

LITTERATURKRITIK &

ROMANTIKSTUDIER - SKRIFTRÆKKE 24

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and the Anti-Ekphrastic Tradition*

Litteraturkritik & Romantikstudiers Skriftrække

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Skriftrækken udgives med støtte fra Institut for Litteraturhistorie, Aarhus Universitet.

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Friedrich Schlegel and the Anti-Ekphrastic Tradition

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Friedrich Schlegel's place in intellectual history is equivocal.¹ On the one hand he is recognized as a key figure in romanticism. An immense secondary work on his writings exists. The many-volumed *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel-Ausgabe* is a monument of twentieth-century scholarship.² On the other hand, if Paul de Man is right, and he usually is in such matters, this enormous effort has been to some degree an unintentional work of covering up what is most threatening and disquieting about Friedrich Schlegel's work.³ Schlegel's conversion to Catholicism in 1808 and his rewriting of crucial passages in his own earlier work provided the model for this coverup.

What is so dangerous about Friedrich Schlegel's writings that it would lead sober scholars to turn away from what he says or to make him say something radically other than what he does say? One answer is to recognize that Schlegel was a great theorist and practitioner of irony. The threatening aspects of irony always call forth their repression. Schlegel's fragments are ironic through and through, as are his other major works.⁴ Many of the fragments, moreover, in one way or another attempt to define irony. Hegel, who understood Schlegel (to a considerable extent at least, for example his derivation from Fichte), and detested him, as did Kierkegaard, though for somewhat different reasons, gives a clue. As Kierkegaard says in *The Concept of Irony*, "As soon as Hegel mentions the word 'irony,' he promptly thinks of Schlegel and

Tieck, and his style is immediately marked by a certain resentment."⁵ Passages denouncing Schlegel appear in Hegel's *Ästhetik*, in the *Philosophie des Rechts*, in the *Geschichte der Philosophie*, and in "Über 'Solger's nachgelassene Schriften,'" all repeating more or less the same indignant reproaches. In *The Philosophy of History*, for example, Schlegel is anathematized as "evil, evil as such." In the essay on his deceased colleague Solger, Hegel speaks of "the wanton disregard of things that are sacred and of the highest excellence such as marks the period of Friedrich von Schlegel's 'Lucinde,'" and of "the most brazen and flourishing period of irony."⁶ Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* contains a long section sharply attacking Schlegel's *Lucinde* and Schlegel's concept of irony generally.

Why is Schlegel's irony so dangerous? Why does it arouse such intellectual violence and resentment? Hegel's remarks about Schlegel in the section of the Introduction to the *Ästhetik* entitled "Irony" suggests one answer. Irony is here defined by Hegel as "infinite absolute negativity."⁷ This definition is later echoed and used again with a slightly different valence by Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Irony*. Irony is a power of the ego that just says no to everything. In a famous formulation Schlegel defined irony as "eine permanente Parekbasis (a permanent parabasis)."⁸ This is itself an ironically self-contradictory definition, since parabasis, the momentary breaking of dramatic illusion when one of the actors in a play comes forward to speak in his own person, must have some fictive illusion to suspend, whereas permanent parabasis would be perpetual suspension with nothing left to suspend. Paul de Man, in "The Concept of Irony," after having said that it is impossible to give a definition of irony or to state its concept nevertheless ultimately defines irony as follows: "if Schlegel said irony is permanent parabasis, we would say that irony is the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes"

(179). As Hegel recognizes and as Paul de Man demonstrates in detail in "The Concept of Irony," Schlegel's conception of irony derives from Fichte. "[T]he *ego*," says Hegel, in discussing Schlegel's derivation from Fichte, "can remain lord and master (Herr und Meister) of everything, and in no sphere of morals, law, things human and divine, profane and sacred, is there anything that would not first have to be laid down by the *ego* (nicht durch Ich erst zu setzen wäre), and that therefore could not equally well be destroyed by it. Consequently everything genuinely and independently real becomes only a show (ein *Schein*), not true and genuine on its own account or through itself, but a mere appearance (ein bloßes Scheinen) due to the *ego* in whose power and caprice (Gewalt und Willkür) and at whose free disposal it remains. . . . [T]he divine irony of genius [is] this concentration of the *ego* into itself, for which all bonds are snapped and which can live only in the bliss of self-enjoyment (nur in der Seligkeit des Selbstgenusses leben mag). This irony was invented by Friedrich von Schlegel, and many others have babbled about it (haben sie nachgeschwatzt) or are now babbling about it again" (Ger., 13:94, 95; Eng., 1:64-5, 66). Hegel's scandalized distaste is overtly directed at what he sees as the immorality and obscenity of *Lucinde*, the way it makes light of the marriage bond. *Lucinde* was deplored also by Kierkegaard as an extreme example of the sort of immorality to which unrestrained irony leads.

