New Critical construction of the history of literary criticism that glosses it, following Hegel, as

"megalomania" in order to *reject* any degree of identity between romantic and postmodern ironies that might possibly disturb her project of demarcating such a distinct cultural period described as the postmodern.

Hutcheon's peculiarly coloured rhetoric in rejecting any potential identity between romantic irony and postmodern irony ("to pretend," "to confuse," "proof of a lingering nostalgia," "antiquarianism of the first order") might recall what Freud named the *narcissism of minor differences* to describe the phenomenon of how neighbouring groups of people with much in common (eg, North and South Germans) will engage "in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other" (Freud 68) in order to emphasize and sustain some desired sense of distinction. And Hutcheon's move in itself, in its refusal to consider the implications of a possible repetition of romantic irony in contemporary cultural production, could be taken as exhibiting "a fear of the power of irony--or of its doubleness that refuses facile resolution"--the facile resolution, say, of literary history viewed as a succession of cohesive literary periods. For as de Man argued, irony can seriously problematize the attempt to view history in narrative forms such as the Hegelian rise to greater self-consciousness. The disruption of such narratives occurs, for example, when examining ironic texts from the late eighteenth century such as Friedrich Schlegel's *Fragments* and discovering, as Hutcheon has asserted for postmodern irony, that they could not be "more radical in [their] awareness of contingency and multiplicity" nor in their "structural recognition that discourse . . . cannot avoid acknowledging its situation in the world it represents."

The consideration, by way of conclusion to my selective ideological

critique of theoretical statements on irony, of the ideological underpinnings of this concept in its relatively recent manifestations in critical/theoretical discourse would, then, invite numerous trajectories into poststructuralist and postmodernist theories. And "the popularity of the word irony in New Historicism" that Joseph Dane has noted (215) suggests yet another broad trajectory for such a critique. Yet given, in Camille La Bossière's words, "the virtual silence" (573) of poststructuralism's response to the concept of irony directly named, to follow this trajectory would risk the abysmal slippage that can occur when one wishes to maintain that when a theorist names one thing (*différance, heteroglossia, chora, desire*) what s/he *really* names is irony. As a minimal way of containing what is for many the already excessive and indeterminate meanings attributed to the word irony, I have attempted to follow Joseph Dane's methodological nominalism and only consider the concept as being under discussion in a text when it, or one of its cognates, is actually named (Dane 4).

The discussions of "postmodern irony," then, appears to be a more promising line of inquiry particularly given Hutcheon's own interests in the political and ideological implications of such an irony and given the numerous problems with such a conception that I merely began to outline above. Yet in addition to wanting to avoid the risk of merely rehearsing the debates over the ideology and politics of postmodernism of which there has been no shortage, such a possible critique is made more redundant by Hutcheon's own recent turn away from, even outright disavowal, of the project of theorizing a uniquely postmodern irony and its politics. As she states in *Irony's Edge: the Theory and Politics of Irony*, her most recent

and sustained treatment of the topic: "What this book is not, however, is yet another book on postmodernism To limit an analysis of irony to one cultural enterprise would be unnecessarily restrictive--and as I've learned, an utter red herring" (1994 3). In this work Hutcheon "offers a generalized theory of irony" (3) and demonstrates an increased awareness of the historical difficulties presented by the attempt to periodize irony when she notes that "ours joins just about every other century in wanting to call itself the 'age of irony'" (1994 9).

Richard Rorty's *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989), with which I have chosen to conclude this study, has the advantage for my purposes of invoking irony directly and centrally, allowing for the kind of sustained reading (albeit briefer) that I have afforded to Schlegel and de Man.³ Furthermore, Rorty's neopragmatist philosophy in its attempt to articulate the possibility for an ungrounded liberalism, a liberalism that could not only survive but flourish in the absence of universalist and essentialist conceptions of selfhood, human nature, and truth, engages with and takes up certain currents of poststructuralist and postmodernist theory (even as it rejects others),⁴ and thus in considering Rorty's irony I will not leave the trajectories outlined above entirely behind. Finally, as a liberal pragmatist philosopher involved in such a project, Rorty is directly concerned with the cultural and political efficacy of the ironist stance, and with what he describes as "ironist theory." His work, therefore, directly touches upon the central concerns of this study, paralleling and contrasting in significant ways Schlegel's and de Man's conceptions of irony with their attendant ideological and political

assumptions and implications. Indeed, Rorty's post-philosophical stance challenges the basic operating assumption of my study: that theory, and "ironist theory" in particular, necessarily has a significant political dimension and that there is, therefore, a value to the ideology critique that seeks to articulate such a dimension.⁵ For this reason alone it would appear imperative to engage Rorty and to demonstrate the value of such critique even as it applies to his own theory.

While there have been a number of critical analyses from a variety of intellectual positions of the politics of Rorty's work from which I have derived important insights for my own discussion here,⁶ there has been no consideration of how his specific invocation of irony relates to a tradition of theoretical statements that similarly invoke this trope with sometimes comparable but frequently very different ideological and political implications. In certain respects this is not surprising as Rorty employs a concept of irony that, in keeping with his consensus building *conversational* prose, strives to be straightforward and semantically unproblematic. As one of my opening epigraphs to this study suggests, Rorty does not wish to theorize irony. Although the works of Schlegel, Kierkegaard and de Man might all suggest otherwise, Rorty asserts that: "The last thing the ironist theorist wants or needs is a theory of ironism" (CIS 97). It is not to Rorty's purposes, then, to invoke the tradition of theoretical statements on irony.⁷ Yet his usage of the concept of irony nonetheless draws upon such a tradition, and an analysis of his usage in relation to this tradition can articulate both what Rorty implicitly takes up from it, and just as significantly, what he does not take up.

Irony for Rorty, as he directly defines his usage and by virtue of what his usage implies, carries three predominant associations: a *self-consciousness* of the historical cultural contingency of one's ideas and beliefs, *self creation*, and the *non synthesis* of fundamental antitheses, most notably for Rorty, of the public and the private. Each of these connotations, as we have seen, is contained within Friedrich Schlegel's conception of irony and is taken up again and reworked by de Man. And there are in fact notable similarities in the ways in which Schlegel and Rorty envision irony operating in politics and culture, a fact that should not be surprising given, as I discussed in Chapter Two, Schlegel's strong liberal leanings in the published *Fragments* and Rorty's own positive endorsement of a certain understanding of romanticism.⁸

Schlegelian irony, however, attempts in part at least to hold contradiction, thesis and antithesis in play, believing in the productivity of a negative dialectic that does not seek to synthesize or sublate its terms but always to play one term off against the other. We have seen how Schlegel performs this with such oppositions as system/non-system, universal/particular, naive/sentimental and we have seen the political allegory of governmentality, of authority and insurrection, such negotiations articulate. Even Schlegel's liberalism itself is thoroughly ironized, the fundamental tenets underlying it (the priority and autonomy of the individual) are shown to be both necessary and false--the recognition of the falsity being itself necessary. Rorty by contrast moves from the presumption of non-synthesis articulated by irony to the assumption of the *incommensurability* of terms and thus the inefficacy of playing oppositions

off against each other at all. In the sense of an interplay of oppositions there is no dialectic, negative or constructive, in Rorty's irony.⁹ What this amounts to is a position that is, by Schlegelian standards, unskeptical and unironic. Rorty, as commentators have pointed out, affirms a series of parallel philosophical certainties: the truth is not "out there" waiting to be discovered or articulated but is an historical cultural construct, as is the self and any idea we might have concerning human nature. Furthermore we cannot, through reason or some other privileged metalanguage, achieve a transcendent God's eye view from which to grasp the totality. We should, therefore, give up the urge to theorize the totality and, like the novelist, work to build solidarity beginning from the recognition of local contingencies (CIS 100).¹⁰ Rorty describes the affirmation of this supposed anti-essentialism as an *ironist* stance, whereas for Schlegel only the *affirmation* and the *negation* of such a position could be so described. This difference is most succinctly focused in Rorty's conception of irony as *self-creation* compared to Schlegel's conception of it as a dialectic of *self-creation* and *self-destruction*.

Rorty provides us with a theory of irony which is both uncritical and profoundly ideological. Since truth is ruled out of the game to begin with, there is little or no standpoint from which to critique the particular *consensus* that passes for truth at any given time. The individual who is postulated as having no access to knowledge of, and hence no control over, the real conditions of his or her existence is to be consoled by a poetic project of "self creation" which amounts to the construction of an imaginary realm of freedom as a bulwark against one's real domination.

"I use ironist," Rorty writes in his initial attempt to define his most direct and central usage of the term, "to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires-- someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance" (CIS xv). The first thing to note here is how Rorty favours the word "ironist," the cognate of irony that names a "sort of person." Indeed outside the work's title, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, the word irony is infrequently employed.¹¹ "Ironist" is also enlisted as Rorty's adjectival form in preference to "ironic." He refers to the "ironist theorist" or "ironist theory" rather than to the ironic theorist or ironic theory. Furthermore, if Rorty wishes to refer to the thing or the process rather than the person he often prefers "ironism" to irony.

This is in part only a different approach to a familiar move that we have witnessed in Schlegel and de Man, and that as Joseph Dane notes is characteristic in the lengthy history of the critical and theoretical discourse that invokes some concept of irony. The theorist by one means or another attempts to distinguish his invocation of irony from a more basic species of rhetorical irony (Dane 26 and passim). To refer to *ironic theory*, in so far as it might suggest a theory that does not mean what it purports to mean, or means the opposite (as Machiavelli, say, is sometimes interpreted as having written an ironic theory of statesmanship in *The Prince*) would not capture Rorty's sense of ironist theory as that which *redescribes* a previously entrenched philosophical vocabulary in self-

consciously provisional terms (CIS 101). Thus ironist as adjective describes a more complex process than the simply ironic, and ironism, rather than simple irony, names this process.

Most significantly, however, Rorty's predominant usage of "ironist" to describe a "sort of person" signifies his interest in irony as a world view, a mode of consciousness, as opposed to irony as a trope and thus as primarily linguistic. Schlegel and de Man by contrast are interested in both aspects and how they interact upon each other. One of Schlegel's several definitions of irony defines it, as we have seen, as "the clear *consciousness* of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos" (Id 69 my emphasis). At the same time in his oscillations between enthusiasm and skepticism, self-creation and self-destruction, Schlegel theorizes and enacts a tropological irony, one which, as he indicates in "On Incomprehensibility," always threatens to elude control and to exceed the subject's consciousness. De Man takes up Schlegel's irony and, reading it through a theoretical problematic that includes Heidegger and Saussure, theorizes a subject oscillating through the *vertige* of ironic disruptions of signifier and signified between the authentic realization that it is produced in language and the inauthentic belief that such consciousness might itself become a language that could benefit the self and others, a position that irony will again disrupt.

Rorty on the one hand wants to allow that the self is to a large extent produced in language, a view that, as he sees it, has been gaining predominance in Western thought over the last two hundred years, beginning with the configuration of German idealism, Romanticism, and the

French Revolution (CIS 3). To this extent Rorty's position parallels de Man's--Nietzsche and Heidegger being common figures within their respective outlooks. The "human self," Rorty writes, "is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary . . . changing languages and other social practices may produce human beings of a sort that had never before existed" (CIS 7). Rorty asserts, furthermore, that "we have no prelinguistic consciousness" (CIS 21).

From his pragmatist perspective, however, Rorty is little concerned with the kinds of theoretical problems of agency and identity that have preoccupied poststructuralists in their negotiations of a similar linguistic problematic. While Rorty allows that the self is produced in language he wishes to claim at the same time that subjects produce language: "*languages* are made rather than found" (CIS 7); "vocabularies are made by human beings" (CIS 21). Thus unlike de Man, Rorty is not concerned with the effect a fundamental instability in language, that De Man names irony, might have upon the subject that is produced within it; and this would seem to account for Rorty's lack of interest in irony as trope.

Rorty outlines briefly a view of language based on the philosophy of Donald Davidson. Language is not to be thought of as "a *medium*--a medium either of representation or of expression" (CIS 10). Furthermore, Rorty cites Davidson to reject any view of language as "a clearly defined shared *structure* which language users master and then apply to cases" (CIS 15 my emphasis)--a view we find in structuralist and to some degree Heideggerian thought which wishes to emphasize the production of

subjectivity and consciousness within a pre-existent system of language.¹²

Language, rather, is likened to the development in one human of a

"passing theory" about the noises and inscriptions presently being produced by a fellow human . . . a set of guesses about what she will do under what conditions. Such a theory is "passing" because it must constantly be corrected to allow for mumbles, stumbles, malapropisms, metaphors, tics, seizures, psychotic symptoms, egregious stupidity, strokes of genius, and the like. . . . Davidson's point is that all "two people need, if they are to understand one another through speech, is the ability to converge on passing theories from utterance to utterance." (CIS 14)

Here language is represented less as constituting the subject than as constituted by the subject as s/he copes with the exigencies produced by her environment and the necessity to comprehend and communicate with others. Languages are more or less adequate "tools" (CIS 11) that we invent for such purposes.

Rorty perceives that there is a problem with this view of language as a tool. Namely, it might suggest some form of extra-linguistic consciousness with which the individual would perceive of a particular problem or project and then invent the tool to apply to this situation, for the "craftsman typically knows what job he needs to do before picking or inventing tools with which to do it" (CIS 12). Yet Rorty, as we have seen, wishes to deny such an extra-linguistic consciousness. Language--or rather "vocabulary" since this is the term Rorty uses to avoid, one assumes, the structural or systemic implications of *language*--"is a tool for doing something which could not have been envisaged prior to the development of a particular set of descriptions, those which it itself helps to provide" (CIS 13).

In his doubled awareness of a subject produced in language who wishes at the same time to use language to her own or public ends Rorty outlines a familiar predicament that we have seen negotiated in Schlegel and de Man's discussions of irony. One might expect Rorty, therefore, to deal with the questions raised by this predicament, which is to say to deal with irony as a trope, an effect of language that might problematize the latter desire. What we receive, however, is a pragmatist elision of the problem. "I shall for the moment," Rorty announces, "ignore this disanalogy" [between tools and vocabularies] (CIS 13). And it is only by virtue of this elision that he is able to concentrate on irony both as a mode of consciousness and as a process of self-creation.¹³

Indeed, language in Rorty's view is not inherently unstable as it is in certain poststructuralist accounts (notably those of de Man and Derrida) and this further explains the absence of any consideration of irony as trope in his work. A key distinction in Rorty's work is that between normal and abnormal discourse derived from Thomas Kuhn's distinction between normal and revolutionary science. In normal discourse, as Nancy Fraser summarizes it, "interlocutors share a sense of what counts as a problem or question, as a well-formed or serious hypothesis, and as a good reason or argument" (51). Abnormal discourse is the periodic disruption of such stable language that eventually produces a new stable discourse, one better equipped to deal with whatever contingencies blind sided the older discourse. Significantly Rorty describes such disruptions as the introduction of new *metaphors* into old language games. Metaphors are employed when "one uses familiar words in unfamiliar ways" (CIS 18)

or "utter[s] a sentence without a fixed place in a language game" (CIS 18).

In a position that rehearses the symbolist ideology's prejudice against merely abstract *allegorical* substitution,¹⁴ Rorty insists upon "the unparaphrasability of metaphor," and insists that "one should not think of metaphorical expressions as having meaning distinct from their literal ones. To have a meaning is to have a place in a language game. Metaphors, by definition, do not" (CIS 18).¹⁵ In time such statements may

become a truth-value candidate. If it *is* savoured rather than spat out, the sentence may be repeated, caught up, bandied about. Then it will gradually require a habitual use, a familiar place in the language game. It will thereby have ceased to be a metaphor--or if you like, it will have become what most sentences of our language are, a dead metaphor. (CIS 18)

The linguistic disruptions that Rorty here describes as *metaphors* might rather be described in terms of a tropological *irony* if Rorty were interested in the kinds of disruptions that are imminent to some degree even within the most seemingly stable discourses, but he is not. His view, rather, is of stable discourses periodically disrupted before regaining equilibrium in a new stable configuration. As Fraser notes, this sets up a "rigid, dichotomous opposition between playing the game in the same old way and starting completely from scratch; between boring, stable, frozen normality and the sudden, novel bolt from the blue" (57). If de Man, particularly in his later phases, concentrates on the instabilities in language to a degree sufficient to bring out a latent pragmatist reaction in just about anyone¹⁶, with Rorty there is a correspondingly problematic refusal to address such instabilities at all.

