INTRODUCTION
An Image of the Age

After forty years of revolutions and revolutionary wars it had become apparent at the beginning of the Victorian period that the nineteenth century was to be characterized as a period of change. It was in fact the one subject on which even the most contentious persons could agree. Writing on “The Spirit of the Age” in 1831, John Stuart Mill described his as “an age of change,” “the conviction [being] already not far from universal, that the times are pregnant with change.” Elaborating on Mill’s observation in the last decade of the century, Walter Pater noted that “the entire modern theory” of change had become “a commonplace.” In sum, the idea of change informed all vital thought of the Victorian age: for example, the philosophy of T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley, the geology of Charles Lyell and William Chambers, the biology of Charles Darwin and T. H. Huxley, the theology of clergymen so diverse as John Henry Newman and Benjamin Jowett, and, in a very radical way, the literary efforts of the best writers of the time.

During the early part of the period, commentators spoke of it as “an age of transition,” from a time of certainty and accepted values to a time of which one knew not what. As Carlyle observed in Sartor Resartus, the Old Mythus had disappeared and the New Mythus had not been revealed. For many the recognition that
theirs was an age of transition was a fearful thing. "We live in an age of visible transition," Edward Bulwer Lytton wrote in his appraisal of the spirit of the age in 1833. "To me such epochs appear the times of greatest unhappiness to our species." "It is an awful moment," Frederick Robertson said a few years later, "when the soul begins to feel the nothingness of many of the traditionary opinions which have been received with implicit confidence, and in that horrible insecurity begins also to doubt whether there be any thing to believe at all." Where many were made anxious by change, others were of a different disposition. Writing to his future wife in 1846, Robert Browning said: "The cant is, that 'an age of transition' is the melancholy thing to contemplate and delineate—whereas the worst things of all to look back on are times of comparative standing still, rounded in their impotent completeness." Still others could be of two minds in contemplating their age. In "Locksley Hall" Alfred Tennyson viewed the time moving in exhilarating fashion "down the ringing grooves of change," whereas in "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After" he saw retrogression as the inevitable concomitant of progress.

If it is a time when "nothing is fixed, nothing is appointed," the liberal congregational theologian James Baldwin Brown said, one must adopt an attitude of skepticism about all things. "We are growing more sceptical in the proper sense of the word," wrote Henry Sidgwick:

we suspend our judgement much more than our predecessors; we see that there are many sides to many questions; the opinions that we do hold we hold more at arm's length; we can imagine how they appear to others, and can conceive ourselves not holding them. We are gaining in impartiality and comprehensiveness of sympathy.

This was entirely proper, according to the scientist John Tyndall, for "there are periods when the judgement ought to remain in
suspense, the data on which a decision might be based being absent." If there were certainties few or none, at least there was a world of possibilities.

Suspended judgment dictated by the perception that various and even contradictory views might be alike true—this was the posture that the thinking individual was forced to assume in a world of change; and basically, as philosophers and literary critics came to understand, it was an ironic stance. The historian and ecclesiastic Connop Thirlwall observed this in 1833 when addressing himself to a kind of irony dependent not upon local effects but made identical with a cosmic view. Noting that in the Antigone Sophocles impartially presented two equal and opposite points of view, he remarked that irony may reside in the attitude of an impartial observer or, more precisely, in the situation observed:

There is always a slight cast of irony in the grave, calm, respectful attention impartially bestowed by an intelligent judge on two contending parties, who are pleading their causes before him with all the earnestness of deep conviction, and of excited feeling. What makes the contrast interesting is, that the right and the truth lie on neither side exclusively: that there is no fraudulent purpose, no gross imbecility of intellect, on either: but both have plausible claims and specious reasons to alledge, though each is too much blinded by prejudice or passion to do justice to the views of his adversary. For there the irony lies not in the demeanor of the judge, but is deeply seated in the case itself, which seems to favour each of the litigants, but really eludes them both.

The most interesting conflicts are not, Thirlwall says, those in which one side is obviously right, as when good is pitted against evil. For

this case seems to carry its own final decision in itself. But the liveliest interest arises when by inevitable circumstances, characters, motives, and principles are brought into hostile
collision, in which good and evil are so inextricably blended on each side, that we are compelled to give an equal share of our sympathy to each, while we perceive that no earthly power can reconcile them; that the strife must last until it is extinguished with at least one of the parties, and yet that this cannot happen without the sacrifice of something which we should wish to preserve.