Somewhat more covertly, however, though it surfaces openly enough in his remarks on irony in Solger, Hegel's perhaps deeper objection to Schlegel's irony is that it puts a stop to dialectical progress. If irony is infinite absolute negativity, saying no to everything, it is therefore a permanent suspension or parabasis. Once you have got into this state of suspension you cannot get out of it or go on progressing through some *Aufhebung* or sublation toward the eventual fulfilment of

the absolute Idea. Irony is antithesis without any possibility of synthesis at a higher stage. It is an aporia in the etymological sense: a dead end or blind alley in thought beyond which it is impossible to progress. "To this negativity," says Hegel, "Solger firmly clung, and of course it is *one element* (ein *Moment*) in the speculative Idea, yet interpreted as this purely dialectical unrest and dissolution of both infinite and finite (als diese bloße dialektische Unruhe und Auflösung des Unendlichen wie des Endlichen gefaßt), only *one element*, and not, as Solger will have it, the *whole* Idea" (Ger., 13:99; Eng., 1:68-9).

Kierkegaard's way of putting this was to say that, on the one hand, Socrates's irony came at an appropriate moment. It was the infinite absolute negativity that destroyed Greek culture and made way for the coming of Christ and Christianity. Christ's advent will lead ultimately to the second coming, the last judgment, and the end of history. Schlegel's irony, on the other hand, has come at the wrong time. It is anachronistic. It puts time out of joint. It is a radical danger to Christianity and to its historical progression, since it threatens to stop or suspend that progression. It must therefore be eliminated at all costs. Unfortunately for him, Kierkegaard, Danish parson though he was, had a great gift for irony in the Schlegelian sense. He spent all his life trying unsuccessfully to expunge it from himself by ascribing it to this or that pseudonymous alter ego, for example the "Either" of *Either/Or*. Kierkegaard was a master of double diegesis and therefore subject to what Plato saw as its intrinsic immorality. This immorality is inseparable from the irony intrinsic to double diegesis or, as we should call it, indirect discourse.

Another deeper reason, however, makes irony dangerous. Paul de Man demonstrates that it is difficult, if not impossible, to state in so many words a "concept of irony," though he ends up doing so nevertheless. Why this difficulty? It is because irony is, in the end, or perhaps even

from the beginning, when there is no more than a "touch of irony" in a discourse, unreasonable, incomprehensible. Irony is "Unverständlichkeit" as such, as Schlegel's essay "Über die Unverständlichkeit" abundantly shows in its comic failure to be entirely reasonable and perspicuous about irony. Everyone knows that irony is a trap for the unwary or for the naively trusting, such as those government officials who took Defoe's "A Short Way with the Dissenters" seriously and were angry enough to put Defoe in the stocks when they found out he had been being ironic, saying one thing and meaning another. Nothing is more embarrassing, or more enraging, than to be caught out taking an ironic remark seriously or "straight." But irony is also, and more dangerously, a trap for the wary. It is particularly dangerous for those who think they understand it, who think they possess a valid "concept of irony," and can therefore protect themselves from it. This includes all the learned scholars, including myself here, who have been so courageous, or so foolish and foolhardy, as to write about irony, that is, to try to make it clear and understandable. Irony cannot be understood. It is the un-understandable as such.

Fragment 108 of the Friedrich Schlegel's "Critical Fragments" says this with deceptively clear irony. The reader will note that the strategy of the fragment is to assert in various ways that irony is dangerously unreasonable because it consistently defies the principle of contradiction. "Socratic irony," says Schlegel, "is the only involuntary (unwillkürliche) and yet completely deliberate (besonnene) dissimulation (Verstellung). It is equally impossible to feign (erkünsteln) it or divulge (verraten) it. To a person who hasn't got it, it will remain a riddle even after it is openly confessed (nach dem offensten Geständnis). It is meant to deceive (täuschen) no one except those who consider it a deception and who either take pleasure in the delightful roguery of making fools of the whole world or else become angry when they get an inkling they themselves

might be included. In this sort of irony, everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden (*verstellt*). . . . It is the freest of all licenses, for by its means one transcends oneself; and yet it is also the most lawful, for it is absolutely necessary. It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores (*die harmonisch Platten*) are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody (*diese stete Selbstparodie*), when they flucuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy (*bis sie schwindlicht werden*) and take what is meant as a joke (*Scherz*) seriously (*Ernst*) and what is meant seriously as a joke."⁹ As Georgia Albert, who has written brilliantly on this fragment,¹⁰ observes, "schwindlicht" means "dizzy," all right, but it also has overtones of "swindle" and "lie or deceive." The attempt to master irony leads inevitably to vertigo, as though one had lost one's footing in reason, no longer had "understanding" in the literal sense of something solid to stand on under one's feet, had been swindled or become a self-swindler, deceived or a deceiver self-deceived, in an endless unstoppable oscillation or rotation, like being caught in a revolving door.