Thus far, then, working out of Rorty's initial definition of "ironist"

I have examined how "ironist" and "ironism" is preferred over *ironic* and *irony* insofar as the former terms serve to differentiate Rorty's meaning from a narrower species of rhetorical irony, and insofar as they fit in with his discussion of ironism as a mode of consciousness and as self-creation as distinct from irony as a trope. I have suggested, furthermore, that given Rorty's wish to concede the self's production within language, a greater attention to the tropological aspects of irony would be warranted, that his pragmatist elision of the problem and his concomitant view of discourse as inherently stable unless disrupted in a revolutionary fashion, are overly rigid dichotomies that misrepresent how discourses generally function. I will now pursue the significant parallels, but also at each stage the significant divergences, in Rorty's use of irony as compared to that of Schlegel and de Man, namely, irony as self-consciousness of the fictionality of discourse, and irony as self-creation. Irony as the non-synthesis of oppositions, my third point of comparison, is implicit in both of these and will arise in the course of my discussion of them. I will consider simultaneously, in relation to my earlier parallel discussions of Schlegel and de Man, Rorty's perspective on the relation between irony and politics and even the relation between irony and ideology that Rorty implicitly posits and depends upon even as he ostensibly denies the efficacy of the latter concept.

The fourth chapter of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," contains Rorty's most extensive discussion of the "ironist" and "ironism." Near the beginning of this chapter Rorty provides his most detailed definition of the ironist, one which reiterates and expands

upon the brief definition I have already begun to analyze.

I shall define an "ironist" as someone who fulfils three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary¹ she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) in so far as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. (CIS 73)

The first thing to note in this comparative analysis is that irony for Rorty, as for Schlegel and de Man, is associated with *skepticism*, with "radical and continuing doubts" about one's final vocabulary. Schlegel's definition of irony as "an endless parabasis," illustrates the skeptical aspect of irony and Rorty's irony implicitly rearticulates the assumptions contained in this definition.

Schlegel as we have seen defines irony as "an endless parabasis," a definition de Man cites with approval, likening parabasis to the intrusive narrator in eighteenth and nineteenth century novels, the narrator who disrupts fictional illusion by appearing to engage the reader directly, or *outside* the fiction. Irony, then, is a similar self-consciousness of a work's fictional status. As an *endless* parabasis it also combines with this an awareness that the voice which disrupts the fictional illusion is no less fictional, that one does not arrive through such disruptions at a final authoritative position.

While Rorty is not directly concerned with irony as the consciousness of a specifically *fictional* illusion, he makes the parallel point that beliefs and desires framed in our final vocabularies are not real in the sense of having a privileged access to a universal objective truth.

Rorty's ironist is, as he frequently repeats, a "nominalist": "in so far as she [the ironist] philosophizes about her situation she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself" (73). Furthermore, drawing on Harold Bloom's theory of literary creativity Rorty describes individuals who provide new paradigms in science, culture and politics as "*strong poets*" (CIS Ch 2); and as we have seen, he views the creation of such new paradigms as a process of introducing new *metaphors* into old language games. Rorty's vocabulary of poets and metaphors indicates, then, that he does view the individual or a culture's "own most central beliefs and desires" as, in a sense, fictional constructs. As with Schlegel and de Man, irony names the recognition of this fictionality--although with the former theorists, and particularly de Man, this recognition is instigated by an ironic *disruption* of language in its normal functioning which gives the analogy to the parabasis its meaning. Given the closed stable character of "normal discourse" that Rorty posits it is difficult to see from whence this recognition arises. It is difficult to see how irony is possible--a problem I will return to in my concluding comments.

Rorty's assertion that the "opposite of irony is common sense" (CIS 74) draws the parallel with Schlegel and de Man's understanding of irony as the consciousness of fictionality of a discourse still more forcefully.

For that [commonsense] is the watchword of those who *unselfconsciously* describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated. To be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies. (CIS 74 my emphasis)

Commonsense, then, is the belief that one's language is final and authoritative. Beliefs and desires are not recognized as creative metaphors but "unselfconsciously" accepted as ontological verities. Fiction is not recognized as fiction but naively accepted as reality. In de Man's terms such a common sense attitude would be that characterizing the operation of language in "everyday, common existence" (BI 213) where it is accepted as adequate to the task of describing the world and human experience, where it functions as "a tool by means of which the heterogeneous material of experience is more-or-less adequately made to fit" (BI 213), or as in similarly "mystified forms of language (such as symbolic or mimetic representation)"(BI 226) in which the arbitrary--or "contingent" to use Rorty's term--character of the vocabulary is not recognized.

I also note here that although Rorty rejects the usefulness of the concept of ideology and of ideology critique, his outline of a commonsensical position which irony opposes implicitly draws upon one of the dominant senses generally given to the concept of ideology and one I have drawn on throughout my study: a system of beliefs which one takes as second nature, failing to recognize its historical and cultural contingency or, analogously, its fictionality. All that is missing from Rorty's latent invocation of ideology is the suggestion that such vocabularies serve particular power interests. This *is*, however, a significant absence--a telling one given the characteristically uncritical tenor of Rorty's thought. To see the commonsensical as ideological suggests that while our vocabularies may not be grounded in some privileged access to universal truth nor are they wholly based on blind and accidental contingencies as

Rorty would have it (CIS 16-17). The contingencies that inform them are in many instances based in class, gender and racial hegemonies. In attempting to articulate the political efficacy of a liberal ironist stance Rorty will outline a concept of ideology even more explicitly. I will return to this latent concept of ideology in considering Rorty's view of the political efficacy of the liberal ironist stance.

If we can compare Rortian and Schlegelian irony in terms of a skepticism concerning the final authority of a discourse we can begin to see simultaneously in this dual association of irony with skepticism a crucial divergence in their conceptions of irony. For Schlegelian irony, as I have argued in chapter one, is analogous to what Schlegel describes as "skeptical *method*" (Ath 97), a strategy as articulated in *Athenaeum* 53 that attempts to combine the necessarily systematizing tendency of thought with the particularity that eludes and disrupts such a tendency: "It's equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two." The political analogy that Schlegel himself draws with such a strategy is the paradoxical figure of an "insurgent government" (Ath 97). Rortian irony by contrast attempts to polarize the opposition between system and non-system. This is characteristic of his entire discussion of the "ironist" and "ironism" in "Private Irony and Liberal Hope." The ironist is here defined in opposition to the metaphysician. To each of these terms Rorty applies a series of opposing characteristics which, by and large, validate the ironist over the metaphysician. In each case Schlegelian irony demonstrates a comparable moment of opposition but the opposition is not conceived as static or

absolute; irony is conceived rather as the necessary interplay and interpenetration of these oppositions.

Schlegelian irony, like Schlegel's fragmentary writing that was intended to manifest this irony, was self-consciously conceived of as opposing the totalizing tendencies of metaphysical systems such as Kant's. And as we have seen, Schlegel's most polemical (and political) critique of such an overly abstract and universalizing tendency is contained in his representation of the French *national character*.¹⁸ Rorty likewise defines irony in opposition to the systematizing, abstracting tendencies of a uniformly conceived metaphysics. The metaphysician's method consists of

weaving platitudes (or, as they would prefer to say, . . . intuitions) into a *perspicuous system* The typical strategy of the metaphysician is to spot an apparent contradiction between two platitudes, two intuitively plausible propositions, and then propose a distinction which will *resolve the contradiction*. Metaphysicians then go on to embed this distinction within *a network of associated distinctions--a philosophical theory--*which will take some of the strain off the initial distinction. . . . He sees philosophical theories as *converging--*a series of discoveries about the nature of such things as truth and personhood, which get closer and closer to the way they really are, and carry the culture as a whole closer to an accurate representation of reality. (CIS 77 emphasis added)

The intolerance of contradiction, the urge to construct an overarching theory within which all particularities would converge--these are all familiar critiques of the metaphysical system in Schlegel's fragments.

A striking echo of Schlegel's fragments is contained in Rorty's juxtaposition of the metaphysicians and the ironists' "attitude toward books" (CIS 75). The metaphysician attempts to codify books "by reference to a previously determined grid" (CIS 76), to separate poetry, philosophy,

science and so forth according to their proper object of knowledge. The ironists by contrast

take the writings of all the people with poetic gifts, all the original minds who had a talent for redescription--Pythagoras, Plato, Milton, Newton, Goethe, Kant, Kierkegaard, Baudelaire, Darwin, Freud--as grist to be put through the same dialectical mill. . . . The ironist would like to avoid cooking the books she reads by using any such grid (although, with ironic resignation, she realizes that she can hardly help doing so). (CIS 76)

Rorty's association of Ironist thought with generic impurity, in contrast to the metaphysician's "grid" recalls, amongst numerous of Schlegel's statements to this effect, most famously *Athenaeum* 116 wherein he asserts of "Romantic poetry" that "its aim isn't merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature. . . ." Rorty's suggestive parenthetical reference to the ironist's "ironic resignation" concerning the inescapability of the "grid," and thus by extension the inescapability of system, and indeed of metaphysics, also recalls Schlegel. But while Rorty nods in passing to such an inescapability, unlike Schlegel he fails to take account of its implications--implications that destabilize Rorty's own *systematic* opposition between ironism and metaphysics.

Irony is similarly conceived of by Rorty and Schlegel as the resistance of particularity and difference to the universalizing tendencies of metaphysics. On the one hand Rorty asserts that the metaphysician

thinks that the task of the intellectual is to preserve and defend liberalism by backing it up with some *true propositions about large subjects*, but she [the ironist] thinks that this task is to increase our skill at recognizing and describing the *different sorts of little*

things around which individuals or communities center their fantasies and their lives. (CIS 93 my emphasis)

Metaphysics seeks to discover a final system within which all particularities will "converge" (CIS 76). One of the chief consequences of metaphysics' attempt to discover such convergence is that it must employ abstract and relatively empty terms that can be perceived as containing all other terms. Thus the metaphysicians "tend to concentrate on the thinner, more flexible, more ubiquitous items in this vocabulary--words like 'true,' 'good,' 'person,' and 'object.' For the thinner the term, the more platitudes will employ it" (CIS 77). For the ironist, by contrast, "searches for a final vocabulary are not destined to converge" (CIS 76). Under the sign of irony Rorty invokes a defence of the local, the particular and of difference that is a familiar stance in a variety of postmodernist writings.¹⁹ Against the thin abstract terms of the metaphysician's universalizing metalanguage the ironist recognizes that in any given vocabulary "thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example, 'Christ,' 'England,' 'professional standards,' 'decency,' 'kindness,' 'the Revolution,' 'the Church,' 'progressive,' 'rigorous,' 'creative' do most of the work" (CIS 73). The ironist's "description of what she is doing when she looks for a better final vocabulary than the one she is currently using is dominated by metaphors of . . . *diversification and novelty* rather than convergence to the antecedently present" (CIS 77).

Schlegel asserts that irony "contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative" (Ly 108), demonstrating, as he does in different ways throughout the *Lyceum* and *Athenaeum* fragments, a concern with particularity that parallels Rorty's.

For both writers the association of irony with particularity and difference serves to ally their irony with the politics of liberal pluralism. Juxtaposing the liberal metaphysician with the liberal ironist Rorty asserts that the former "wants a final vocabulary with an internal and organic structure, one which is not split down the middle by a public-private distinction, not just a *patchwork*" (CIS 102). Rorty suggests that the imposition of such universalizing structures, while they might have served liberal purposes in their day (as for example in the liberal metaphysician's discourse of "inalienable human rights") have become an impediment to liberalism. The liberal ironist's recognition that a liberal society can only ever achieve a "patchwork" of vocabularies--which at best might become a "beautiful mosaic" (CIS 81)--is more conducive to the tolerance and pluralism that, in any event, both kinds of liberals wish to achieve.

Rorty's juxtaposition of the "internal and organic structure" versus the "patchwork" recalls Schlegel's *Lyceum* 103 in which "the powerful . . . instinct for unity in mankind" is juxtaposed with "the *motley heap* of ideas" provided by "solid, really existent fragments." Schlegel critiques the instinct for unity for "deceiving even the exceptional reader" and, in parallel to Rorty's outline of a liberal ironist's utopia, praises the "motley heap of ideas" as analogous to "that free and equal fellowship in which . . . the citizens of the perfect state will live at some future date."

Yet Schlegel's position that irony "contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative" (Ly 108) also marks the critical difference between his and Rorty's conception of irony. For to invoke an "indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and

the relative" is to insist, nonetheless, upon a fundamental relation between the universal and the particular, as does the word "relative" itself. For Rorty's ironist by contrast there is no such "indissoluble antagonism," indeed no tension between the universal and the particular whatsoever. Rorty's nominalist ironist *knows* that terms such as "absolute," and "universal" have no extra-linguistic validity, *knows* that they are simply words--the thinner platitudes amongst other thicker more useful platitudes that comprise certain final vocabularies. Rorty, indeed, answers the charge of philosophical relativism levelled against his position by asserting that such a charge is only meaningful within a metaphysical framework within which there *is* a universal in contrast to which one *could* be merely relative. The charge of relativism, along with the related charge of irrationalism, are "remnants of a vocabulary we should try to replace" (CIS 44).

The eradication of such a tension, I am suggesting, leaves Rortian irony bereft both of an effectively critical edge and of the necessary recognition of limitation that an irony such as Schlegel's might exercise upon our actions. The point can be approached most productively from Rorty's opposition of the dominant metaphors governing the metaphysician and the ironist's mode of inquiry. For the metaphysician it is the metaphor of "finding," for the ironist it is the metaphor of "making" (CIS 77). "Finding" dominates the metaphysician's mode of inquiry in so far as he looks for that which is already there, that which is given in all cases. "Making" dominates the ironist's mode of inquiry in so far as she realizes that nothing absolute is given, that our beliefs have been constructed in

certain ways and may be reconstructed in other more productive ways. With Schlegel, by contrast, finding and making each find a moment of affirmation and subsequent negation by the other term.

We have seen that Schlegel in his treatment of national character, nation and history, gives due attention to what has become known more recently as the "constructive hypothesis," a hypothesis that has dominated contemporary theory such as Rorty's to the point of saturation. Schlegel notes for instance how classical scholarship often engages in a process of constructing the ancient Greeks in a manner that reflects more on contemporary ideals and aspirations than on its putative object. "Up to now everyone has managed to find in the ancients what he needed or wished for: especially himself" (Ath 151). Of interpretations in general Schlegel asserts that they "are frequently insertions of something that seems desirable or expedient" (Ath 25). Schlegel's view of the "so-called History of States" as retrospective narrative constructions that redescribe the past in order to legitimate a particular political state--"nothing more than a genetic definition of the phenomenon of the present political conditions of a nation" (Ath 223)--strikes a particularly postmodern Rortian note (see CIS 55).

Yet while the recognition of the element of constructedness in our interpretations of, or beliefs about, the natural and human worlds is necessary for Schlegel, it remains checked and critiqued by an idea of the objectively and universally true, just as the latter remains critiqued and limited by the former. Thus in *Athenaeum* 151 above Schlegel's stipulation that "up to now" representations of ancient peoples have been little more

than idealized self reflections, indicates that there *is* a way to get at a more truthful representation. Likewise the conclusion to his proto-Nietzschean fragment on interpretation in *Athenaeum* 25 indicates that he is not wholly given over to the constructive hypothesis. Because we insert what is desirable or expedient into our interpretations "many a deduction is actually a *traduction*"--a slanderously inaccurate misinterpretation. And he asks, rhetorically, with respect to interpretations of a given object if it is not "*childlike* to marvel at the wonder of what one has created oneself?" To be childlike, or naive in the Schillerian sense, is certainly not a wholly pejorative description for Schlegel, yet he suggests that a self-consciousness of the constructedness of our interpretations is necessary in order to correct and limit the excesses of such a tendency, not, as in the direction Rorty would lead us, in order to give it free reign in a postmodern anti-foundationalist culture.

Another way of stating Schlegel's desire to hold finding and making in a dialectical tension is in terms of his central project of combining philosophy, understood as *finding* the ultimate nature of reality--or as Schlegel puts it, as "a mutual search for omniscience" (Ath 344)--and poetry, understood as *poiesis* or *making*. "Whatever can be done while poetry and philosophy are separated has been done and accomplished. So the time has come to unite the two" (Id 108). Irony, as Kevin Newmark has written in relation to Schlegel, "is a term that always marks the encounter and potential tension between literature and philosophy, or truth and tropes" (906). With Rorty, by contrast, the encounter is over, the tension has been eradicated, philosophy is not combined with, but reduced to

poiesis, to a "rather narrowly confined, literary tradition--roughly the Plato-Kant canon" (CIS 97). The ironist is the one who recognizes and embraces "the final victory of poetry in its ancient quarrel with philosophy--the final victory of metaphors of self-creation over metaphors of discovery" (CIS 40).

Rorty's (post)philosophy in effect abolishes the *object*, abolishes any notion of an objective truth either about ourselves or the world around us that we might believe ourselves to have discovered or might hope eventually to discover, a truth existing independently of our always historically shifting human predications of it. Rorty argues this point in part through a critique, worked out largely in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, of epistemology and its informing subject/object dichotomy. Drawing from Heidegger's critique of epistemology amongst others (a critique I have considered in my discussion of de Man's own substitution of the subject/object problematic for a problematic of temporality and rhetoric) Rorty critiques the idea of truth as *adequatio*, a wholly transparent representation of the object to the subject: "the notion of having reality unveiled to us . . . with some unimaginable sort of immediacy which would make discourse and description superfluous" (Rorty *Philosophy* 375). From Rorty's neopragmatist standpoint truth is what works, what, because it works, gets accepted as truth in any given culture at a given point in history. It is a product of the vocabularies that predominate at any given time: "since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths" (CIS 2).