The kind of irony that Thirlwall describes—suspended judgment required by the indeterminacy of the case—is that now known as romantic irony. Romantic irony has not often been associated with literature in English. To critics in England and America it has seemed foreign, something made in Germany, for which there was little market in English-speaking countries. Recent critical studies, however, have helped to domesticate the term, although even yet it does not enjoy widespread usage because of a lack of common understanding as to its meaning. As Lilian Furst observes, romantic irony almost seems to elude definition (p. 225).

It is important to note, in the first place, that romantic irony is unlike the local ironies that are rhetorical, polemical, satirical, and parodistic. Its purpose is not to persuade, amuse, or ridicule but, rather, to question certainties and present possibilities. It is essentially philosophical and is a response to the problem of contradictions in life that are perceived as irreconcilable. It first assumed a prominent position in European thought and literature at the close of the eighteenth century. In spite of its name, however, romantic irony is not to be associated exclusively with the Romantic period, although critics of English literature have discussed it mainly in connection with Romantic writing.

For an understanding of romantic irony we can do no better than to go to its first and foremost theoretician, the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich von Schlegel. As he conceived it, romantic irony is rooted in the problem of the self in German idealism. How, for example, is the finite ego related to the Infinite or Absolute Ego? How may the
realms of the relative and the absolute be brought together? Schlegel's answer was to posit both the finite and the infinite as a process: the essence of reality is not being, a substance in itself, but becoming, a process. In the fertile abundance of the phenomenal world, "an infinitely teeming chaos," all is change: an entity becomes something so as to become something else, is created so as to be de-created, is formed so as to be transformed. Thus everything is simultaneously both itself and not itself in that it is in the process of becoming something else: $a$ is not only $a$ but also $a$ becoming $b$, and $b$ is not only $b$ but also $b$ becoming $c$, and so on ad infinitum. This is the basic paradox of romantic irony, which Schlegel defined as "the form of paradox" and as "everything simultaneously great and good" (L 48, KA 2:153). There can be, as the most advanced Victorian authors came to perceive, no certainty in this world of flux because there is no stability, the only constant being change itself without telos.

Infinity, in Schlegel's view, is an ever-growing center of finite expressions, and finitude is a momentarily limited infinity. Reality is, accordingly, an interplay between the finite and the infinite. Ontologically the finite can never encompass the infinite, because an exhaustless fund of life constantly develops itself amidst the ever-flowing vital energy of nature. Psychologically the individual experiences the tension caused by the desire for order and coherence (being, on the one hand) and chaos and freedom (becoming, on the other) as a conflict between power and love. Epistemologically man can never attain full consciousness, an infinite self; any theoretical formulation or system of reality that he makes can be only an approximation, which ultimately must be transcended. Morally the recognition of the inadequacy of a specific formulation or system stimulates the dissatisfaction that urges the individual and the race toward evolution into ever-higher states or conditions of consciousness.

Romantic irony finds a literary mode correspondent to this world view in what Schlegel calls "progressive, universal poetry (Universalpoesie)," "romantic poetry" (A 116, KA 2:182) or
"transcendental poetry" (A 238, KA 2:204). As "a representation of the Universe" (KA 18:213, frag. 219), it is infinite and free, forever "in the state of becoming"; it is "a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age" (A 116). Having its "real homeland" in philosophy (L 42, KA 2:152), it is a combination of poetry and philosophy, science and art (L 115, KA 2:161).

Since no one literary genre can accommodate this fusion, all genres are therefore to be combined. For the aim of Universalpoesie is not "merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric" but also to "mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature" (A 116, KA 2:182). It can therefore be a poem, a drama, a novel, or some intermixture thereof. Taking all forms, modes, styles, and genres for its expression, it will employ, *inter alia*, fragments, differing perspectives, critical comments, disruptions of cause and effect, and confessional interpolations. Outwardly it will resemble an "arabesque," an "artfully ordered confusion" and a "charming symmetry of contradictions" representative of the order of being and the chaos of becoming. It will be "at once completely subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in a system of all the sciences" (A 77, KA 2:176).

Originating in philosophy, ironic art will operate in the "scientific spirit" of "conscious philosophy" (L 108, KA 2:160). Just as "we wouldn't think much of an uncritical transcendental philosophy that doesn't represent the producer along with the product and contain within the system of transcendental thought a description of transcendental thinking," so the ironic artist will "unite the transcendental raw materials and preliminaries of a theory of poetic creativity with artistic reflection and beautiful self-mirroring" (A 238, KA 2:204). He not only offers a representation of the universe (KA 18:213, frag. 219) but also shows how his representation came to be (KA 12:102). With his "clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos" (L 69, KA 2:263), the ironic artist attempts to render or evoke the infinite
in his creation of a fiction or system. But he questions it as an accurate representation of the chaos of becoming and in the act of doing so soon discovers that it is but a mere construct of his own making, an inadequate and fragmentary exposition of infinite becoming, from which he recoils and which he undermines, in effect de-creating his own creation. The gap between representation and presence resulting from the "indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative" (L 108, KA 2:160), he indicates by self-representation: which is to say that he makes his art a representation of the act of representation in order to show the limits of the activity and at the same time hold on to the evocation of the infinite manifested in his art. That is why Universalpoesie is a "form so fit for expressing the entire spirit of the author" and why "many artists who started to write only a novel ended up by providing us with a portrait of themselves" (A 116, KA 2:182).