That the reader of the passage is himself or herself caught up in the dizzying alternations it names, led by it not to a masterful understanding of irony but to an experience of *Unverständlichkeit*, is the most unsettling aspect of this fragment. If you do not understand the passage you are led to fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief. If you understand it you are plunged into dizzy incomprehension by your very act of understanding. Either way you have had it, which is a way of saying that the aporias central to Schlegel's thought are not tame impasses in logic or mere matters of wordplay. As Schlegel observes in "Über die Unverständlichkeit," "Irony is something one simply cannot play games with. (*Mit der Ironie ist durchaus nicht zu scherzen.*) It can have incredibly long-lasting after effects. (*Sie kann unglaublich lange*

nachwirken.")" (G538)¹¹ It might be safer to leave it alone. But how can one be sure, in a given case, that one is not speaking ironically, without meaning to do so, or that one's interlocutor is not an intentional or unintentional ironist?

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Another of Schlegel's formulations, this one about the creation of a "new mythology," ascribed to Ludovico,¹² the speaker of the "Rede über die Mythologie (Talk on Mythology)" in *Gespräch über die Poesie (Dialogue on Poetry)*, turns on the multiple meanings of a particularly rich family of words in German: *Bild*, *bilden*, *Bildung*, *umbilden*, *anbilden*. "Bild" means form and is translated as such in the English version. It also means figure and metaphor, as well as portrait or picture. *Bilden* means to form, but also to educate. *Bildung* is formation but also education—formation in the sense of informing submission to a discipline or curriculum. A university education, for example in Humboldt's idea of it in his plan for the University of Berlin, is devoted not only to teaching knowledge, *Wissenschaft*, but also to *Bildung*, to the formation of citizens of the state. "Anbilden" means conform, while "umbilden" means transform.

Schlegel uses play on these various words to express a double paradox. On the one hand the original "chaos," as he calls it, from which everything else has derived, already has form or has been given various cultural forms. We should make use of those pre-existing forms in our new mythology. On the other hand chaos is without form. It is rather a place of constant transformation. The proper way to give poetic expression to this is to produce a new mythology that is itself in constant transformation. Moreover, this new mythology must be radically

inaugural, innovative, not dependent on any pre-existing forms. On the one hand the new mythology will be constative. It will seek the best indirect expression of what is always already there but that usually escapes our consciousness and can never be directly expressed. On the other hand the new mythology will be performative in a radical sense. It will be a speech act that is a new start. It will invent "the highest" not in the sense of discovering it but in the sense of casting out new forms that reshape the original chaos and are deliberately manipulated transformations of it.

"In regard to the sublime (wegen des Höchsten)," says Ludovico, "we do not entirely depend on our emotions (unser Gemüt)" (G501).¹³ To translate "das Höchste" as "the sublime" is daring, perhaps even a sublime daring, since the usual German word for the sublime is "das Erhabene." Schlegel probably just means "the highest" in the sense of the most elevated, the most out of reach, and the most valuable in itself, that unspeakable of which mythologies are allegorical expressions. It is somewhat misleading to bring in all the Kantian, Burkean, and Hegelian associations of the sublime by translating "das Höchste" as "the sublime." To say we do not entirely depend on our emotions in regard to the highest is to say that irrational feelings, love and imagination as manifested in *Lucinde*, for example, are not the only way to get in relation to the highest. The other way is to "take part everywhere in what is already formed (an das Gebildete)" (ibid.). Schlegel has Ludovico go on to say that this means we should "develop, kindle and nourish the sublime (das Höchste)," in two ways: "through contact with the same in kind, the similar (des Gleichartigen, Ähnlichen,) or if of equal stature (bei gleicher Würde) the hostile; in a word, give it form (bilden)" (G501; DP85-6). This is an odd and not entirely perspicuous formulation. Its somewhat covert logic seems to be the following: Since the highest is

itself a place of contradictions, we should develop, kindle, and nourish it not only by things that seem to be similar to it, but also through appropriately grand things that are hostile to it, such as Schlegel's details about bodily love in *Lucinde*. Just as Schlegel's fragments generate their explosive wit by bringing together in the tight space of a sentence or two logically contradictory expressions, so the highest, since it cannot in any case be spoken of directly or literally, must best be spoken of simultaneously in what is like and unlike it. Or rather, nothing is really either like or unlike it in the usual sense. To express it simultaneously in the like and the unlike is to give it form, to shape it, in an act that Schlegel calls "bilden." Since it does not have fixed form in itself, any form we give it will be both adequate and inadequate.

The notion of "giving form" to the highest, Behler and Struc's translation of "bilden," is crucial here. The highest does not in itself have a form comprehensible to human consciousness. The function of any mythology, whether that of the Greeks or that of the new romantic mythology in the process of being created, is to give form not so much to the formless as to something that is a place of constant transformation. That something has forms, if forms they can be called, that are alien to human consciousness. Schlegel's expression of this necessity is somewhat hyperbolic or even shrill: "If the sublime, however, is incapable of being intentionally created (Ist das Höchste aber wirklich keiner absichtlichen Bildung fähig), then let us give up any claims to a free art of ideas (freie Ideenkunst), for it would be an empty name" (G501; DP86). A free art of ideas would be intentional (absichtlich) creation, the Bildung of the new mythology as an allegory of the inexpressible.