But while Rorty draws support for his position from Heidegger, there is a persistent materialism in Heidegger's thought which for many constitutes its most valuable aspect, an attempt to comprehend Being outside anthropomorphizing modes of knowledge. It is precisely such a materialism in Heidegger that Rorty wishes to do away with. Rorty notes Heidegger's critical characterization in "The Age of the World Picture" of the later stages of European thought, of which Heidegger makes Nietzsche the central figure, as one in which "'the world becomes view' as the intellectuals (and gradually, everyone else) realize that anything can be made to look good or bad, interesting or boring, by being recontextualized, redescribed" (CIS 11). While Heidegger "loathed" (CIS 113) such a "humanistic" standpoint as nihilistic, Rorty, as one who "forgets about Being and thinks that beings are all there are, . . . want[s] to stand Heidegger on his head--to cherish what he loathed" (CIS 113). Thus Rorty, in a disturbing formulation, promotes "a culture that would have no room for the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be responsible" (CIS 45).

It is not difficult to point to instances in which a recognition of *limit* provided by some residual notion of an absolute existing independently of our models of comprehension and description constitutes a salutary check upon the possible excesses of a constructive hypothesis. As Roy Bhaskar notes, to fail to see "that there are physical (natural) constraints on human social life--that is, 'non-human forces to which we must be responsible' and responsive--is a charter for ecological disaster, if not indeed (species) suicide" (227). Furthermore, some kind of ontology

is necessary within which even to think, along with Rorty:

(i) the contingency of our origins, of human experience and human reason (and hence the possibility of an unexperienced or an a-rational(ized) world); (ii) the finitude of human being (including the uncompleted or unfinished character of human lives); and (iii) the historicity of human knowledge. (Bhaskar 207)

I will consider the necessity of such a limit by way of considering the problems raised by another central aspect of Rorty's irony, irony as self-creation.

Rorty's understanding of irony, I have argued, parallels Schlegel's and de Man's in so far as each refers to a self-consciousness of the contingent, fictional nature of discourses and the beliefs and desires articulated within them. Furthermore, Rorty parallels Schlegel in locating *freedom* in this ironic self-consciousness. De Man goes some little distance toward negating such freedom entirely, a problematic extreme the possible consequences of which I have explored in my previous chapter. Rorty on the other hand presents an opposingly problematic extreme in failing to take account of the limits to freedom posited in his own version of self-creation. Schlegelian irony both affirms and problematizes such freedom and thus operates as the most satisfying negotiation of the polarities presented by de Man and Rorty.

Rorty affirms "'freedom as the recognition of contingency'" (CIS 46)²⁰ a recognition he names irony. The recognition of contingency for Rorty is the recognition that one's beliefs and desires are historically, culturally constructed metaphors. Thus they are not absolute, other historical eras and other cultures have produced different metaphors and still newer ones will arise in one's own culture. Once we recognizes this

we are in a sense freed from the determinism these metaphors exercise upon us if we mistakenly accept them as absolutes and thus as necessary. Or to put it more accurately, one can *begin* to free oneself from these metaphors. One can begin to "[weave] new candidates for belief and desire into antecedently existing webs of belief and desire" (CIS 84) and through this process hopefully create a self that one can call one's own.

Although self-creation is not included within Rorty's explicit extended definition of the "ironist" that commences "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," it is clearly implied throughout in such phrases as "self-creating ironist" (CIS 65). Writing of the "ironist theorist" in the following chapter entitled "Self-creation and affiliation" Rorty states: "He is doing the same thing which all ironists do--attempting autonomy. He is trying to get out from under inherited contingencies and make his own contingencies, get out from under an old final vocabulary and fashion one which will be all his own" (CIS 97). Rorty's "ironism," then, might appear to be synonymous with the kind of *redescription* of one vocabulary in terms of another that he frequently discusses. However, the synonymization of ironism and redescription, Rorty tells us, is too imprecise. Redescription for Rorty characterizes all forms of discursive conflict (between different cultures, religions, philosophies, etc) as it characterizes intellectual and cultural history seen as a succession of changing metaphors. Redescription is "no more closely connected with ironism than with metaphysics. The metaphysician also redescribes, even though he does it in the name of reason rather than in the name of the imagination. Redescription is a generic trait of the intellectual, not a specific mark of

the ironist" (CIS 90).

The "specific mark of the ironist" appears to be threefold. Firstly, she *knows* that all this is just redescription, that no "vocabulary is closer to reality than others . . . that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed" (CIS 73). Secondly Rorty asserts: "the metaphysician . . . thinks that there is a connection between redescription and power, and that the right redescription can make us free. The ironist offers no similar assurance" (CIS 90).²¹ Knowing there is no true language of the world allied to a power outside the human, the ironist embraces her "rootlessness" (CIS 75) and contingency. Thus thirdly, self-creation through redescription becomes her highest goal.

The generic trait of ironists is that they do not hope to have their doubts about their final vocabularies settled by something larger than themselves. This means that their criterion for resolving doubts, their criterion of private perfection, is autonomy rather than affiliation to a power other than themselves. All any ironist can measure success against is the past--not by living up to it, but by redescribing it in his terms, thereby becoming able to say, "Thus I will it." (CIS 97)

Rorty attributes the idea of narrative self-creation that he wishes to integrate into his pragmatist philosophy to Nietzsche (CIS 27)²², but as we have seen it was long preceded by Friedrich Schlegel. Furthermore, Schlegel directly associates self-creation with irony. Nietzsche, on the other hand, does not. Nietzsche generally avoided the word irony altogether and at least once when it appears in his writings it is treated with suspicion.²³

Schlegel writes in *Athenaeum* 51:

Naive is what is or seems to be natural, individual, or classical *to the point of irony, or else to the point of continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction*. If it's simply

instinctive, then it's childlike, childish, or silly; if it's merely intentional, then it gives rise to affectation. The beautiful, poetical, ideal naive must combine intention and instinct. The essence of intention is in this sense freedom, though intention isn't consciousness by a long shot. (my emphasis)

In this passage we see again how Schlegelian irony is partially similar to Rorty's irony, yet also crucially different. That Schlegel is here discussing the specifically aesthetic artefact, the work of art, should not deter us from drawing the analogy with Rorty's cultural and political concerns. For with Schlegel and with Rorty the aesthetic artefact is in some respects analogous to the self and to society.

Irony, to briefly rehearse Schlegel's crucial articulation in this fragment, is conceived of as that which combines the instinctual and the intentional, which fluctuates or hovers between them. "Instinct" represents the natural forces within us. We cannot be wholly conscious of nor control such forces and thus they stand as the negation of the self understood as an at least partially autonomous agent. Therefore, that which is dominated by instinct is "merely childlike, childish, or silly." "Intention" is that within us that opposes such forces attempting to rework them according to some design of our own creation, a process that affirms and creates the self. Thus "the essence of intention is in this sense freedom." Schlegelian irony, then, refers to a reworking of certain deterministic forces through which one might achieve self-creation. Schlegel describes these forces as natural and instinctual. Rorty, despite his incorporation of a certain Freudianism into his ideas of self-hood (CIS 30-39), would not; for Rorty the forces that produce us are simply fortuitous historical contingencies.

While Schlegelian irony retains a reference to the natural and instinctual that to Rorty might appear misguided and outdated, these are by no means simplistic binaries in Schlegel's articulation. Schlegel insists "that intention isn't consciousness by a long shot;" and he continues on in this fragment to maintain that "intention doesn't exactly require any deep calculation or plan." Thus the instinctual inhabits the intentional, an insight that might be elaborated by Nietzschean or Freudian theories of sublimation (a point that should trouble Rorty given that he attempts to incorporate both theorists into his own position). At the same time, in a chiasmatic crossing characteristic of Schlegel's thought, the intentional also inhabits the merely instinctual or natural. In response to the popular critical view of Schlegel's time that Homer could be conceived of as a completely natural, or "naive" poet, Schlegel asserts at the close of this same fragment: "even if Homer himself had no intentions, his poetry and the real author of that poetry, Nature, certainly did."

Schlegel's comment suggests at least two readings, both of which are productive in this context. On the one hand, nature has intention because what we construe as the natural will be in part a cultural construct. This reading assumes, or allows for, Rorty's position and in my detailed reading of Schlegel in my second chapter I evinced much evidence of Schlegel's partial support for such a constructivist position. At the same time, however, nature has intention because Schlegelian irony retains an other-than-the-subject possessing a truth, a design even, that is not the subject's own. This residuum of a non-subjective truth places crucial restrictions upon the processes of self-creation that are absent in Rorty's

irony.

From *Athenaeum* 51 and from the rest of Schlegel's published Fragments we can legitimately construe several senses to the limitation upon self-creation that Schlegel posits in conceptualizing irony as a dialectic of self-creation and self-destruction. Aesthetically it suggests that a work of art should not appear to be too artful, that a balance must be struck between those elements that would bear the trace of the author's individuality, and a pleasing naturalness or naiveté in the execution that restrains such individuality, a balance found somewhere between the extremes of the merely affected and the merely childish. Theoretically, nature, both in the sense of a stubborn materiality and in the sense of an unchangeable essence (as in 'human nature') limits self-creation. Indeed the value of an aesthetic self-restraint, Schlegel suggests, lies in its consciousness of the inevitability of this more fundamental limitation. In *Lyceum* 37 Schlegel asserts that "self-restriction" is "for the artist as well as the man . . . the most necessary . . . duty. Most necessary because wherever one does not restrict oneself, one is restricted by the world; and that makes one a slave."²⁴

Irony as self-creation is further limited for Schlegel by the self's creation within language. Schlegel dramatizes this predicament in "On Incomprehensibility" noting that irony must be understood as

something that happens in more ways than one. For example, if one speaks of irony without using it, as I have just done; if one speaks of irony ironically without in the process being aware of having fallen into a far more noticeable irony; if one can't disentangle oneself from irony any more, as seems to be happening in this essay . . . and if irony runs wild and can't be controlled any longer. (37)

In such comments Schlegel recognizes that our control over language, and thus our control over the self creation we attempt in and through language, will always be curtailed by language's control over us.

Schlegel also recognizes the limits to self-creation in social structures of which language is one among others. When Schlegel notes that "wherever one does not restrict oneself, one is restricted by the world," we understand by "world" [*Welt*] the social as well as the natural spheres of being. On a theoretical level that has been explored in Gary Handwerk's discussion of Schlegelian irony such a limitation appears in the form of the constitutionally social nature of the subject assumed by Schlegel, a subject that is constituted in relation to others and who thus contains an irreducibly social otherness at its core (Handwerk 18-43). Furthermore, I have explored in Chapter One how Schlegel's fragments on the governmental, institutional distribution of power are an attempt to work out the political structure of the dual necessity of individual autonomy and restrictions upon that autonomy.

With Rorty, on the other hand, there are also limits to the kind of metaphoric redescription that comprise any attempts at self-creation. As Roy Bhaskar has noted, Rorty does not maintain that the "ideal--of total self-creation, full self-overcoming" (Bhaskar 224) is a possibility. Rorty writes: "no project of redescribing the world and the past, no project of self-creation through imposition of own's own idiosyncratic metaphoric, can avoid being marginal and parasitic" (CIS 41). Indeed, when closely examined, the limitations Rorty posits are such that the freedom through self-creation he propounds appear very restrictive indeed. Yet despite

these limitations, Rorty fully affirms the pursuit of self-creation in the private realm as the sphere within which the individual can achieve her or his freedom. He thus proposes a largely imaginary realm of private freedom which leaves the rest of the world unchanged. To this extent his irony is ideological in a profound sense.

The first order limits to the metaphoric redescription of self and world that Rorty posits are the specifically *theoretical* limits, theoretical because they derive logically from his overall historicist and linguistically oriented theory of truth as a history of changing metaphors. From these theoretical limits Rorty goes on to suggest both ethical and political limits to redescription.

Metaphoric redescription can only ever be "marginal and parasitic" because metaphors, as "unfamiliar uses of old words . . . are possible only against the background of other old words being used in old familiar ways. A language which was 'all metaphor' would be a language which had no use, hence not a language but just babble" (CIS 41). Thus any attempt at self-creation through redescription in one's own vocabulary will be resisted by a necessary background of historically and socially determined linguistic convention. Here Rorty reminds us of "Wittgenstein's point that there are no private languages" (CIS 41). Given such limitations "there can be no fully Nietzschean lives, lives which are pure action rather than reaction--no lives which are not largely parasitical on an un-redescribed past and dependent on the charity of as yet unborn generations" (CIS 42).

The "charity of as yet unborn generations" indicates a further aspect of the theoretical limitations upon redescription, namely, the

significance of a new metaphor in changing our fundamental understanding of ourselves and of our world can only be, as Bhaskar paraphrases Rorty, "recognized *post festum* and retrospectively justified" (224). This position follows logically from Rorty's central assumption that language is not a medium of either expression or representation and that there is no archimedean point outside our current vocabularies from which we could speak of having a particular intention in the introduction a new metaphor. To speak of language and metaphor in such terms is to posit an extra-linguistic ground and thus to return to metaphysics. The "creation of a new form of cultural life, a new vocabulary," Rorty writes,

will have its utility explained only retrospectively. We cannot see Christianity or Newtonianism or the Romantic movement or political liberalism as a tool while we are still in the course of figuring out how to use it. For there are as yet no clearly formulatable ends to which it is a means. But once we figure out how to use the vocabularies of these movements, we can tell a story of progress, showing how the literalization of certain metaphors served the purpose of making possible all the good things that have recently happened. (CIS 55)

Yet this important limitation upon metaphoric redescription applies more to the large scale publicly accepted redescriptions (or in the Kuhnian terminology Rorty employs, "paradigm shifts") than to the more private project of self-creation that Rorty generally associates with irony. This distinction between redescriptions for public purposes versus redescription for private purposes is central to Rorty's argument. The purpose of the distinction is to provide certain *ethical* limitations upon the former which might meet the objections to a metaphysically ungrounded liberalism,²⁵ while granting the latter the greatest freedom allowable.²⁶

"Borrow[ing] [his] definition of 'liberal' from Judith Shklar, who

says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do" (CIS XV), Rorty maintains that "only redescription which serve liberal [public] purposes are those which answer the question 'What humiliates?' . . . The liberal ironist just wants our *chances of being kind*, of avoiding the humiliation of others, to be expanded by redescription" (CIS 91). Redescription for private purposes, or self-creation, enjoys a much broader purview. It is limited for the theoretical reasons suggested above but otherwise, for liberals at least, only by an ethical imperative to avoid cruelty. And even in this respect one is limited only in so far as one's private purposes impinge on public purposes. Thus the "ironist novelist" (CIS 101) may be granted a large latitude to redescribe others however she or he wishes because the novel, as Rorty conceives it, is an essentially private act of self-creation.²⁷ The liberal politician or the liberal philosopher whose purposes are public does not enjoy such latitude. And again, it is to redescription for private purposes that Rorty largely confines the term irony. Thus Rorty can shorthand the concerns of these two kinds of redescription as matters of "public hope" versus "private irony" (CIS 91).

From the theoretical limitations to cultural transformation through metaphoric redescription Rorty draws conclusions that have an undeniably *political* import. "Ironist theorists," of whom the "paradigms" for Rorty are "the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*, the Nietzsche of *Twilight of the Idols*, and the Heidegger of the 'Letter on Humanism'" (CIS 101):

have in common the idea that something (history, Western man, metaphysics--something large enough to have a destiny) has exhausted its possibilities. So now all things must be made new. They are not interested only in making

themselves new. They also want to make this big thing new; their own autonomy will be a spin-off from this larger newness. They want *the sublime and ineffable*, not just *the beautiful and novel*--something incommensurable with the past, not simply the past recaptured through rearrangement and redescription. They want not just the effable and relative beauty of rearrangement but the ineffable and absolute sublimity of the Wholly Other; they want *Total Revolution*. They want a way of seeing their past which is incommensurable with all the ways in which the past has described itself. By contrast ironist novelists are not interested in incommensurability. They are content with mere difference. Private autonomy can be gained by redescribing one's past in a way which had not occurred to the past. It does not require apocalyptic novelty of the sort which ironist theory demands. (CIS 101 my emphasis)

The ironist theorist is here allied with precisely the sort of apocalyptic temporality that irony (and allegory) in de Man's theorization always disrupts. The ironic sign for de Man constitutes a temporality that is based upon the "repetition . . . of a previous sign with which it can never coincide since it is the essence of this sign to be pure anteriority" (BI 207). That the ironic sign is, for de Man, a *repetition* suggests that it can never be apocalyptically new, just as the assertion that the sign can never *coincide* with the previous sign suggests that it cannot, as in the mirror gesture of certain revolutionary programs, recapture a past conceived as more desirable than the present.²⁸

But Rorty's position, while it employs a different terminology, is in some respects parallel to de Man's, for Rorty is asserting that the ironist *ought not* to ally himself with such an apocalyptic program. To do so is an ethical transgression of the private sphere within which Rorty wishes to confine irony. De Man resists any explicitly ethical language in his theorization of irony but he too sees irony as taking place within the self, as necessarily resisting, in a peculiarly coloured phrase, the

"degradation to an intersubjective level" (BI 217). Furthermore, Rorty would contend, in a fashion that recalls de Man, that the ironist theorist's apocalyptic project is an inauthentic elision of his truest insight: that history is an *endless* process of redescription, a succession of changing metaphors which, while they may achieve something quite different than what preceded them, can never avoid being "marginal and parasitic" upon what preceded them. What de Man and Rorty are saying in different ways is that irony is not temporary, not to be erased in some seamless totality of the future. De Man critiques a conventional view of irony as "a preliminary movement toward a recovered unity" (BI 219). Rorty likewise critiques the metaphysician who "prays that irony will no longer be necessary" (CIS 92). And the ironist theorist, in so far as he comes to believe he speaks for "something large enough to have a destiny," becomes just another metaphysician (CIS 104).