What it means to say mythology is a *Bildung* whose essential trait is constant transformation is indicated in the next paragraph of Ludovico's discourse, as well as in a consonant passage in *Lucinde* that I shall not discuss here.¹⁴ Giving form to the highest is not a single static gesture, but a perpetual process of metamorphosis. This is so because that for which the allegorical myth stands is itself not a fixed unity, such as the Platonic One or the Christian Godhead, three in one. Schlegel's "highest" is the locus of constant transformation.

"Mythology," says Ludovico, "is such a work of art created by nature (ist ein solches Kunstwerk der Natur)" (G501; DP86). The translation here makes a not wholly justified choice by saying "created by Nature." Which is it, subjective or objective genitive, in the phrase "Kunstwerk der Natur"? The phrase must contain the possibility of both. The German might mean "work of art created by Nature," or it might mean "natural Work of art," or it might mean "artwork representing nature," as when we say, "That is a picture of so and so." The German literally says, "artwork of Nature," just that. This point is worth dwelling on because of a fundamental, and highly traditional, ambiguity in Schlegel's use of the word "Natur." The word, in his usage, means non-human nature as intermediary between human beings and the aboriginal chaos. It also means human nature. It also means, especially given the avowed influence of Spinoza's pantheism on Schlegel's thinking in the "Talk on Mythology," a single continuous realm that includes "the highest" as well as nature in the limited senses of physical nature and human nature. An "artwork of Nature" arises from, represents, and is continuous with nature in this complex sense.

Ludovico goes on to say that in the "texture (Gewebe)" of a mythology that is intertwined with nature in this way, "the sublime is really formed (ist das Höchste wirklich gebildet)" (ibid.). The sentence

contains undecidable alternative possibilities of meaning. "Gebildet" may mean either the creation of something that was not there at all before the mythology brought it into being, or it may mean that the mythology gives form to the formless chaos that was always already there. The rest of the sentence does not decide one way or the other, but it helps understand why it is impossible to decide. In such a mythology, says Ludovico, "everything is relation (Beziehung) and metamorphosis (Verwandlung), conformed and transformed (angebildet und umgebildet), and this conformation and transformation (Anbilden und Umbilden) is its peculiar process (Verfahren), its inner life and method, if I may say so" (ibid.). Far from being a fixed set of mythological stories, the new mythology will be, like romantic poetry in general in Schlegel's idea of it (the two are more or less synonymous), dynamic, never finished, constantly changing. A celebrated fragment, fragment 116 of the *Athenaeum Fragments*, is the best expression of this. "Romantic poetry," says Schlegel, "is progressive, universal poetry. . . . Other kinds of poetry are finished (fertig) and are now capable of being fully analyzed (zergliedert). The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming (im Werden); that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected (daß sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann). . . . It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free; and it recognizes as its first commandment that the will [in the sense of arbitrary wilfulness; the German word is Willkür] of the poet can tolerate no law above itself. (Sie allein ist unendlich, wie sie allein frei ist und das als ihr erstes Gesetz anerkennt, daß die Willkür des Dichters kein Gesetz über sich leide)" (G38-9; E31-2). This refusal to accept any law above itself is one feature of Schlegel's thought that outraged Hegel, but one can see its necessity. If the new mythology is going to be forever becoming and never perfected, it can move toward its infinitely distant

goal only by rejecting whatever has come before and working in a radically inaugural way. If it is to progress, it must, in an absolutely free and wilful creative gesture, be a new law unto itself. That means rejecting any pre-existing law.

This freedom and wilfulness must enter into the intimate texture of the new mythology. This means that if, on the one hand, it is characterized by establishing new and hitherto unheard of relations (*Beziehungen*) among the elements that enter into it, on the other hand these relations must not be fixed. They must rather be in a constant state of change. This change takes two forms, as is indicated by the two forms of "bilden" that are employed: "anbilden" and "umbilden," conformed and transformed. Each new element must be conformed to the one to which it is related, but this process is also a transformation of the new element that is assimilated into the dynamic system.

The alert reader will notice that what Schlegel is describing here is nothing more or less than a tropological system. Metaphor and the other master tropes-synecdoche, metonymy, and prosopopoeia-as they work by substitution, condensation, displacement; naming, and renaming, are the primary linguistic tools whereby the process of giving form by conformation and transformation, in a perpetual metamorphosis, is accomplished. The consonance of Schlegel's formulations here with an admirably exuberant affirmation of the poet's power in Wordsworth's "Preface" of 1815 will confirm this. Wordsworth is talking about a series of figurative metamorphoses in a passage from his "Resolution and Independence." The passage and its commentary might have been written as an exemplification of what Schlegel says about the way the poet gives the law to himself and continually transforms things in a sovereign exercise of his tropological power. What Wordsworth says is a comment on the following passage in "Resolution and Independence," as he cites it

in the Preface:

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couched on the bald top of an eminence,
Wonder to all who do the same espy
By what means it could thither come, and whence,
So that it seems a thing endued with sense,
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, which on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposeth, there to sun himself.

Such seemed this Man; not all alive or dead
Nor all asleep, in his extreme old age.

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Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood,
That heareth not the loud winds when they call,
And moveth altogether if it move at all. (ll. 57-65; 75-77)

Here is Wordsworth's commentary on these lines:

In these images, the conferring, the abstracting, and the modifying powers of the Imagination, immediately and mediately acting, are all brought into conjunction. The stone is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate it to the sea-beast; and the sea-beast stripped of some of its vital qualities to assimilate it to the stone; which intermediate image is thus treated for the purpose of bringing the original image, that of the stone, to a nearer resemblance to the figure and condition of the aged Man; who is divested of so much of the indications of life and motion as to bring him to the point where the two objects unite and coalesce in just comparison. After what has been said, the image of the cloud

need not be commented on.¹⁵

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All this aspect of Schlegel's theory of myth seems admirably positive and optimistic. This is the side that has been most often stressed by those critics and scholars who approve of Schlegel and who want to affirm his importance as one of the founders of romanticism or of what we should call today aesthetic ideology in its modern form. Things are not quite so simple, nor quite so cheerful, with Friedrich Schlegel, however. A darker side of the motif of transformation emerges a little later in the "Talk on Mythology" and in the echoing passage in *Lucinde* to which I referred earlier. The reader will remember that the function of the new mythology is to form allegories, indirect expressions, of "the highest," or of what Schlegel calls "chaos." Works contributing to the formation of the new mythology must be in constant transformation because what they indirectly represent is not fixed but is in constant, senseless metamorphosis, subject to deformations beyond human power to comprehend. "Senseless" is the key word here, and I must now show why it is justified and why this senselessness gives a dark tone to Schlegel's notion of mythology.

The paragraph about the way the highest is really formed by a mythology that is a constant process of metamorphosis is followed by a passage that amalgamates, in an act of transformation and conformation of its own, the "marvelous wit of romantic poetry which does not manifest itself in individual conceptions but in the structure of the whole," meaning the works of Shakespeare and Cervantes, with mythology. "Indeed," says Schlegel, "this artfully ordered confusion (diese künstlich geordnete Verwirrung), this charming symmetry of contradictions (Widersprüchen), this wonderfully perennial alternation of

enthusiasm (Enthusiasmus) and irony which lives even in the smallest parts of the whole, seem to me to be an indirect mythology themselves" (G501; DP86). Having said that the wit of romantic poetry lies in the structure of the whole not in individual parts, Schlegel now says the alternation of enthusiasm and irony is vitally present even in the smallest parts of the whole. It must be both at once, in another example of the symmetry of contradictions of which Schlegel speaks. The wit of romantic poetry is present in the asymmetrical symmetry of the whole, something slightly askew or amiss in the whole structure that makes it explosively witty, as a fragment is witty, rather than an example of harmonious organic unity, with each part contributing to a whole that hangs together, with nothing in excess, as Aristotle says should be the case with a good tragedy. On the other hand, by a species of fractal design before the fact, in a work of the new mythology each smallest part will mirror that paradoxical witty structure of the whole. It is not simply that one part is not consonant with some other part, though perfectly coherent and self-consistent in itself. Each smallest part is itself riven by the same kind of contradictions that dominate the larger structure. It repeats those contradictions in miniature, as each part of a fractal repeats the pattern of the whole. It is not that one part is enthusiastic and another part ironical but that even the smallest part is enthusiastic and ironic at once.

The next sentence gives that asymmetrical symmetry a name that has a complex resonance in Schlegel's thought and in that of German romanticism generally.¹⁶ He says both romantic witty poetry and the new mythology are organized as an arabesque: "The organization [of both romantic poetry and mythology] is the same, and certainly the arabesque (die Arabeske) is the oldest and most original form of human imagination (der menschlichen Phantasie)" (G501; DP86). As other passages in

Schlegel show, he thinks, when he says "arabesque," as much of Raphael's arabesques, complex designs of beasts, flowers, and foliage, as of the Muslim designs to which Raphael was alluding. In either case an arabesque is, like the airy flourishes of Corporal Trim's stick in *Tristram Shandy*, a tangle of lines whose interleaved wanderings are governed by a center that is outside the design itself and that is located at infinity. An arabesque is a complex of asymptotic curves.