But if de Man conceives of irony as constantly disrupting any final apocalyptic reconciliation of self and world as well as self and others, his irony, as I have explored in the previous chapter, remains equally suspicious of the possibility of achieving freedom through self creation. The truly ironic subject (or, rather, the true subject of irony) becomes caught in a maddening *vertige* of "self-destruction and self-invention" (BI 222). Rorty by contrast uses the critique of apocalyptic temporality precisely to affirm irony as self-creation. Society and the world cannot be made new but one can go about the business of pursuing one's own "private autonomy."³⁹ To this extent Rorty's theoretical and ethical limits to metaphoric redescription suggest simultaneously a limit on what is

attainable through political action. This political limit bespeaks much about the ideology of Rorty's theory, despite his disavowal of both ideology (CIS 83-84) and theory (CIS 76-77).

The ironist theorists, in their failure to recognize, as Rorty has earlier theorized, that self and societal transformation can only be "marginal and parasitic" (CIS 41), become in the political sphere not only deluded, but very possibly dangerous, radicals thirsting after the sublime of "Total Revolution." As "public philosophers they are at best useless and at worst dangerous" (CIS 68). The ironist novelists, on the other hand, preeminently concerned with "making themselves new . . . [with] [p]rivate autonomy," make better liberals, or at least better models for liberals to follow. Content with "the beautiful and the novel . . . [with] mere difference," they can be expected to be sensitively pluralistic in politics without engaging upon any misguided projects to fundamentally change social structures, structures which a critic of a more radical bent might believe to be sustaining and reproducing a currently dominant and inequitable social order. "The effable and relative beauty of rearrangement" cited as the more modest goal of the ironist novelist would here be allied to a politics which would be moderately reformist at its most extreme, a politics which would share Rorty's conviction that "contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement," and share Rorty's "hunch . . . that Western social and political thought may have had the last *conceptual* revolution it needs" (CIS 63).

Rorty has here set up an overly dichotomous opposition--a characteristic manoeuvre that has been critiqued by Charles Taylor

amongst others ³⁰--between the ironist theorist's goal of "Total Revolution" and the ironist novelist's goal of "private autonomy"--a dichotomy polemically geared toward making the latter the only acceptable alternative. And that one of his paradigm ironist theorists, Heidegger, did hold a notoriously extreme political position, and that another, Nietzsche, was at least appropriated for fascist political purposes, certainly lends rhetorical force to Rorty's position. But clearly one would want to conceive of the projects of certain "ironist theorists" (Adorno, Foucault, Derrida) in terms of a more sober critique of philosophical, institutional, linguistic and economic *structures* that reproduce an undesirable status quo, critiques which are therefore geared toward the possibilities of altering those structures in ways which, while perhaps fundamental, are certainly less apocalyptic than any "Total Revolution."³¹ Similarly one would often wish to conceive the projects of certain ironist novelists as allied with such critiques, that is, to conceive of them in more public and even politically radical terms than simply the quest for "private autonomy."

Rorty, then, asserts that "[i]rony seems *inherently* a private matter" (CIS 87 my emphasis). The most fundamental problem with Rorty's conception of an inherently private irony, as Jennifer Herdt (88-93) and Thomas McCarthy (364-367) have variously suggested, is that it is seriously inconsistent with his overall philosophical position and with his stated objectives--a difficulty which, as I explored in my previous chapter, also characterizes de Man's attempts to delimit irony to a subjective phenomenon. The inconsistency is greater with Rorty, however, because he is fully explicit about language being neither representational of the world

nor an act of consciousness, but the publicly shared medium within which our selves are woven, and the tools with which we *interact* with one another. With de Man on the other hand, I argued that a somewhat similar view of language was implicit in his theory despite his attempt to theorize an "*intentional* rhetoric" (BI 188).

Four inconsistencies arise with Rorty's "inherently" private irony. First, if the self is constructed within a certain contingent vocabulary woven together out of previously existing vocabularies, and if these vocabularies are, as Rorty reminds us after Wittgenstein, never private, then the entire notion of redescriptions geared toward inherently private purposes appears untenable. Rorty might respond that he is not concerned with drawing an absolute distinction between public and private, that such a task would be part of a metaphysics he wishes to abandon. But it is worth noting at least that the public/private distinction is in considerable tension with some of his most fundamental assumptions. Even Rorty supports the "internal consistency" of a given vocabulary as a meaningful criterion of its rationality (CIS 47) and thus, one would hope, the desire to be pragmatic would not entirely excuse his own vocabulary from such a criterion of consistency. Second, Rorty states that one of the aims of *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* is to "suggest the possibility of a liberal utopia: one in which ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal" (xv). When we abandon our commitments to the truth of our own vocabularies we will become, Rorty hopes, sensitive to the validity of other vocabularies and hence liberally pluralistic.³² Thus Rorty himself conceives an overriding public purpose for ironism which undercuts his attempt to

consign it to the private realm. Third, Rorty's division between redescription for public and private purposes is an ethical restriction. One *ought not* engage in redescription that are cruel to other people. While such a restriction is unarguably commendable, it is difficult to defend in the absence of any assumptions about what it means to be human. As Norman Geras has argued (Ch 2), Rorty does implicitly fall back upon such assumptions in support of his public/private division. Fourth, Rorty's entire Nietzschean/Bloomian schema of cultural and scientific history as the introduction of a new metaphor by a "strong poet" which catches on to become the truth of the day, rests upon a conception of ironism that exceeds the private. Many ironist projects will be fated to remain more private than others, but none can be "inherently" so.

What are the possibilities for freedom given Rorty's premises and the kind of irony he describes? What kind of critical perspective does Rortian irony permit toward the vocabularies around us and the institutions that comprise society, a critical perspective that might allow for the alteration of such vocabularies and institutions? These are two key questions I will address before concluding more generally on Rortian irony in relation to Schlegel and de Man.

It is Roy Bhaskar's persuasive argument that Rorty, by virtue of his failure to acknowledge and theorize ontology,

remains captive to the epistemological problematic he critiques . . . a prisoner of the implicit ontology of the problematic he describes. . . . remains under the spell of a third effect of the celestial closure achieved by Newtonian mechanics. Namely its forming a model of phenomena as well as science, an ontological paradigm of an empirical actualist and regularity determinist cast. (198, 201)

On the one hand, as I have explored, Rorty affirms "the apotheosis of contingency" (Bhaskar 213) as freedom such that he can assert: "If there is no center to the self, then there are only different ways of weaving new candidates for belief and desire into antecedently existing webs of belief and desire" (CIS 84). On the other hand, however, Rorty implies a universe of a classically causal, determinist cast as when he asserts in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: "Physicalism is probably right in saying that we shall some day be able, 'in principle', to predict every movement of a person's body (including those of his larynx and his writing hand) by reference to microstructures within his body" (34). Even in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* Rorty implies "a world of blind contingent *mechanical* forces" (17 my emphasis).

In his most sustained articulation in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* of the extra-linguistic world and the extra-linguistic self Rorty asserts:

Both [the self and the world] . . . have power over us--for example, the power to kill us. The world can blindly and inarticulately crush us; mute despair, intense mental pain, can cause us to blot ourselves out. But that sort of power is not the sort we can appropriate by adopting and then transforming its language, thereby becoming identical with the threatening power and subsuming it under our own more powerful selves. This latter strategy is appropriate only for coping with other persons--for example, with parents, gods, and poetic precursors. For our relation to the world, to brute power and to naked pain, is not the sort of relation we have to persons. Faced with the nonhuman, the nonlinguistic, we no longer have an ability to overcome contingency and pain by appropriation and transformation, but only the ability to *recognize* contingency and pain. (CIS 40)

Rorty's negotiation of this antinomy is a familiar one. He implicitly relies upon a classically Kantian distinction between an empirical world which is set, determinate and unchangeable, and a human, existentialist world within

which we may act as free agents--between our relation to objects and our relations to others. The tension between these two positions in Rorty's discourse amounts, Bhaskar notes, to "a veritable tale of two Rorties--tough-minded Humean versus tender-minded existentialist" (212).

The function of this traditional antinomy between the *pour soi* and *en soi* that Rorty adopts is clear. With it he attempts to avoid the clearly untenable position that our vocabularies invent the world out and out--a subject/object identity characterizing certain aestheticizing versions of romanticism that elide the all important "as if" of Kant's Third Critique. There *is* an extra-linguistic world and self of a regulative and determinist cast. Only by allowing such a view can his position not be subject to immediate rebuttal by the success of the natural and medical sciences in predicting and controlling such forces. But, as in the Humean empiricist tradition, this extra-linguistic world and self remains, in Rorty's words, "blind impresses" (CIS 38). We can know nothing with certainty about the ultimate source of these impresses. We can only *recognize* their effects in our historically shifting vocabularies, continually reinventing different causes (CIS 28) to attribute to these effects. *We* interpret the world; the meaning we attribute to it is our own and this is the basis of our freedom. Yet posed in this light the question becomes more acute: what sort of freedom lies in the (mere?) redescription of a deterministic world?

As Bhaskar suggests, Rorty's assertion of a kind of absolute difference between our relation to the natural world within which we are determined and therefore constrained to merely *recognize* these forces, and our relation to the social world within which we are freer to reinvent

through *redescription* because such relations are not so determined, falsely characterizes, and falsely dichotomizes, both worlds. "The social world is not a cut-off redescription of nature. Rather it is both inscribed within and in continuous dynamic causal interaction with (the rest of) nature" (Bhaskar 227). Nature is not the closed and immutable system of Newtonian physics. Nor is science to be properly understood as a passive and descriptive relation to the natural world but as a dialectical interaction with, even manipulation of, that world (Bhaskar 208). On the other side, human interaction frequently takes more the form of a relation to objects than a relation to others.

The existence of objective social structures (from languages to family or kinship systems to economic or state forms), dependent on the reproductive transformative agency of human beings, must be granted. Such structures are not created by human beings--for, they pre-exist us and their existence is a necessary condition for any intentional act. But they exist and persist only in virtue of our activity, which reproduces or transforms them. . . . It follows from this that Rorty's distinction between 'coping with other persons' and 'coping with the non-human, the non-linguistic' namely by redescription needs to be reworked, on several counts. . . there is more to coping with social reality than coping with other people. There is coping with a whole host of social entities, including institutions, traditions, networks of relations and the like--which are irreducible to people. In particular it would be a mistake to think that we had overcome a social structure, like the economy, state or family, if we were successful imposing our description of it on the community. (226)

Rorty's (post)philosophical position does not permit thought access to either the objective natural physical limits of our environment with which we must contend, nor to the objective social structures that sustain and reproduce a status quo from which we might desire to be free. Thus the kind of freedom through *metaphoric redescription* that Rorty describes

(and prescribes) amounts, as Bhaskar suggests, to little more than "the poetic redescription of an already determined world" (198). Fundamental social and political change will certainly in all instances change humans' self descriptions and their final vocabularies, but to believe along with Rorty that "to change how we talk is to change what, for our own purposes, we are" (CIS 20) may be in many instances a sad delusion.³³ Furthermore, such redescriptions are thoroughly ideological if they merely provide a more amenable way of coping with structures whose effects remain unaltered.

I suggested earlier that it is difficult to see how the ironic standpoint Rorty promotes is possible given his Kuhnian opposition between normal and revolutionary discourse, the view that when a vocabulary is not being fundamentally disrupted in some revolutionary fashion it functions in a closed, stable fashion, such that all the players of a particular language game accept the rules and the game appears to be the perfectly "rational" way of doing things. Rorty is insistent about the closed nature of the worldview provided by one's final vocabulary. Thus it would only be consistent with Rorty's own premises to assert, as Charles Taylor wishes to remind him, that "[y]ou cannot get in and out of these world-views like a cab, as Weber caustically put it" (259). Yet the ironist, by way of becoming a liberal pluralist, is exhorted to do just that. The "liberal ironist needs as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies as possible" (CIS 92).

It is necessary to inquire at the same time what sort of *critical* perspective upon the beliefs, values, and institutions of a given time

Rorty's historicist, pragmatist premises permit. This is very much a related question insofar as irony, in Schlegel and de Man, functions as negation and therefore as critique. With Schlegel I suggested that the alternation of enthusiasm and skepticism which he describes as irony provides a potentially productive figure for ideology critique and for the exigencies of politics wherein one must embrace a political position while remaining aware of its shortcomings and indeed its falsity. The infinite negation of de Manian irony, while salutary in its ideological resistance, can ultimately provide us with no such model. Rorty's pragmatist standpoint on irony is thus welcome to some extent, but is Rortian irony sufficiently critical?

Rorty's position that irony is an inherently private affair of self-creation already suggests that it is bereft of a critical edge. And if one considers Rorty's (post)philosophical position more broadly one discovers indeed that it provides little in the way of any standpoint from which one might criticize the givens within one's culture. Truth in Rorty's pragmatist view is simply the given consensus of a given time. Furthermore "there will be no way," Rorty asserts by way of rejecting reason as a metalanguage, "to rise above the language, culture, institutions, and practices one has adopted and view all these as on a par with all the others" (CIS 50). How, then, is a critical standpoint possible?

Immanent critique is a possibility that suggests itself, a procedure arguably allied to irony insofar as irony (tropological irony at least) functions as both a repetition and a negation of a previous sign or discourse. Irony plays the same game as that about which it is ironic, but plays it in a way that critiques the game if it does not aim to collapse the

game entirely. Yet Rorty's "over-normalization of normal discourse," as Bhaskar describes it, "ignoring its holes, silences and incommensurabilities--and also its ambiguities and ambivalences, its open texture and rich potentialities for development" (207), allows for little in the way of immanent critique.

Along with the impossibility of immanent critique in Rorty's discourse comes the impossibility of any rational program of resistance to a given social-political-economic order with its attendant "vocabularies," a program that might simultaneously map out the possible restructuring of that order. Such an aspiration is part of the hubris of traditional theory. "The most [human beings] can do is to manipulate the tensions within their own epoch in order to produce the beginnings of the next epoch" (CIS 50). In order not to contradict his premises Rorty cannot allow a critical standpoint any more profound than this. To be capable of more would suggest that one could "rise above the language, culture, institutions, practices one has adopted." For Rorty, as I have indicated, large scale cultural changes are only understood retrospectively, once one is already playing the new normal game. "Those who made us possible could not have envisaged what they were making possible, and so could not have described the ends to which their work was a means. But we can" (CIS 56). Such a position comes close to eradicating all critical transformative agency despite Rorty's championing of a voluntaristic view of the revolutionary strong poet as the instigator of cultural change (CIS 20). Despite what are undoubtedly Rorty's own humane liberal intentions the position he outlines constitutes, in Bhaskar's words, a "council of despair" (207). Adorno's

suggestive comments on irony and ideology in *Minima Moralia* are pertinent here:

Irony used to say: such it claims to be, but such it is; today, however, the world, even in its most radical lie, falls back on the argument that things are like this, a simple finding which coincides, for it, with the good. There is not a crevice in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail. (211)

This in essence is Rorty's predicament in attempting to combine irony with a pragmatic ("things are like this") view of truth.

When he is not rather contradictorily limiting irony to an "inherently private affair," Rorty outlines a fundamentally important public role for it that in many respects parallels the role, as I have argued, it plays in Schlegel's fragments and of which I have seen suggestions in de Man's essays, namely, an ability to combine commitment with a sense of the only partial validity of that to which one is committing, whether such commitment be as specific as a political platform or as broad as a conception of a nation. "The citizens of my liberal utopia" Rorty writes, ". . . would be liberal ironists--people who met [Joseph] Schumpeter's criterion of civilization, people who combined commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment" (CIS 61). Only if the necessary critical perspective entailed in such an ironic standpoint is granted can political participation be more than indoctrination. Rorty's discourse appears rightly to uphold this perspective even if it does not persuasively account for it. His overall argument might be even more persuasive if in affirming the value of a post-metaphysical culture he took as the object

of his critique neither enlightenment liberals (ie the majority of his colleagues in the profession of philosophy), nor the so called "School of Resentment" of Marxist and post-marxist critiques, but the really genuine threat to liberal values in the United States: the growing political coalition of fundamentalist Christians for whom Walt Disney (that *locus classicus* of the American ideology) is too playful and pluralistic by half.