The words enthusiasm and irony are not chosen at random. Enthusiasm: the word means, etymologically, "possessed by a god." Insofar as witty romantic poems, poems that are an indirect mythology themselves, are enthusiastic, they contain or are possessed by that "highest" to which they give indirect, allegorical expression. Irony: we know what that means. It means incomprehensibility, vertigo, a dead end in thought, the permanent suspension or parabasis of dialectical progression. A mythology must be both enthusiastic and ironical at once, in defiance of reason. It must be enthusiastic in order to be inhabited by the highest. Since that highest is also chaotic, however, it can only be adequately allegorized in a mythology that is self-cancelling, against reason or alogical. Schlegel's name for this kind of discourse is "irony." This combination is itself contradictory and ironic. How could a person or a discourse be at once enthusiastic and ironic? Each feature would suspend or cancel the other.

The necessity for this impossible combination is made clear in the two sentences that follow. These are the climactic formulations of the whole braided or enchaind sequence of assertions I have been following. Both romantic wit and any mythology must be enthusiastic in the precise sense that they allow the highest to shimmer through, according to that figure of "sinnliche Scheinen" used already earlier in the "Talk on Mythology," in the paragraph just before my citations begin. At the same

time what shines through must be expressed ironically because it is, like irony, senseless, absurd, mad. It must fulfill Paul de Man's definition of irony in "The Rhetoric of Temporality": "Irony is unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness."¹⁷ In de Man's witty sentence "unrelieved" must be taken not only in the sense of unremitting, without relief, but also as an unostentatious translation of the Hegelian term "Aufhebung" as "relief." "Aufhebung," as everyone knows, is more or less untranslatable, since it means simultaneously, cancel, preserve, and lift up. It might, however, be translated as "relief." Unrelieved vertigo would be a dizziness that could be defined as a infinite absolute negativity incapable of dialectical sublation, lifting up, or relief. "Neither this wit nor a mythology can exist," says Schlegel, "without something original and inimitable which is absolutely irreducible (ohne ein erstes Ursprüngliches und Unnachahmliches, was schlechthin unauflöslich ist), and in which after all the transformations (Umbildungen) its original character and creative energy (Kraft) are still dimly visible (durchschimmern läßt), where the naive profundity (der naive Tiefsinn) permits the semblance of the absurd and of madness, of simplicity and foolishness (den Schein des Verkehrten und Verrückten oder des Einfältigen und Dummen), to shimmer through (durchschimmern läßt)" (G501-2; DP86). These are strong words - the absurd, madness, simplicity (in the sense of simplemindedness), and foolishness. As Paul de Man observes in "The Concept of Irony" these words sharply undercut any strongly positive, humanistic reading of the passage as a whole, such as might seem to be authorized by what is said earlier about the ability of a mythology to represent the highest allegorically, as well as by many other passages in Schlegel that seem to give a cheerful allegiance, in accordance with aesthetic ideology generally, to a progressive view of history as moving closer and closer to a union with the highest under the

guidance of romantic poetry and the new mythology. The endpoint of the new mythology's insight is, on the contrary, the shimmering through of the aboriginal chaos's madness and stupidity. As Paul de Man also observes in the same place, Schlegel rewrote these phrases to make them even stronger. Originally he wrote "the strange (das Sonderbare), even the absurd (das Widersinnige), as well as a childlike and yet sophisticated (geistreiche) naïveté," rather than "Schein des Verkehrten und Verrückten oder des Einfältigen und Dummen."¹⁸ This revision in the direction of a starker confrontation with the senselessness of chaos also gives little support to the assertion by the "many critics," alluded to in the introduction by Behler and Struc to the English translation of the *Dialogue on Poetry*, who "have seen in this demand for a new mythology the first symptom of Schlegel's later conversion to Catholicism" (DP, 27). Catholicism is a broad and catholic religion, but there is no way it can be made to jibe, even distantly, with the conception of a chaotic, impersonal, mad "highest" presented in the *Dialogue on Poetry*.

The "something original and inimitable which is absolutely irreducible" is that aboriginal chaos. The words "original," "inimitable," and "irreducible" must be taken in strong or literal senses. This "something" is radically original in the sense of being the transcendent source of everything, not just in the weaker sense that we speak of "poetic originality." It is inimitable not in the sense that Charles Dickens was known as "the inimitable Boz," but in the literal sense that it is impossible to represent it directly in a mimesis. It is "unspeakable," and can only be spoken of indirectly. It is absolutely irreducible in the sense that it cannot be reduced by analysis to its component elements. Though it is the locus of a constant self-differentiation, it cannot be adequately differentiated, analyzed, or reduced by human language. Nevertheless, its original character and creative energy still shine dimly through all the formations,

conformations, and transformations that characterize a mythology. It shines through because this mythology combines, in an oxymoron, naïveté with profundity. The new mythology is naively profound, or profoundly naive, like a fairy story. It is profound without knowing that it is profound. The combination of naïveté and profundity makes it both enthusiastic and ironical at the same time. What shines through, however, as should be stressed, is not the original absurdity, madness, simplicity, and stupidity of chaos, but only its Schein, that is, both a distant, indirect gleam of it and its "semblance," as the translation puts it. Probably that is a good thing, since the closer one gets to that original chaos the closer one gets to absurdity, dizziness to the point of madness. Mythology, it may be, is a protection as well as a means of insight.