Furthermore, Rorty's reference to the "merely poetic foundations of the 'we-consciousness' which lies behind our social institutions" (CIS 68) recalls Schlegel's views on nation and national character. As with Schlegel, this position is intended to resist reification, to avert the stasis and possible violence of an unreflective investment in a *particular* social order as the true and unchangeable *one*. Social institutions, rather, must be seen as something made and therefore always to be remade. Yet once again this similarity simultaneously marks a difference with Schlegel, for the latter's irony does not one-sidedly affirm the "merely poetic" character of that which it takes up. To do so is to eradicate the tension between philosophy and poetry, truth and tropes, which Schlegelian irony always attempts to keep open. In political terms, to assert the more than "merely poetic" character of institutions allows one to account for the objective materiality of these institutions that will in most instances be more determinate than their "merely poetic foundations."

In keeping truth in the equation Schlegel averts a difficulty that Rorty must address and, I would suggest, upon which his position founders: namely, upon what basis does one believe in and thus commit oneself to fundamental concepts such as "the community" that one knows

to be contingent? Rorty's response to this difficulty--a characteristic one when he dislikes the consequences implied by his premises--is to take a step back and to deny

that there could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is *ironist*. I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization. Irony seems inherently a private matter. On my definition an ironist cannot get along without the contrast between the final vocabulary she inherited and the one she is trying to create for herself. Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated. (CIS 87-88)

Rorty, then, is forced to posit the necessity of a sort of publicly held truth as the minimal social glue that will hold a society together and that will allow ironism to be possible in the first place. But it is a rhetoric that the intellectuals, at least, know to be completely ungrounded, one toward which they entertain "radical and continuing doubts" (CIS 73).

Rorty's liberal utopia would remain at least an intellectual hierarchy. "In the ideal liberal society, the intellectuals would still be ironists, although the nonintellectuals would not" (CIS 87)--a statement which contradicts the book's opening remark that Rorty will propose "a liberal utopia: one in which ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal" (xv). As a minimal way of maintaining the coherency of his position Rorty suggests that the nonintellectuals would be "commonsensically nominalist and historicist. So they would see themselves as contingent through and through, without feeling any particular doubts about the contingencies they happened to be" (CIS 87). But this rather Nietzschean (and *illiberal*) evocation of the nonironist "herd" is clearly unsatisfactory. The nonironists

by this definition are at once too close to Rorty's definition of the ironist ("nominalist and historicist," "see[ing] themselves as contingent through and through") and too far removed (commonsensical, undoubting) to base any persuasive distinction between them and the ironist elite. Rorty is on the fence here, wavering *vertiginously* between his hope that a universal ironism could permit a pluralistic liberal utopia and his fear that it would hopelessly fragment society.

And what would the promotion of such an untruth-ascribed-to-as-truth amount to but a promotion of ideology? Here Rorty can not maintain his conventional dismissal of the concept of ideology as requiring some *deeper truth* to lie beneath the so called ideological *belief*. Rorty's position does posit a deeper truth, namely, that contained within what Charles Taylor refers to as Rorty's "global *extant* theory of knowledge" (265), that any such socially accepted truths will be only historically, contingently produced metaphors.

To say Rorty must posit the necessity of ideology even as he dismisses it is not simply to dismiss in turn his position, for one of my arguments in this study has been to affirm, with Althusser, that ideology is inescapable, just as irony, for Schlegel, de Man and Rorty, is not temporary. Human society will by necessity construct and inhabit some form of imaginary relation to its real condition of existence. But as many an ironist would affirm, if one must by necessity inhabit ideology, then freedom, for oneself as well as for others, lies not in the pragmatic dismissal of the problematic ideology opens up, but partly at least, in the reflective consciousness upon ideology: its source, its affects, whose

interests it serves as well as "its holes, silences and incommensurabilities-- and also its ambiguities and ambivalences, its open texture and rich potentialities for development" (Bhaskar 207).

The evocation above of Rorty's *vertige*, is meant of course to evoke another irony operative in Rorty's discourse than that which he thematizes (even as he refuses to theorize)--an irony closer to de Man and Schlegel's. It occurs in the startling juxtapositions of thesis and antithesis in Rorty's thought, a characteristic which, while it might appear to be the rather predictable assertion of a literary theorist's *deconstruction* of Rorty, has in fact been commented upon more or less explicitly by several of Rorty's philosophical interlocutors: in Bhaskar's "tale of two Rorties--tough-minded Humean versus tender-minded existentialist"³⁴ (21); in Nancy Fraser's charting of Rorty's oscillations "between Romanticism and Technocracy" (39); and in Jennifer Herdt and Thomas McCarthy's critiques of the contradictions in Rorty's public/private dichotomy. This irony exceeds and disrupts Rorty's discourse, threatening the coherency of his project. Thus Rorty both affirms and denies the public nature and function of irony; he both affirms and denies that irony can empower; he both affirms and denies the efficacy of a discourse of truth. Irony would be best for all; irony should only belong to the few. While these juxtapositions are always expressed, each in their turn, in Rorty's serene and lucid language, there appears to be little awareness, serene or otherwise, that these statements amount to negations of each other. Thus there is no possibility of negotiating such an ironic movement as Schlegel attempts to do even as he recognizes the precarious nature of such a project. The most fundamental

irony of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* is that, as Schlegel wrote, the writer "speaks of irony ironically without in the process being aware of having fallen into a far more noticeable irony" ("Incomprehensibility" 37).

Conclusion

Hegel Redux

Rorty's irony-as-self-creation takes the pervasively influential critical representation of Schlegelian irony articulated by Hegel and Kierkegaard at face value. Rorty assumes irony to be synonymous with the self's desire for autonomy and individuality for its own sake. Irony thereby becomes virtually synonymous with the aesthetic impulse seen as the drive to create anew, differently, more beautifully (CIS 39, 81)¹. I have argued that Hegel and Kierkegaard's critiques of Schlegelian irony do not appreciate the extent to which this irony attempts a critique of isolated and autonomous subjectivity rather than a hypostatization of it. Thus in a fashion that de Man would have appreciated, Rorty champions an irony that was not the Romantic's own, or at least not that particular Romantic's own. But I also suggested that Hegel and Kierkegaard's critiques provided a key historicist insight into how, ideologically, irony might be seen to function in the age of industrial capitalism: as a celebration of an unfettered subjectivity which is a precise ideological *inversion* of the subject's relation to his/her real (ie existential/social) conditions. Rorty, who has suggested in his earlier *Consequences of Pragmatism* that we have every reason to "celebrate bourgeois capitalist society as the best polity actualized so far" (xxxvii), has few qualms about recognizing the rootedness of his discourse in a yet later and more advanced capitalist ethos. If one believes contra Rorty that, except for the increasingly few, the individual has become

increasingly more impoverished and less free as capitalism has developed throughout the world, one can conclude that irony, as an ideologically based celebration of an imaginary freedom, is, appropriately enough, most fully realized in Rorty's discourse. To this extent Hegel functions as a more cogent critic of Rortian than of Schlegelian irony. Hegel, ironically enough and much as he might have wished, stands insurmountably at the end of my reading of a highly selective history of theorizations and invocations of irony.

Kierkegaard's critique of the negation of history in "irony after Fichte" is also pertinent with respect to Rorty, anticipating Bhaskar's critique of Rortian freedom as self-creation as providing no access to the objectively real conditions of the subject's existence, conditions which must be accounted for and altered through some combination of theory and praxis if freedom is to be more than imaginary.

For irony . . . there never really was a past . . . The actual history . . . in which the individual has his positive freedom because therein he possesses his premises, had to be set aside. To that end irony acted just as Hercules did when he was fighting with Antaeus, who could not be conquered as long as he kept his feet on the ground. As we all know, Hercules lifted Antaeus up from the ground and thereby defeated him. Irony dealt with historical actuality in the same way. In a twinkling, all history was turned into myth--poetry--legend-fairy tale. Thus irony was free once again. (277)

Rorty's ironist is, as he repeatedly asserts, an "historicist" (xv) and thus it might appear unfair to invoke Kierkegaard's critique in relation to her. Yet she is an historicist who would precisely reject the idea that historical inquiry might provide any access to "premises" or to a "ground," the knowledge of which Kierkegaard here suggests, is a prerequisite to

"positive freedom." The Rortian ironist is an whiggish historicist for whom the past provides an occasion for weaving a pleasing "causal story " (CIS 28), a "story of progress, showing how the literalization of certain metaphors served the purpose of making possible all the good things that have recently happened" (CIS 55). While there is certainly a place for narratives of progress as well as for utopian speculation (the dialectical incorporates both aspects after all) to the extent that such histories are blithely divorced from historical actuality they become indistinguishable from "myth--poetry--legend-fairy tale" and as such may play a part in the perpetuation of a dominating and exploitative social order rather than leading out of one.

To Hegel's critique of such an irony as presenting an ego "for which all bonds are snapped, an ego that can live only in the bliss of self-enjoyment" (*Aesthetics* 66) Rorty would presumably respond that since there is no way to join private interests with public obligation (CIS xiv) this presents an unresolvable dilemma. "All that is in question . . . is accommodation--*not synthesis*. My 'poeticized' culture is one which has given up the attempt to unite one's private ways of dealing with one's finitude and one's sense of obligation to other human beings" (CIS 68 emphasis added).

It is in this respect, I contend, that Rorty's irony takes up the connotation of non-synthesis that it gains with Schlegel and that is taken up again by de Man. Yet as Kierkegaard aptly describes irony throughout his *Concept of Irony*, irony for Schlegel is a "negative *dialectic*" (*Concept* 145). Thus while it does not entail the synthesis of oppositions, it does

entail their interaction as well as the inescapability of their interpenetration, just as it entails the necessity of each term remaining distinct. For Rorty, in certain of his formulations at least, the two sides of a dialectic are not to act upon each other at all. In a private/public opposition irony concerns only the former.

Rorty's irony avoids the kind of totalized ideological critique that de Manian irony threatens to become, a critique that, however salutary and undeluded, ultimately represents a dead end for the exigencies of the political world wherein one must inhabit some form of ideology. Rorty has, rather, a partially persuasive perspective on the necessity of building consensus and solidarity within a community as something that must be *built* imaginatively, rather than waiting for philosophy to *find* the correct philosophical foundations within us or without us that will establish why we *must* realize a liberal democratic society. And his attempt to retain the fruits of a liberal enlightenment tradition, such as individual freedom, the sanctity of the private realm, an ethical outlook towards the needs of others, while critiquing the totalizing universalist assumptions that have sought to underwrite these virtues, is as timely and as important a project as it was when Schlegel embarked upon it. It is equally, if not more, important, however, to critique, in the style of C.B. Macpherson, the *class* interests that have precisely *not* underwritten liberalism but whose interests liberalism has nonetheless articulated. The universalist enlightenment discourse of individual rights and human nature has been liberalism's self professed foundation; class is its hidden determination, that which it does not talk about. The former, as Rorty in a pragmatist

fashion suggests throughout *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, is withering away in "our increasing ironist culture" (94); the divisions of the latter are grimly entrenched and growing deeper, posing the most genuine threat to the realization of liberal values in any society as a whole.

Class is of course Schlegel's silence as well, and I've suggested that his *brotherhood of artists*, at once radically democratic amongst one another, and radically elitist toward those outside the brethren, is a reflection of the aspirations and the contradictions of the bourgeoisie itself. Yet his negotiation of general and particular, the disjunction between form and content, self-creation and self-destruction, articulate a dialectic of authority and insurrection that leads more readily out toward politics, the structure of government and the class basis underlying them. To this extent they could form a model for Adorno's ironic ideology critique. The necessary function of totality in Schlegel's thought, a totality which exists both as a necessary hypothesis of thought, and as a potential ideal against which the "polemical totality" of present reality can be cancelled out as incommensurate with it, lends the process its positivity as well as its critical force.

The one sided closure of Rorty's irony, however, leaves it bereft of a critical edge, bereft of opposition to its particular affirmations, such as the self as an historical cultural construct. While no cogent critical theory would wish to deny the significant and necessary validity of such a position, nor would it wish to expand the position beyond all bounds as in some potentially frightening project in social engineering. The opposition to this view, contained in at least some residual notion of a universal

human nature and of objective truth that exists independently of human's shifting historical predications about the natural world places necessary limitations upon it.

I suggested in my introduction that all the many and by no means insignificant redescriptions of the terms irony and ideology remain reliant, much as Quintillian and Marx said of each respectively, upon the related rhetorical figures of *antiphrasis* and *inversio*, a saying the opposite of what is meant, or of what *is*--visually conceived, a turning upside down as in Marx's "camera obscura" (154). To the extent that Rorty's liberal ideology is the *inversio* of the individual's condition in society, an effective irony should counter the *inversio* and turn Rorty on his feet, even as he claims, and claims for all of "us," to be floating groundlessly.

If, as Rorty suggests, we cannot speak meaningfully of a reality, of any objective truth, that would exist independently of the vocabulary in which it is expressed, then there is either, as Rorty would contend, no ideology, or else everything is ideology. While such an expanded conception of ideology, as Eagleton has rightly suggested, drains the concept of any critical efficacy (*Ideology* 7) it may serve provisionally to suggest the deeply ideological character of Rorty's discourse. If one were to accept Rorty's ultimately *uncritical* theory on its own terms one might well have to conclude, as Adorno postulated to be the condition of culture in advanced capitalist society, that "irony's medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared" (*Minima* 211).

End Notes

Introduction

1. For Booth, this preferred form is what he names "stable irony" (3-31 and *passim*).

2. As I discuss in chapter four, Hutcheon's most recent and most sustained study of irony, *Irony's Edge*, turns away from theorizing postmodern irony.

3. De Man's 1977 lecture, "The Concept of Irony," is his most thorough working out of this position on irony. An essay that builds upon the de Manian position in an informative fashion is Gordon Tesky's "Irony, Allegory, and Metaphysical Decay." Kevin Newmark's "*L'absolu littéraire: Friedrich Schlegel and the Myth of Irony*"; and Georgia Albert: "Understanding Irony: Three *essais* on Friedrich Schlegel" theorize Schlegel within the later de Manian problematic.

4. I am thinking of Hayden White's *Metahistory*, of course, but more particularly James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture*, a reading of the discourse of anthropology, attuned to its textuality and to its ideological presuppositions, Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, as well as Fredric Jameson's forays into *The Ideologies of Theory*. These last two, in particular, provide a certain model for my own approach which might be described as a metacritical ideology critique. But I will consign that rather ugly term to this one mention in the footnotes.

5. Since Macpherson's historical materialist analysis and critique of this tradition underpins and informs my own (necessarily briefer) references to liberalism, it may be worth citing the outline of his argument at length. Macpherson commences:

A great deal has been written in recent years about the difficulty of finding a firm theoretical basis for the liberal democratic state. As the difficulty persists, it seems worth inquiring whether it may not lie as much in the roots of the liberal tradition as in any subsequent growth. (1)

Thus Macpherson is not *opposed to* liberalism, to the project of founding a *genuinely* liberal democratic state with the values it would seek to embody, but rather situates his critique in the service of its creation by rooting out its impediments. The impediments as he sees it, however, are very deep-rooted within the tradition of liberal theory itself and are as much (or simultaneously) social and historical as theoretical.

The present study . . . suggests that the difficulties of modern liberal-democratic theory lie deeper than had been thought, that the original seventeenth-century individualism contained the central difficulty, which lay in its possessive quality. Its possessive quality is found in its *conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself.* The relation of ownership, having become for more and more men the critically important relation determining their actual freedom and actual prospect of realizing their full potentialities, was read back into the nature of the individual. The individual, it was thought, is free inasmuch as he is proprietor of his person and capacities. The human essence is freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession. Society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise. Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors. Political society becomes a calculated device for the protection of this property and for the maintenance of an orderly relation of exchange. (3 emphasis added)

The liberal tradition's ideas of society, individuality, freedom, and equality, are indelibly tied to the structure and values of the "possessive market society" (53 and passim), or capitalism, that fundamentally transformed English society from the seventeenth century onward. Liberalism is thus to an extent the ideology of capitalism. It asserts a general equality and freedom which, however, directly serves the interests of a privileged propertied class. Class, as Macpherson points out, is always, and necessarily, its great silence (93).

This is not to suggest, for Macpherson, that these ideals were not progressive in their time in freeing society from older more hierarchical and static forms of social organization. He "argue[s] that these assumptions, which correspond substantially to the actual relations of a market society, were what gave liberal theory its strength in the seventeenth century" (4). I would further suggest, with the benefit of more recent studies of ideology, that liberalism presents values and ideals which in their universal appeal present inherent dangers to the class in whose interests they are espoused in so far as they invite reflection upon the distance between the posited freedom and equality of theory and the individual's actual social condition.

Macpherson goes on to suggest that while liberal theory is progressive in its day, its "possessive individualism" becomes an impediment to a genuinely liberal democratic state

when the development of the market society destroyed certain prerequisites for deriving a liberal theory from

possessive assumptions, while yet the society conformed so closely to those assumptions that they could not be abandoned. They have not been abandoned yet, nor can they while market relations prevail" (4)

For some this quietly stated final sentence must leave liberalism behind in so far as it looks forward to a fundamental restructuring of the economy and social relations. Liberalism, on the other hand, is often synonymous with *laissez faire* or modest reform. For others, like Macpherson, however, it would be the necessary step toward genuinely achieving liberal values.

6. On the intersubjective character of Schlegelian irony in particular see Gary Handwerk: *Irony and Ethics in Narrative from Schlegel to Lacan*.

7. For some, the balance between individual and community, and not an excessive and autonomous individualism, *is* the essence of a liberal tradition, one which may have been attenuated and perverted in "Bentham's narrowly selfish, narrowly rationalist, version of it" (Macpherson 2) but was certainly present in John Locke. Thus my position would be entirely liberal and any pretensions to an ideological critique of such a position would be misguided because liberalism had been misread, or even gone unread.

That my position is, in a significant sense, a liberal one is hopefully true, but again I would position my critique in opposition to what Macpherson sees as a very continuous tradition of assumptions, "*bourgeois liberalism*" if one prefers, from Hobbes to J.S. Mill and the present. It is incontrovertible of course that in John Locke there is a conception of society and of the individual's moral obligation to it. The fundamental question, however, is *what* conception of society, and *what* conception of the individual? For Macpherson, Locke's view of society is the market writ large as the individual is the fundamental unit within that market.

When the fundamental quality of Locke's individualism is kept in mind the debate [over Locke's individualism versus his collectivism] becomes meaningless. Locke's individualism does not consist entirely in his maintaining that individuals are by nature free and equal and can only be rightfully subjected to the jurisdiction of others by their own consent. To leave it at that is to miss its main significance. Fundamentally it consists in making the individual the natural proprietor of his own person and capacities, owing nothing to society for them. Such an individualism is necessarily collectivism (in the sense of asserting the supremacy of civil society over every individual). For it asserts an individuality that can only fully be realized in accumulating property, and therefore only realized by some, and only at the expense of the individuality of the others. To permit such a society to function, political authority must be supreme over individuals; for if it is not, there can be

no assurance that the property institutions essential to this kind of individualism will have adequate sanctions. (255-256)

8. It has become a rather notorious footnote. Terry Eagleton makes it the second epigraph to his study *Ideology* (ix). His first epigraph is also from *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*.

Consider, as a final example, the attitude of contemporary American liberals to the unending hopelessness and misery of the lives of the young blacks in American cities. Do we say that these people must be helped because they are our fellow human being? We may, but it is much more persuasive, morally as well as politically, to describe them as our fellow *Americans*--to insist that it is outrageous that an *American* should live without hope. (*Contingency* 191)

The juxtaposition of the two statements, the first so clearly demonstrating Rorty's investment in a nationalistic American ideology, the second rejecting the concept of ideology outright, evokes, of course, a certain *irony*.

9. Jameson applies the term "late Marxism" to Adorno, the theorist with whom Jameson feels, at this point in his intellectual trajectory (1989), most closely allied. The term indicates "that Marxism, like other cultural phenomena, varies according to its socio-economic context" (*Late* 11). Thus there is a "late Marxism" corresponding to "late Capitalism" it inhabits, theorizes and critiques. But Jameson also invites us to hear in the term late Marxism: "still, better late than never!" (*Late* 12).

10. The acceptance of this proposition leads Candice Lang to argue that irony is now an outmoded term, and that *humour*, as theorized by Gilles Deleuze, should be substituted as the best description for the play of postmodern literature.

11. At the same time, Michasiw's argument turns upon the *difference* between zeugma and ideological enquilting, a difference located in de Man's insistence (although de Man is repressed in this essay) that literary, or rhetorical, language is less mystified than other forms of language because it posits itself in a void which it knows to be a void. "That is, zeugma constructs a knot structurally identical to that of the ideological enquirer, and identical also in its semantic emptiness, but, unlike the enquirer, or the nodal point, it does nothing to obscure its vacancy" (Michasiw 28). This suggests that there is a reflexivity, or irony, contained within the trope which resists its ideological operation even as it performs it.

12. See Martin Jay on the significance of exaggeration to Adorno's approach to truth (43).

Chapter One

1. Schlegel, Behler asserts, "gave irony a completely new scope and effected a fundamental change in the concept in Western literary theory" (146). Furst is less willing to attribute so much to Schlegel alone but notes: "The connotation, usage, and aura of 'irony' underwent such a metamorphosis towards the close of eighteenth century as to make it a hazardous notion" (23). Muecke affirms this position: "It was, however, *after 1755* that the word 'irony' began to take on several quite new meanings, though less rapidly in England and France than in Germany" (8). For a view that contests the commonly held presumption that Schlegel and his circle fundamentally altered and expanded the concept of irony see Dane (Ch 7).

2. This is not to maintain that all irony prior to this point was simply rhetorical. The texts of Shakespeare and Cervantes are primary examples of ironic literary texts for Schlegel but, as Behler notes: "The authors he mentioned certainly would have certainly been astonished to hear him interpret their literary creations as displaying irony."

3. Furst notes that Schlegel employs the term 'romantic irony' only four times in his writings and then only in the unpublished notebooks (29). On the development of the term "Romantic irony" see Dane (74-76).

4. In a significantly different vein de Man in "The Concept of Irony" also places Schlegelian irony in relation to Fichte (172-179).

5. See Beiser (224-227) and Brian McCole (110-114) on the history of the critical debates surrounding the determination of the politics of German romanticism. "It can be argued," McCole writes, "that the reception of romanticism has been more politicized than that of any other literary tendency in German cultural history" (111).

6. David Simpson similarly comments on De Staël's representation of German as contrasted to French and English thought and national character:

De Staël's Germany is now the source of idealism and of a depoliticized criticality open to being applied "whatever may be our situation upon earth"; it is the expression of "essential" human attributes, which function in despite of any worldly constraints. In this image of Germany the critical philosophy has been thoroughly made over into a friend to the established order. (103)

7. Behler notes the German Romantic's belief in "a much greater revolution than the French one, a revolution that permeated the age in all spheres of life, including poetry and philosophy" (58).

8. The second is the development of "both the concept of the

positive value of change, change as dynamic and progressive, and the concept of the normalness of contradiction and paradox in human affairs" (188); and the third is "the growth of self-awareness, the increasing extent to which men become conscious of being conscious" (189).

9. I examine here only the ideology of the *theory* of "romantic irony" as expounded by Friedrich Schlegel. Undoubtedly in its practice the ideology of such irony would be subject to numerous variations dependent upon its shifting authorial, historical, political, and cultural contexts. Such variations, as David Simpson has noted, would be an excellent subject for a lengthy independent study (Simpson 1993 201).

10. Kierkegaard in a later journal entry makes the following critical estimation of the Hegelian influence of *The Concept of Irony*.

Influenced as I was by Hegel and whatever was modern, without the maturity really to comprehend greatness, I could not resist pointing out somewhere in my dissertation that it was a defect on the part of Socrates to disregard the whole and only consider numerically the individuals.

What a Hegelian fool I was! It is precisely this that powerfully demonstrates what a great ethicist Socrates was. (cited in Hong xiv)

In "The Concept of Irony" de Man asserts that Kierkegaard "has to invent . . . a whole theory of history to justify the fact that one should get rid of Friedrich Schlegel, that he's not a real ironist" (168).

11. Kierkegaard's critique of romanticism strikingly prefigures Lukács's Marxist critique of "the ideology of modernism" (17), which should not be surprising given the strong influence of Hegel upon this early Kierkegaard and upon Lukács throughout his career. Like Kierkegaard in dealing with Schlegel and Tieck, Lukács takes writers like Kafka and Beckett to task for their failure to represent a concrete historical actuality. In both cases what these theorists decry is the presentation of isolated ahistorical subjectivities--gleeful and insouciant in the case of the romantics, tortured and psychologistic in the case of the moderns. The nineteenth century realistic novel, despite its bourgeois origins is, for Lukács, far more successful in the representation of "concrete" history (Lukács 17-47).

12. As Susan Buck-Morss discusses, Adorno interpreted Kierkegaard's position as a *rentier* as centrally informing the latter's bourgeois philosophy of interiority (114-121).

13. This might account for Muecke's promotion of romantic irony (one of the stated purposes of his general study of irony) as an aesthetic and critical model. On the one hand such a promotion was certainly necessary when Muecke wrote in the late sixties, a time when romantic

irony, as he points out, was a relatively unknown term in Anglo-American literary studies. On the other hand the concept, as represented by Muecke at least, was tailor made to suit the generally liberal pluralist ideology that dominated (and still dominates) in the academies.

14. In his more recent study *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory*, Simpson comments: "The failure to distinguish different historical phases and political applications of this Romantic irony informs, I'm afraid to say, my own *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry*, which treats the reflexive method largely as a formal aesthetic strategy" (201). I view my own work as an attempt in part to redress this failure, to apply to the theory of irony the kind of very suggestive political readings Simpson applies to nineteenth-century theoretical discourse in this later work.

15. Simpson's *Romanticism, Nationalism, And The Revolt Against Theory* represents a near reversal of the politics attributed to Romanticism and enlightenment rationality in the earlier work (ch. 7 and passim).

16. The theoretical explorations of irony by a later de Man pose, however, one of the most fundamental challenges to the relation between irony and political commitment. They are undoubtedly the source for Simpson's own view of irony in *Irony and Authority*. But as I will argue in detail in chapter three even at this later stage de Man cannot successfully extricate irony from intersubjectivity and political commitment.

17. This point is addressed to de Man's theory of irony. De Man, Handwerk argues, overemphasizes the figural and representational aspects of language with the result that irony can only name the unbridgeable distance between language and being, language and reality. When language is considered in its more fundamental communicative function, however, irony does not represent such an aporia (see Handwerk 10-15). In chapter three I consider this charge in detail tracing in de Man's statements on irony a latent (and occasionally explicit) conception of the trope as a dialectic of self and other.

18 Here Schlegel appears to grasp the ideologically constructed status the "people," a centrally important nineteenth century "ideologeme" discussed by Jameson. Of George Gissing's novel *The Nether World*, and by extension much nineteenth century realism and naturalism, Jameson writes:

Its conceptual and organizational framework is not that of social class but rather that very different nineteenth-century ideological concept which is the notion of "the people," as a kind of general grouping of the poor and "underprivileged" of all kinds, from which one can recoil in revulsion, but to which one can also, as in some political populisms, nostalgically "return" as to some telluric source of strength. (189)

To substitute "the people" for the differential and conflictual concept of class is, Jameson argues, to reduce the characters in a novel "to nothing more than illustrations of their pre-existent essences, and the novel can at best merely repeat over and over again the class warnings described above . . . do not attempt to become another kind of character from the one you already are!" (191).

Chapter Two

1. Quotations from Schlegel's fragments are, unless otherwise indicated, from Peter Firchow's translation *Philosophical Fragments* containing the published fragments from the *Lyceum* and *Athenaeum* journals. These fragments form three series. The first and last were entitled: *Critical* and *Ideas* respectively. The longest middle series is known simply the *Athenaeum* fragments. I have followed the majority of commentators on the fragments in referring to the first series as the *Lyceum* fragments after the journal in which they appeared. Thus citations of the fragments are indicated by the abbreviation *Ly*, *Ath*, and *Id*, followed by the number of the fragment in its particular series.

2. In the scholarship on Schlegelian irony, Handwerk writes: "Two primary standpoints emerge, the first depicting irony as critical-negating phenomenon, the second privileging its aesthetic-creative side" (18).

3. In the *Athenaeum Fragments* Schlegel writes that "as yet no genre exists that is fragmentary both in form and content, simultaneously completely subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in a system of all the sciences" (77). Clearly his own fragment series is an attempt to create such a genre and the above passage suggests the proper hermeneutic strategy such a genre demands: to take, simultaneously, each fragment as complete in itself and as part of a greater totality.

4. Further examples of such contradictions could be listed: at different points in his own argument Beiser cites two fragments virtually side by side in Schlegel's text (*Athenaeum* 422 and 424) as indicating, respectively, Schlegel's early support for the French Revolution (242), and Schlegel's later increasingly critical attitude toward the Revolution (261). Beiser is correct in characterizing these fragments as pro and contra revolution, the difficulty lies in interpreting such blatant, simultaneously held antinomies, as indicating an *evolving* opinion.

5. Beiser writes: "Throughout the *Athenaeum Fragmente* Schlegel's early radicalism is still very much in evidence" (261) and yet the "political doctrine of the *Fragmente* marks a definite retreat from the radicalism of 1796" (261).

6. The "word *ironie*," Dane notes "is surprisingly rare in these published fragments, appearing only four times in the *Lyceum* (fragments 7, 42, 48, 108), seven times in the *Athenaeum* (fragments 51, 121, 253, 305,

344, 362, 431), once in *Ideen* (fragment 69)" (107).

7. As the translator's note indicates, the fragment is one of four authored by Schlegel and "included in Novalis's collection of fragments, *Blütenstaub* (Pollen), published by the Schlegel brother in *Athenaeum*, 1798" (17).

8. But see Dane (108-109) who problematizes the reading of this line, suggesting that the "or else" may not function to say "in other words," but to introduce a distinctly different alternative to irony. Thus irony and "self-creation and self-destruction" would here be opposed rather than synonymous.

9. Clearly "always saying no" does not capture the full sense of Hegel and Kierkegaard's "absolute infinite negativity" but the former everyday style of negation is a legitimate part of this process and thus Schlegel's rejection of such a continual 'no' goes some little distance toward distinguishing his irony from such an "absolute infinite negativity."

10. Behler notes the proto-poststructuralist aspects of early German Romantic theory later "actualized" in Adorno, Heidegger, Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, and Paul de Man (*German* 8).

11. In the later "Concept of Irony," de Man reworks his understanding of "permanent parabasis" in a fashion that moves it away from a dialectic of the self. The "permanent parabasis" of irony is at this point understood in terms of "the play of the signifier, which undoes any narrative consistency of lines and which undoes the reflexive and the dialectical model both of which are . . . the basis of any narration" (181).

12. See Beiser's discussion of "The Politics of Kant's Critical Philosophy" (27-56). Beiser argues that the fundamental tenets of Kant's philosophy affirming the freedom, rationality and morality of the subject imply a rejection of the paternalist tradition of Prussian politics. In his "Theory-Praxis" essay Kant does indeed reject this tradition supporting the ideals of the Revolution and argues that "reason not only permits but obliges us to change society according to the principles of justice" (Beiser 38). Yet in this same essay Kant adamantly rejects the people's right to rebellion or civil disobedience of any sort. All resistance to the sovereign is, Kant writes, "the greatest and most punishable crime in a commonwealth" (qtd. in Beiser 44). Kant's categorical imperative, Beiser writes,

condemns the maxims of the rebel, which cannot be made into a universal law. Turning the tables on Burke, Kant argued that it is the principle of happiness that sanctions rebellion, since it permits the people to topple a government whenever they think it contrary to their interests. So if rationalism approves of the ideals of the Revolution, it condemns its practice. (44-45)

Beiser speculates interestingly about the role of political pressures and outright censorship from the Prussian state during the conservative period of the 1790's in influencing Kant to appear not to be supporting political insurrection (48-53). While such pressures were very real Beiser concludes that there is a fundamental dichotomy in Kant's political view. "If Kant was a radical in principle, he was a conservative in practice" (53).

In 1796 Schlegel published "*Versuch über den Begriff des Republikanismus*," a review of political works by Condorcet and Kant described by Beiser as "one of the most radical writings of the 1790's, one of the few philosophical defenses of democracy or popular sovereignty" (250). In the essay Schlegel critiques the conservative remnants of Kant's political philosophy, arguing that the tenets of his philosophy should be taken to their logical conclusion to support republicanism and the right to revolution (Beiser 251).

13. Ernst Behler locates the distinction made in this fragment between rhetorical and philosophical irony as the precise point at which irony begins to assume its expanded significance in romantic and post-romantic critical discourse (*German* 146-147).

14. As both Dane and Ernst Behler note, however, the association of the *eiron* with grace and urbanity in Aristotle contests its earlier association in Aristophanes with "burlesque coarseness" (Behler *German* 144, Dane 20).

15. Beiser writes: "The fundamental political problem facing the romantics was therefore clear: to prepare the German people for a republic through further education and enlightenment. Their task as intellectuals in the Germany of the 1790's was to define the standards of morality, taste, and religion, so that the public would have some ideal of culture, some model of virtue" (229).