Nevertheless, what Schlegel stresses in the final sentence of the enchainé sequence I have been following is the irrationality of poetry and the way it puts us within chaos. The sentence, in its use of the word "aufzuheben" is a parodic anticipation of Hegelian dialectical sublation. In Schlegel's case the *Aufhebung* does not raise us to a higher level in an endless progression toward the faroff fulfillment of union with absolute spirit, the Idea, nor does it move toward the achievement of Absolute Knowledge. It transplants us into a mad chaos. It leads to total non-knowledge. Hegel was right to be appalled.

As opposed to Paul de Man, who stresses the madness of ironic language in Schlegel, I want to argue that Schlegel's difference from Hegel arises from a different intuition about what is beyond language, Schlegel's chaos as against Hegel's Idea. Everything follows, I claim, from that difference. Every feature of Schlegel's non-systematic system makes sense (a strange kind of nonsensical sense) when everything he says is seen as swirling around those "wholly others" he called chaos.

Here is that final sentence, the last link in this non-concatenated

chain: "For this is the beginning (Anfang) of all poetry, to cancel (aufzuheben) the progression (Gang) and laws of rationally thinking reason (der vernünftig denkenden Vernunft), and to transplant (zu versetzen) us once again into the beautiful confusion of imagination (die schöne Verwirrung der Phantasie), into the original (ursprüngliche) chaos of human nature, for which I know as yet no more beautiful symbol (Symbol) than the motley throng (das bunte Gewimmel) of the ancient gods" (G502; DP86). About the stuttering repetition of the prefix Ver- here in "vernünftig . . . Vernunft" (reasonable reason), in "versetzen," and in "Verwirrung," already used a few sentences earlier there would be much to say, but I defer that here. If aufheben means not just cancel, but preserve, and raise up, thereby suggesting that poetry is a kind of higher reason, the passage makes clear that this higher reason is not rational, clear, but an irrational confusion. The translation affirms that poetry "transplants" us into that original confusion, but "versetzen" means literally, according to the dictionary, "set over, move, transfer; move from one grade to another in school; pawn, hock; reply." The word, in one of its valences, as meaning "transpose," is almost a synonym for "übersetzen," translate. The prefix "ver-," as in this verb, is double antithetical, both an intensive and a privative. "Versetzen" can mean to put forth or deposit as collateral for a loan, in short, to put in hock, as well as transpose, set across. In Schlegel's usage here, "versetzen" affirms that poetic words have a magic power to transpose the reader into original chaos, just as if he were being translated into another language home where another mother tongue is spoken. That new language, however, is the language of madness and foolishness.

*

This encompassing irony, a kind of ultimate irony of irony, will allow, finally, understanding, if I dare to use that word, of another recurrent motif in Schlegel's work, namely the definition of poetry as magic. In the dialogue leading up to Ludovico's presentation of the "Talk on Mythology," Ludovico asserts that "poetry is the finest branch of magic (der edelste Zweig der Magie)" (G496; DP80). After Ludovico's talk Lothario (who is sometimes said to represent Novalis) asserts, apropos of Dante, that, "Actually, every work should be a new revelation (Offenbarung) of nature. Only by being individual and universal (Eins und Alles) does a work become *the work* (wird ein Werk zum Werk)." A moment later he stresses the word again, speaking of the "independence and inner perfection for which I simply cannot find another word but the work (als das von Werken)" (G507; DP92). The word "work" here means primarily a work of art, of course, Dante's *Divine Comedy* in one example Schlegel gives. The insistence on the word, however, gives it alchemical or magical overtones. The great "work," for medieval alchemy, was the transmutation of base metals into gold. That transmutation was a figure for the transfiguration of the human spirit by a kind of magic into something worthy of salvation or even into a kind of deity. If poetry is the noblest magic, this means that poetry does not promise or give knowledge. It works performatively to bring something about, as though it were a magic formula. It is a feature of magic formulas, however, that they are, at least superficially or to profane ears and eyes, senseless, stupid: "Abracadabra! Hocus Pocus!," says the magician, and something happens, a pack of cards is turned into a pigeon. Schlegel's conception of mythology is ultimately performative not constative. A work of mythology is a speech act that works through its senselessness to reveal, in a magic opening up, a gleam of the semblance of chaos, a formula in which the "of . . . of" indicates the double remove.

The mythological work thereby works to transform its readers through this revelation. We do not come to know anything through a myth. We are made different, magically. The mythological work works.