16. See Eagleton's *Ideology of the Aesthetic* Ch 4: "Schiller and Hegemony."

17. Cf. Ly 58, 70, 77, 86, Ath 329, Id 12 for Schlegel's oscillation between the didactic and the autotelic artwork.

18. Behler discusses the very similar political theory of Novalis, Schlegel's close friend in the Jena circle.

In this oscillating manner of thinking, operating between opposites without overcoming them, accepting the antinomies as natural, Novalis reflected upon the two forms of government of democracy and monarchy. On the surface, the two seem to constitute 'an insoluble antinomy--the advantages of the one to be terminated by the opposed advantage of the other.' . . . Novalis adds to this observation: 'The time must come when political entheism and pantheism are most intimately connected as interactive

members.' 'Entheism' in this fragment is the designation for monotheism, and in political terms, it stands for the monarchic system, while pantheism is doctrine according to which God is everywhere and which therefore corresponds to democracy in the political realm. Monarchy and democracy, in other words, are the poles between which our thinking oscillates, the phenomena of an interactive quality that determine each other. (*German* 60-61)

19. As I will discuss in my final chapter, the allegiance to a community that one knows to be completely ungrounded is one that Richard Rorty must confront in his promotion of an "ironist culture." Because Rorty lets go of any idea of an objective truth residing in the public discourse that might perform this function his position is fraught with difficulties.

20. See Michael Mosher, "Civic Identity In the Juridical Society: On Hegelianism as Discipline for the Romantic Mind," for a suggestive discussion of irony as providing a double sense of belonging and not belonging to the wider political collectivity.

21. "I apply the term 'fictive ethnicity'" Balibar writes,

to the community instituted by the nation-state. This is an intentionally complex expression in which the term fiction . . . should not be taken in the sense of a pure and simple illusion without historical effects, but must, on the contrary, be understood by analogy with the *persona ficta* of the juridical tradition in the sense of an institutional effect, a 'fabrication.' No nation possesses an ethnic base naturally, but as social formations are nationalized, the populations included within them, divided up among them or dominated by them are ethnicized--that is, represented in the past or in the future *as if* they formed a natural community, possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions. (96)

22. The concepts of "low-other" and the process of "othering" I derive from Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (5).

23. Balibar notes "the simultaneous genesis of nationalism and cosmopolitanism" (90), suggesting that the one does not challenge or subvert the other so much as reciprocally depend upon it.

Chapter Three

1. See Frank Lentricchia's *After The New Criticism* (282-317) on de Man's conservative quietism; Terry Eagleton's *The Function of Criticism* (97-106) on de Man's liberalism; Michael Sprinker's *Imaginary Relations*

(237-266 and passim) on de Man's proto-Marxist materialism; and Stanley Corngold's "On Paul de Man's Collaborationist Writings" on the abiding fascist roots of de Man's work.

2. Eagleton's brief discussion of de Man in *The Function of Criticism*, for example, cites only "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (100). Furthermore, Eagleton's characterization of de Man's essential critical position--"an irony which gazes contemplatively at the whole inauthentic scene, wryly conscious of its own inescapable complicity with what it views, reduced to a truth which consists in no more than a naming of the void between its own speech-act and the empirical self" (100)--is clearly drawn from this same essay, employing it synecdochally to refer to the whole of his work. As I will discuss below, Stanley Corngold's interpretation in "Remembering Paul de Man" of the ironic stance de Man adopted in his own professional life "to play down his empirical identity" (185) also clearly draws from de Man's elaboration of irony in this essay. One could garner many other statements forthrightly attesting to the essay's centrality in de Man's writing. "'The Rhetoric of Temporality'" Lindsay Waters writes, "is (rightly I think) felt to be [de Man's] most fully achieved essay" (lvi).

3. In *The Prison House of Language* Fredric Jameson makes a similar point about the ideology of Victor Shklovsky's *ostranenie* or "defamiliarization," which indeed Jameson likens to Romantic irony (79-81). As his example, Jameson passingly refers to the very different political and social ends of defamiliarization in eighteenth-century British and French literature. Thus Swift's grotesque is used "to construct a relatively metaphysical vision" (56), whereas La Bruyère's thoroughly defamiliarizing representation of the French peasantry "no longer directs our attention to the natural and metaphysical conditions of human life, but rather to its unjustifiable social structure" (57).

4. Dominick LaCapra's "The Temporality of Rhetoric" is an important exception here.

5. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" Althusser writes: "For on the one hand, I think it is possible to hold that ideologies *have a history of their own* (although it is determined in the last instance by the class struggle); and on the other, I think it is possible to hold that ideology *in general has no history* . . . i.e. [it is] an *omni-historical* reality . . . ideology is eternal" (86).

6. As Ortwin de Graef notes the tension between rhetorical and existential terminology characterize even de Man's early work of the 1950's (61).

7. Pace Doris Sommer who in "Allegory and Dialectics: A Match Made in Romance," contends that Benjamin receives no explicit credit until "very late in de Man's writing career" (60). A cursory glance at the index of *Blindness and Insight* would have quickly disabused her of this notion. The error, however, is perhaps indicative of the care Sommer takes to

understand de Man's work. Sommer juxtaposes de Man and Benjamin's understanding of allegory with a view to championing the latter's "promising lead," the "effort to join allegory with dialectics . . . that has come to a virtual dead end with de Man's divorce between the terms" (61). Sommer reads great significance into de Man's "too skimpy" acknowledgement of Benjamin in "The Rhetoric of Temporality."

The understated debt seemed calculated toward de Man's critical capitalization; the master was already at the feet of his disciple. A comparative reading of their essays will follow to show that de Man was indeed engaged in that subordinating effort, but far more aggressively than we imagined through a standard Oedipal drama of reduction and replacement. He was not merely changing the critical guard but declaring a polemic against the values Benjamin had guarded, namely, time and the dialectic time makes possible. (61)

8. As Ortwin de Graef notes, de Man in "The Double Aspect of Symbolism" had himself ascribed to this reading of Baudelaire (de Graef 49-65).

9. With Coleridge, de Man notes, the spiritualization of both symbol and allegory has been carried so far that "both alike now have a common origin beyond the world of matter" (192).

10. Benjamin, Bainard Cowan notes,

does not question the validity of the theological symbol because it is presented as a *mystery*, available to the soul but not to the intellect. In the realm of the intellect the symbolic unity of the immanence is an unfulfillable claim, by reason of an unbridgeable gap that exists between the realm of the ideas (a term Benjamin always uses in the Platonic sense) and the world of phenomena. . . . Furthermore, the symbol's claim is made in bad faith, because it is born out of the very consciousness that--for the first time as a widespread cultural phenomenon--experienced the pervasiveness of that gap. (111)

11. Benjamin quotes an extraordinary passage from Schopenhauer that likens allegory to writing, to the process of "carving a picture to serve at the same time as an inscription, as a hieroglyphic" (cited in OGT 162). Despite being one of the "perfunctory dismissals of the allegorical form" Benjamin notes that Schopenhauer's comment "comes close to touching on the essence of allegory" and that "Schopenhauer is not alone in dismissing allegory with the statement that it is not essentially different from writing" (162).

12. For all de Man's resistance to totality in his writings he remains

resistant as well to an aesthetics of the fragment which might well be a way to slip the glimmer of an aura in under the back door. This would appear to be his chief quarrel with the modernist aesthetics of Benjamin and Adorno. De Man's comments on his own hypotactic style contained in the preface to *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* are illuminating in this respect:

The apparent resignation to aphorism and parataxis is often an attempt to recuperate on the level of style what is lost on the level of history. By stating the inevitability of fragmentation in a mode that is itself fragmented, one restores the aesthetic unity of matter and substance that may well be what is in question in the historical study of romanticism. (ix)

13. In a further parallel with de Man, Benjamin also maintained that the early romantics expressed the fundamental insights of the period, insights that were elided by the misreadings of later romantics (See McCole 81-89).

14. Benjamin writes in this essay of "such outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery--concepts whose uncontrolled (and at present almost uncontrollable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense" (218).

15. For a de Manian reading of the violence underlying allegory see Gordon Tesky, "Irony, Allegory, and Metaphysical Decay."

16. The quotations within this quotation are from *The Origin of The German Tragic Drama*. The translations, however, are McCole's and thus I have given no references to the Osborne translation with which I am working.

17. In "Central Park," amongst the last fragments Benjamin wrote, Benjamin returns to a consideration of allegory, this time in Baudelaire. Although Benjamin is concerned to demonstrate the historical difference in the seventeenth and nineteenth century uses of the form, and the difference in the form itself, his characterization of allegory is remarkably consistent with his work on the baroque drama. Here Benjamin's comments truly are cryptic, yet he suggests a relation between allegory and Nietzschean (and Baudelarean) eternal recurrence which would seem to anticipate de Man's theorization of the relation that allegory and irony bear to Kierkegaardian repetition.

18. Although as Bainard Cowan suggestively reads Benjamin, the miraculous *deus ex machina* ending characteristic of the *trauerspiel* is itself so mechanical, arbitrary, and heavy handed that it hardly moves one beyond the rhetorical mode (118). One can as easily see de Man, then, rejecting the apocalyptic reading of Benjamin as a misreading.

In "The Concept of Irony" de Man cites, in order to reject, Benjamin's somewhat parallel reading of Schlegelian irony, a reading that

also recuperates the negative within an overall movement toward the absolute. Benjamin writes:

far from being a subjective whim of the author, this destruction of the form is the task of the objective moment on art, (the moment) of criticism. . . . This type of irony (which originate in the relationship of the particular work to the indefinite project) has nothing to do with subjectivism or with play, but it has to do with the approximation of the particular and hence limited work to the absolute, with its complete objectivation at a cost of its destruction. . . . the ironization of form is like the storm which lifts up [*aufheben*] the curtain of the transcendental order of art and reveals it for what it is, in this order as well as well as in the unmediated existence of the work. (qtd in "Concept" 182-183)

"At the moment when all seems lost," de Man comments, "when the work is totally undone, it gets recuperated, because that radical destruction is a moment in the dialectic, which is seen as a historical dialectic in the progression toward the absolute in a Hegelian scheme" (183). Benjamin's reading for de Man is a symptomatic and inevitable covering over of the "total arbitrariness" ("Concept" 181) of language the ironic "disruption" (182) opens up.

19 Jürgen Habermas has echoed this criticism: "To put it in a nutshell: with his steady focus on the invariant structures of Dasein, Heidegger from the start cuts off the road from historicity to real history" (191).

20. Stanley Corngold's "Remembering Paul de Man: An Epoch in the History of Comparative Literature," while frequently unhelpfully scurrilous in its representation of de Man, does present an interesting picture of the right wing cold war ideology that dominated American universities in the post war years. American departments of Comparative Literature, Corngold suggests, owed much of the expansion they enjoyed in these years (and certain departments such as Cornell's owed their very inception) to America's military role in post war Europe (182-83).

21. Joseph Dane argues suggestively that the inclusion of irony as a type of allegory marks, in the history of the critical understanding of the irony, the beginnings of a vast expansion of its power "to interpret and transform texts" (55).

22. Of de Man's juxtaposition of irony and history Dominick LaCapra writes:

In one sense, he might be read to mean that the very structure of historicity is in some pertinent sense ironic and thus it makes no sense to try to write a standard history

of irony that would, for example, seek some oriented development or delimit well-defined periods in the unfolding of irony. But this reading implies that it is impossible not to be historical or engaged by the problem of irony. On another reading, however, de Man himself relies on the standard and dubious binary opposition between history and structure. He seems to occlude the possibility of significant variations in the recurrent role of irony over time--variations whose different figurations and possibilities could be traced and perhaps have implications for social life. (116-117)

23. On the Heideggerian aspect of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* see Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (3-12).

24. De Man devotes considerable space in the first part of "The Rhetoric of Temporality" to a parallel Heideggerian destruction of the subject-object model that had dominated romantic studies and had informed the privileging in this criticism of symbol, image, and a metaphoric diction (193). The detailed elaboration of this critique would fall outside the purview of this discussion. The critique does, however, further establish the overall Heideggerian framework of the essay.

25. The phrase "materiality of language" properly belongs to de Man's later essays where it takes on a more counter-intuitive and radicalized meaning. I invoke it here, however, in so far as the "Rhetoric of Temporality" can be seen as marking the movement toward these concerns with materiality--a subject torn asunder in language that no longer operates as his tool. In the break down of language, as in the Heideggerian equipmental breakdown, the subject is made aware of its materiality.

26. De Man's characterization of irony in this line is, however, troublesome. If irony "dissolves," this suggests, against the tenor of the rest of the discussion that irony is not endless. In his discussion of both Baudelaire and Schlegel de Man points out how irony expands toward the infinite, thus one would have conceived of irony as a widening rather than a "narrowing" spiral. The idea of irony as a process whereby the sign becomes more and more remote from its meaning does, however, seem consistent with the rest of de Man's argument.

27. The early Heidegger, however, does not privilege language to the same extent as the later structuralists and poststructuralists. In *Being and Time* Dasein's being-in-the-world is more originary than language, which Heidegger associates with intersubjective discourse. "The items constitutive for discourse are . . . existential characteristics rooted in the state of Dasein's Being, and it is they that first make anything like language ontologically possible" (Being 206). Language thus becomes one (very fundamental) practice amongst others in Dasein's being-with-others.

I return in the conclusion of this chapter to a consideration of the implications of this view of language which strikes me as a sensible defetishizing of language.

28. In "Roland Barthes and the Limits of Structuralism," a review article written for, but ultimately rejected by, *The New York Review of Books*, de Man explicitly posits the relation between ideology and referential language, a point with which he is in agreement with Barthes:

One can see why any ideology would always have a vested interest in theories of language advocating correspondence between sign and meaning, since they depend on the illusion of this correspondence for their effectiveness. On the other hand, theories of language that put into question the subservience, resemblance, or potential identity between sign and meaning are always subversive, even if they remain strictly confined to linguistic phenomena. (170)

29. In "What are Poets For?" Heidegger writes: "The locality to which Holderlin came is a manifestation of Being, a manifestation which itself belongs to the destiny of Being and which, out of that destiny is intended for the poet" (95).

30. In "Temporality in Hölderlin's 'Wie wenn am Feiertage'," de Man's third Gauss lecture, de Man quotes Adorno to critique Heidegger's totalizing, recuperative reading of Hölderlin: "The tension between two moments, not a thesis, is the vital element in Hölderlin's work" (qtd in *Gauss* 72).

31. As the editors of the Gauss lectures inform us (RCC 196), de Man's manuscript for these lectures contain one crossed out reference to Dasein suggesting that he may have indeed considered the term too obscure and heavy handed for his audience.

32. In the first Gauss lecture, "The Contemporary Criticism of Romanticism," de Man devotes considerable space to critiquing the dissolution of the subject in the criticism of René Girard and in French structuralism more generally. "As Lévi-Strauss, in order to protect the rationality of his science, had to come to the conclusion of a myth without an author, so the linguists have to conceive of a metalanguage without speaker in order to remain rational" (RCC 12).

33. As Hubert Dreyfus notes, Heidegger himself came to historicize the concept of Dasein when in a new introduction to "What is Metaphysics," written in 1949 he describes it as "the experience of 'the oblivion of being' uniquely characteristic of the modern age" (Dreyfus 337).

34. In *The Function of Criticism* Eagleton argues that the Yale School's conception of ideology is limited to its Stalinist and Fascist forms and thus is itself "drastically reductive and essentialistic."

For it is simply false to believe that all ideologies, in some structurally invariant manner, rely as profoundly upon apodeictic truth, metaphysical groundedness, teleological vision and the violent erasure of difference as these brutally extreme models would suggest. Nor is it in the least the case that all ideology is 'naturalizing' --a dogmatic emphasis which the Yale school have inherited from Lukács-- or that structures of ironic self-distantiation may not be embedded at its heart. The implicit model of ideology advanced by much deconstruction is, in fact, a straw target, and one which gravely underestimates the complexity and 'textuality' of ideology's operations. (101-102)

35. The classic statements of the theory of reification are Marx's *Capital I*, ch.1 sec. 4: "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret"; and Lukács' interpretation of Marx: "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" in *History and Class Consciousness* (83-222).

Chapter Four

1. Behler writes:

[Derrida's] texts, from this formal point of view, appear as a congenial contemporary correspondence to the tradition of irony in the modern period. Derrida too [like Nietzsche] avoids the word irony, at least he does not accord any prominence to it in his writings. . . . The text among Derrida's writings, however, that could be considered the most direct continuation of the discourse of irony in the style of our time and that unfolds a structure similar to that of universal irony in previous discussions, is his essay on *Différance* of 1968. . . . Difference . . . appears to be the most stringent example of the "impossibility and necessity of complete communication" which Schlegel listed among the characteristics of irony. (Behler 1990 104, 109)

2. For Rorty writers such as Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida are "ironist theorists" engaged in a process of "self-creation" (Rorty 1989 ch 5-6).

3. Henceforth referred to in parenthetical citations as CIS.

4. See Rorty's essay "De Man and the Cultural Left," for his own account of how his neopragmatism intersects with, and diverts from, poststructuralist theories. Rorty embraces the "postmodern" most explicitly in his essay "Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism," where the term is used to describe the sort of (post)metaphysical liberalism Rorty has been generally concerned with promoting. In this essay he equates the term with Lyotard's "'distrust of metanarratives,' narratives which describe or predict the activities of such entities as the noumenal self or the Absolute

Spirit or the Proletariat" (199). In his later introduction to *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, however, Rorty wishes to distance himself from this word. "I have sometimes used 'postmodern' myself, in the rather narrow sense defined by Lyotard as 'distrust of metanarratives.' But I now wish that I had not" (1). At this point, Rorty implies, the term strikes him as one more problematic attempt at a totalizing description of the *zeitgeist*. "It seems safer and more useful to periodize and dramatize each discipline or genre separately, rather than trying to think of them all as swept up together in massive sea changes" (1). Nonetheless, Rorty's influential employment and promotion of an essentially literary, narrativizing and aestheticizing discourse makes him, as David Simpson has recently argued, one of the paradigms of the "academic postmodern" (*Academic* 18).

5. Rorty articulates this, amongst other places, in reference to Habermas:

Habermas shares with the Marxists, and with many of those whom he criticizes, the assumption that the real meaning of a philosophical view consists in its political implications, and that the ultimate frame of reference within which to judge a philosophical, as opposed to a merely "literary," writer, is a political one. For the tradition within which Habermas is working, it is as obvious that political philosophy is central to philosophy as, for the analytic tradition, that philosophy of language is central. But, as I said in Chapter 3, it would be better to avoid thinking of philosophy as a "discipline" with "core problems" or with a social function. (CIS 83)

6. Four critiques that I have found persuasive in this respect are: Roy Bhaskar, "Rorty, Realism and the Idea of Freedom"; Nancy Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty Between Romanticism and Technocracy"; Christopher Norris, "Philosophy as a Kind of Narrative: Rorty on Postmodern Liberal Culture"; Jo Burrows, "Conversational Politics: Rorty's Pragmatist Apology for Liberalism."

7. As I will discuss in further detail, Rorty views Hegel along with Nietzsche and Heidegger as a "paradigms of ironist theorizing". They "have in common the idea that something (history, Western man, metaphysics - something large enough to have a destiny) has exhausted its possibilities. So now all things must be made new" (CIS 101). They thus set out to *redescribe* the previous history of philosophy in their own terms and thus to extricate through "Total Revolution" (1989 101) the world, and themselves along with it, from this history. While to approach Hegel as some sort of ironist is suggestive, the fact that Rorty nowhere comments upon the evident irony of describing the great debunker of romantic irony as himself a paradigmatic ironist suggests a possible lack of familiarity with irony in German Romantic theory and the later responses to it.

8. On Rorty's romantic impulse, "lioniz[ing] the figure of the extraordinary individual" see Fraser (39 and *passim*).

9. Thus Nancy Fraser has written that a "profoundly disturbing" aspect of Rorty's thought "is the sharply dichotomous character of the resulting map of culture, the *abstract and unmediated opposition* between poetry and politics, theory and practice, individual and community" (52 my emphasis). It is such "abstract and unmediated oppositions," I believe, that chiefly distinguishes Rorty's irony from Schlegel's and that is its chief difficulty. One should note, however, that Rorty does associate ironism with dialectic in the sense of dialogue. In this respect the ironists's *dialectic* contrasts the metaphysicians *logic*. "The ironists preferred form of argument is dialectical in the sense that she takes the unit of persuasion to be a vocabulary rather than a proposition" (Rorty CIS 78).

10. In this respect Charles Taylor refers to Rorty's "global *extant* theory of knowledge" (265) which underlies and informs his supposedly anti-essentialist, anti-epistemological theory.

11. Leaving one to speculate, indeed, if irony has any other place in the title than the superior eloquence its assonance with the final syllable of the first and last words affords. When one considers the troubling implications of Rorty's aestheticism within his project for a "liberal utopia" such speculation may take on a more significant aspect, suggesting a willingness to sacrifice particularity to the *beauty of the whole*. See also Nancy Fraser (43) on the political implications of Rorty's "aestheticized culture."

12. The rejection of language as a structure is a central instance in what Roy Bhaskar has cogently critiqued about Rorty's (post)philosophical position, its insufficient recognition of "the existence of objective social structures (from languages to family or kinship systems to economic or state forms)" (226). As I shall explore further below, this lack of attention to structure in various registers, has a political dimension in Rorty's discourse. It is allied with his view that the structures of Western democracies are adequate for the promotion of a just society, that they do not, therefore, require any thorough examination.

13. When he does return to this disanalogy (CIS 55) he does so only in passing to suggest that new metaphors can only be recognized as the useful tools that they were retrospectively, that is by the succeeding generation that has embraced them. But this position, as I shall explore in more detail, undermines the very possibility of genuine self-creation.

14. Rorty's promotion of a "poeticized culture" (CIS 65) would appear, indeed, to ally his theories with an aesthetic ideology of the symbol the implications of which, as I have discussed in my previous chapter, are central to de Man's very different theorization of irony. Nancy Fraser (43) correctly notes the disturbing implications of Rorty's poeticized culture:

Consider what a politics that gave free rein to the romantic

impulse [in Rorty's thought] would look like. Recall the individualist, elitist, and aestheticist character of that impulse, its deification of the strong poet, its fetishization of creation *ex nihilo*. It takes only the squint of eye to see here the vision of a Georges Sorel: a "sociology" that classifies humanity into leaders and masses; a "theory of a action" whereby the former mould the latter by means of a sheer triumph of the will; a "philosophy of history" as an empty canvas awaiting the unfettered designs of the poet leader. (43)

Rorty, as Fraser notes, has become aware of these implications and "has been at pains to show that his own romantic streak does not lead down this road" (43). Rorty's major attempt to avoid this road is to privatize the ironist aestheticist impulse, a move which, as critics have discussed, involves his work in a host of contradictions. Jennifer Herdt looks productively at the slippage in Rorty's thought most evident in a comparison between *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* and the earlier articles up which it is based, a slippage away from earlier rhetoric that celebrated *irony, aestheticism*, toward one which is more conscious of the effect this rhetoric, which attempts to be more responsible and yet to shield irony within the quarantine of the private.

15. Jennifer A. Herdt provides a cogent critique of Rorty's view of Metaphor (86-88). In particular Herdt takes issue with Rorty's position that metaphors, while they force us to draw analogies and see similarities between things, do not have a cognitive content:

our response to a metaphor is conditioned by the assumption that there is a *purpose* behind its utterance. We assume that the person who confronts us with a metaphor wants us to notice something in particular (typically something which cannot yet be paraphrased literally). Therefore, as long as a metaphor remains in its native land, which is the realm of communication, hearers will not be satisfied with just any analogy they happen to notice. (87-88)

16. Gary Handwerk's response to de Man in theorizing his own more consensually orientated irony is pertinent here. Irony, Handwerk suggests, is a procedure "by which relative but adequate social, if not ontological, verities might be established" (14).

17. By "final vocabulary" Rorty refers to the "set of words which they [all human beings] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives" (CIS 73).

18. Rorty might be read as providing an updated version of Schlegel's strategy of assigning different philosophical tendencies to different *national characters*, a version attuned to contemporary gender politics. Rorty consistently assigns his metaphysician the pronouns 'he', the

ironist the feminine pronoun 'she.'

19. See David Simpson *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature* (Ch 5) for a critical account of localism and particularity in postmodern academic writing and its origins in Romantic thought.

20. The double quotation marks are employed because Rorty also places the phrase in quotations, indicating another, uncited, location where he has previously referred to "freedom as the recognition of contingency." This would seem to indicate, then, the centrality of this idea for Rorty.

21. Rorty, or my representation of his position, would appear to be caught in a contradiction here. I am describing an important element of Rorty's irony as the attainment of freedom through self-creation, yet in the quotation above Rorty notes that the ironist is one who, unlike the metaphysician, "offers no similar assurance" "that the right redescription can make us free." The contradiction can be partly resolved here by emphasizing "right redescription" and "us." Rorty does not believe that some single "right redescription" can be found that will be valid for all peoples and thus make "us" free. The pursuit of freedom through redescription can at best only be a private matter and it is furthermore dangerous to conceive of it as being anything more than this. But there is here, as there is in other aspects of Rorty's argument, an unresolved contradiction between associating irony with freedom through redescription and associating irony with the recognition that redescription does not entail freedom. What this suggests is that another irony is operative in Rorty's discourse, one which he does not theorize and one that is indeed closer to Schlegelian irony, namely, the vertiginous juxtaposition of thesis and antithesis.

22. See Daniel W. Conway, "Thus Spoke Rorty: The Perils of Narrative Self-Creation," on how Rorty's concept of self-creation derives from Nietzsche but also eradicates important elements the latter's concept of self-creation. The thrust of Conway's argument is pertinent to my own. "The inherent danger of Rorty's strategy lies in its propensity to overestimate the extent to which we can create ourselves" (105). In Rorty's postmodern appropriation of Nietzsche,

no brute world residuum restricts our capacity for narrative redescription . . . No longer distracted by Nietzsche's cryptic allusions to a 'spiritual *fatum*,' 'what is *unteachable* very deep down,' and other possible impediments to self-creation, Rorty celebrates the capitulation of ontology to language. (103)

Schlegelian irony, like Nietzsche's self-creation is restricted by such "residuum(s)" and thus is always a dialectic of "self-creation and self-destruction." It remains for me to argue that this is a dialectic which better negotiates the "inherent danger" of Rorty's theory.

23. As Ernst Behler has pointed out, Nietzsche's relation to the term irony was at best an ambivalent one.

In one instance he even referred to the term with its Hegelian flavour, when he attempted to describe his own attitude in entirely classical terms, but then inadvertently added a decidedly modern ingredient to it, saying: "*amor fati* [love of my fate] is my innermost nature. But this does not preclude my love of irony, even world-historical irony." Yet Nietzsche usually avoided the term irony, which for his taste had too much romanticism in it, and preferred the classical notion of dissimulation which he translated as "mask." (Behler *German* 93)

Furthermore Charles B. Guignon and David R. Hiley in critiquing Rorty's "vision of a culture devoted to a 'spirit of playfulness and irony'" (356), a culture that might be able to embrace an ideal of multiple and varied redescriptions of self and world as the best we might achieve, cite Nietzsche's own diagnosis of the detached attitude which follows from an over-developed historical consciousness" (357). Their passage is significant for indicating in Nietzsche a decidedly critical view of irony and, *avant la lettre*, of Rorty's allegedly Nietzschean project as whole.

The "modern man who continuously has the feast of a world exhibition prepared for him by his historical artists," Nietzsche suggests, "has become a spectator merely enjoying himself." Through this detached stance, "an age acquires *the dangerous disposition of irony* with regard to itself, and from this the still more dangerous one of cynicism: in this, however, it ripens even more into clever egoistic practice through which the vital strength is paralysed and finally destroyed." Nietzsche also describes the dangers inherent in "the faith of Americans today": "The individual becomes convinced that he can do just about anything and can manage almost any role, and everybody experiments with himself, improvises, makes new experiments, enjoys his experiments; and all nature ceases and becomes art." The outcome, according to Nietzsche, is that life comes to be seen as mere role-playing: "whenever a human being begins to discover how his is playing a role and how he can be an actor, he becomes an actor," and consequently the "strength to build becomes paralysed; the courage to make plans that encompass the distant future is discouraged." (cited in Guignon and Hiley 356-357)

To hold on to the simultaneous truth and falsity of a view, to both believe and disbelieve it, is the manner in which Schlegelian irony attempt to avoid this abyss.

24. In "The Concept of Irony" de Man discusses "self-creation,"

"self-destruction," and "self-restraint" as the three fundamental aspects of Schlegelian irony and places them in relation to Fichte's dialectic (173). The third stage, "self-restraint," is that which posits existential attributes to the self. It marks the moment, or the event, with which de Man was centrally concerned in his late writings: the movement from a purely linguistic positing to the positing of a referential (existential) meaning. This move can never be logically accounted for within whatever system of meaning is subsequently derived from it. It exists as a kind of performative. And because the materiality of language is anterior to such systems the former can disrupt the latter at any point. See also Gordon Tesky, "Irony, Allegory, and Metaphysical Decay," for a detailed working out of de Man's position in this essay.

25. Although as Rorty's readers have pointed out this appears to be precisely the point at which he must rely upon the metaphysics of a residual human nature (See Geras Ch 2, Conway 108-109).

26. The *locus classicus* for this argument, as Rorty would heartily affirm, is J.S. Mill's *On Liberty*.

27. This private/public distinction forms the basis of Rorty's distinction between Proust's project as an ironist novelist and Nietzsche's project as an ironist theorist (CIS 107). Proust's project is ultimately a more commendable model for Rorty because it recognizes the proper limits of the private.

28. The reader may object that I have here taken de Man's description of the temporality of allegory from the first half of his essay and applied it indiscriminately to describe the temporality of irony. I cite de Man in defense of this manoeuvre: "Yet the two modes [allegory and irony] for all their profound distinctions in mood and structure, are the two faces of the same fundamental experience of time" (BI 226). Moreover de Man writes: "irony is not temporary [*vorläufig*] but repetitive" (BI 220).

29. In his essay "De Man and the Cultural Left" Rorty outlines the main points, as he sees it, of his convergence and divergence with de Man. Rorty takes issue both with a certain existentialist pathos in de Man and with the later de Man's insistence that deconstruction was an indispensable method of ideological and political critique.

The sort of pluralist and pragmatic antiessentialism which I take over from Dewey agrees with all of de Man's antilogocentric, Derridean premises, but denies that they entail his existentialist, Sartrean conclusions. We pragmatists do not see the end of logocentrism or the death of God as requiring us to adopt a new self-image. For us, no argumentative roads lead from antiessentialist philosophy to the choice of such an image. Nor do any argumentative roads lead from this kind of philosophy to any particular brand of politics. (Essays 132)

While I would agree with Rorty that, as I explored in my previous chapter, "the new self-image" arising from de Man's theory is unnecessary, the difficulty with Rorty's neopragmatist position is that it can assimilate such theories as Derrida's and de Man's without indicating that *anything new* is necessary. To this extent Rorty's comfortable (and comforting) assimilation of continental theory mirrors the often brilliant ways in which a late twentieth-century capitalist economy almost effortlessly assimilates the potential negativity of so much artistic and theoretical production by placing it on the marketplace alongside other commodities. These days you can have your negation and eat it too.

Of particular significance to my analysis here of irony and self-creation, is precisely Rorty's departure from the thorough going negativity of de Man's work.

De Man should not have assimilated the Saussurian-Derridean antiessentialist account of how signs function to the claim that desire "as such" is intrinsically unsatisfiable, that this unsatisfiability is the *essence* of desire. Some desires are satisfiable and some are not. The *logocentrists'* desires may not be satisfiable, but other people have other desires which are satisfiable: for example, *the desire for individual self-creation* [emphasis added] and the desire for social justice. (*Essays* 132)

While I have likewise argued that the total ideological resistance de Man's theory of irony entails represents a dead end for the exigencies of a political world, the opposing difficulty with Rorty, as I suggest below, is understanding how his presuppositions allow for any sort of critical standpoint from which one might articulate what "social justice" means, and how one's present society does not measure up to it.

30. Taylor for example critiques the dichotomy Rorty establishes between pragmatism and the rest of philosophy in insisting that "the only alternative to his Pragmatism is some belief in a correspondence theory, the belief that one's 'philosophy corresponds to the way things really are'. This is represented as being quite untenable, even laughable; Pragmatism is the only believable alternative" (268). On the other hand, when Rorty is discussing twentieth century theoretical positions that partially share his anti-essentialist, anti-epistemological perspective, such as those critiques deriving from Heidegger, Althusser, and Foucault, he labels them, after Harold Bloom, "The School of Resentment" (*Essays* 179) to indicate their insignificance to any productive political outlook. Jameson has noted how the popular rhetorical manoeuvre that Rorty here employs, of labelling an opposing position as, after Nietzsche, *ressentiment*, is itself thoroughly ideological. To do so is to neutralize critiques that may indeed profoundly locate the sources of broad based structural inequalities in a society by attributing these critiques to the mere disaffection of isolated subjects (Jameson *Political* 202).

31. In Chapter Six of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*: "From

ironist theory to private allusions: Derrida," Rorty commends the later Derrida's writing for distancing itself from the broader public projects that he and earlier ironist theorists had mistakenly engaged upon, and for taking up the more novelistic project of attempting private autonomy through redescription. Surely this is a characterization with which Derrida, who has been if anything increasingly explicit about the political nature of his project, could not agree.

32. Charles Guignon and David Hiley suggest that such an assumption might be too sanguine (355-361).

33. At other points Rorty is perfectly aware that redescription is insufficient to instigate any kind of fundamental change in peoples' lots. The ironist

cannot offer the same sort of social hope as metaphysicians offer. She cannot claim that adopting her redescription of yourself or your situation makes you better able to conquer the forces which are marshalled against you. On her account, that ability is a matter of weapons and luck, not a matter of having truth on your side, or having detected the "movement of history." (CIS 91)

34. See also Martin Hollis "The Poetics of Personhood," for a critique of the incommensurability between Rorty's account of "self-creation" and his behavioursim.

Conclusion

1. Rorty for example synonymizes "ironism in philosophy and aestheticism in literature" (CIS 89).

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