The final irony, however, is that since this transformation is brought about not by knowledge but by a magic speech act, there is no way to know, for sure, whether the revelation is a true one, or only a semblance, a Schein. "Hocus Pocus" is a slang term for the beguiling procedures of a fraud. The pack of cards is not really turned into a pigeon. It is a sleight of hand. The paradox of all speech acts appears here in a hyperbolic form. It is hyperbolic because the speech act in question deals with the highest destiny of humankind. It is the speech act enabling all other speech acts. The performative side of a speech act is alien to knowledge. It makes something happen, but just how, by just whose authority, and just what happens can never be known for certain. Another way to put this is to say that mythologies are for Schlegel forced and abusive transfers of language, thrown out to name something that has no proper name, something that is unknown and unknowable. The rhetorical name for this procedure is catachresis. I therefore call Schlegel's myths catachreses for chaos. For Schlegel, what cannot be known for certain is whether new mythological works create a spurious semblance of the highest out of hocus pocus, language's magic power to project new virtual realities, or whether such works open doors allowing us to glimpse a semblance, a Schein, of that pre-existing, perennial, wholly other realm Friedrich Schlegel calls "chaos." Nothing could be more important to know, but we cannot know. We can, however, believe, and bear witness, one way or the other. This is the way Schlegel's assertions about myth embody the threat to rationality and dialectical thought that made Hegel so indignant.

I have also shown, so I claim, the paradoxical place Friedrich

Schlegel has in the history of ekphrasis or in the history of what Murray Krieger the illusion of the natural sign. On the one hand, catachreses for chaos are by no means signs that have a natural correspondence to their referent. They must be "worked" to come to stand for chaos. On the other hand, any sign under the sun has a natural capacity to be worked in this way, for example the details about sexual intercourse in *Lucinde* that so scandalized Hegel and Kierkegaard. The lowest can stand for the highest, or, as Ludovico puts it, the highest can be given form by what appears opposed to it as well as by what appears most like it.

¹ This paper is a somewhat truncated version of an essay appearing in *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today*, ed. Michael Clark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). It is used here by permission.

² Ed. Ernst Behler, Jean-Jacques Anstett, and Hans Eichner (Munich: Schöningh, 1958-).

³ See "The Concept of Irony," *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 182: "The best critics who have written on Schlegel, who have recognized his importance, have wanted to shelter him from the accusation of frivolity, which was generally made, but in the process they always have to recover the categories of the self, of history, and of dialectic, which are precisely the categories which in Schlegel are disrupted in a radical way." The two examples of this de Man gives are Peter Szondi and Walter Benjamin, two names to conjure with. To these names may be added the even more august names of Hegel and Kierkegaard. If all these dignitaries got Schlegel wrong, how could we expect to do better?

⁴ These include, along with the three sets of fragments, the *Gespräch über die Poesie* (*Dialogue on Poetry*) (1799-1800); the essay entitled "Über die Unverständlichkeit (On Incomprehensibility)" (1800); and the strange autobiographical

novel, *Lucinde* (1799).

⁵Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 265-6. Lee Capel's translation has "indignation" rather than "resentment." See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Lee M. Capel [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965], 283: "As soon as Hegel pronounces the word 'irony' he immediately thinks of Schlegel and Tieck, and his style instantly takes on the features of a certain indignation." Friedrich Schlegel makes Hegel indignant.

⁶Cited in Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, Hong trans., 547.

⁷"Unendliche absolute Negativität," G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik, Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 13:98; *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1:68. Henceforth Ger. and Eng., respectively.

⁸"Die Ironie ist eine permanente Parekbase,-": Friedrich Schlegel, "Zur Philosophie" (1797), Fragment 668, in *Philosophische Lehrjahre I* (1796-1806), ed. Ernst Behler, *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. cit., 18:85.

⁹Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Schriften* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1964), 20-1, henceforth G, followed by the page number; Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 13, henceforth E, followed by the page number.

¹⁰See Georgia Albert, "Understanding Irony: Three *essais* on Friedrich Schlegel," *MLN* (1993), 825-48. The comment on "schwindlicht" is on 845.

¹¹Translated as "On Incomprehensibility," *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: The Romantic Ironists and Goethe*, ed. Kathleen Wheeler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 37.

¹²Ludovico is thought by some scholars to be modeled on the philosopher F. W. von Schelling, but there is no way to be certain about that.

¹³Friedrich Schlegel, "Dialogue on Poetry," *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), 85, henceforth DP, followed by the page number.

¹⁴See Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1973), 78; *Lucinde*, trans. Peter Firchow, in *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 104.

¹⁵William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 754.

¹⁶See Karl Konrad Polheim, *Die Arabeske: Ansichten und Ideen aus Friedrich Schlegels Poetik* (Paderborn, 1966).

¹⁷Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," *Blindness and Insight*, 2nd. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 215.

¹⁸De Man, "The Concept of Irony," ed. cit., 180-1.

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