Bearing a somewhat similar relation to his poem as the Christian God does to the cosmos, the poet may be said paradoxically to be both in and out of the creation, immanent and transcendent. Hovering above his work but free to enter it as he pleases, the artist is like the buffo in comic opera or the Harlequin figure in commedia dell'arte, who at the same time controls the plot and mocks the play, or like the parabasis of Greek drama in which the author's spokesman, usually the chorus, interrupts the action of the play to address the audience on matters of concern to the author. Engaged in constant "self-creation and self-destruction" (L 37, KA 2:151), the ironist is committed to "continuous self-parody" (L 108, KA 2:160). Irony is permanent parabasis, Schlegel insisted (KA 18:85, frag. 668), parabasis and chorus being necessary to every ironic work "for potentiation."9 Such a work is "informed by a truly transcendental buffoonery" and in its execution will appropriate "the mimic style of an averagely gifted Italian buffo" (L 42, KA 2:152).

As Anne Mellor points out in her valuable book, the author's making known his presence need not necessarily mean a deliberate destruction of the fictional illusion (pp. 17–18). Often it is
accomplished by use of opposing voices or ideas or artistic structures that remain unharmonized. In the sustained and unreconciled opposition of polar points of view the author yields precedence to no particular voice but positions himself above the discourse as a kind of impartial umpire, although he occasionally descends to manifest himself in certain aspects of his creation. As the quotation by Henry Sidgwick cited above indicates, this dialectical irony recognizes that the opposite of what one says may well be true, and thus it never entirely denies an alternative as it hovers between possibilities. It refuses to be forced into a stance of either/or but insists on the posture of both/and.

Yet even in this instance of dialectical irony the fictional illusion is broken by the artist’s insistence, sometimes explicit but more often implicit, that his work is not a representation of reality but an artistic re-presentation, that it is first and foremost an artifact, pure artifice that aims to “describe itself,” being “simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry” (A 238, KA 2:204). Like the artist himself, it transcends itself: “it can hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer, free of all real and ideal self-restraint, on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors” (A 116, KA 2:182). Insofar as it depicts, a work of romantic irony portrays itself.

In this “hovering” (Schweben) of artist and artwork itself the element of game and play is present. The ambiguity, mobility, and paradox of ontological becoming that inform art and life alike require an agility, a brisk and nimble stretch characteristic of all kinds of play. “Poetic illusion, says Schlegel, “is a game of impressions, and the game, an illusion of actions” (A 100, KA 2:180). To shatter this illusion is to introduce another dimension to the game, for it means that the pieces have to be put back together for the game to proceed: “The fact that one can annihilate a philosophy or can prove that a philosophy annihilates itself is of little consequence. If it’s really philosophy, then, like
the phoenix, it will always rise again from its own ashes” (A 103, KA 2:180).

Irony, being “involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation” (L 108, KA 2:160), is play in the theatrical sense as well, in that it requires one to enact roles. The ironic author not only plays the role of stage manager or master of ceremonies but, like Harlequin, also assumes a part in the play. In addition, he at times endows his characters with the consciousness that they too are actors in a literary vehicle, so that while seeming to possess free will, they nevertheless are aware of being puppets controlled by the author or his spokesman in the play; just as in real life human beings are granted the illusion of freedom of choice while at the same time they are hemmed in, and the scope of their choice is narrowed by mountains of necessity. Joyfully embracing the voluntary and necessary dissimulation in both life and art, Schlegel demands “that events, men, in short the play of life, be taken as play and be represented as such” (DP, p. 89).

Because indeterminacy or the unsettling of meaning follows from the playful hovering of the author above the text that represents the world of becoming, irony avoids closure. Where other kinds of poetry can be finished and rounded out, all its parts brought together into formal perfection, “the romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected” (A 116, KA 2:182); it is “open” (L 117, KA 2:162). Yet, while recognizing the impossibility of enclosure, some authors may nevertheless seek to achieve something like it by lengthy elaboration, wanting “to say a great many things that absolutely ought to be left unsaid” (L 33, KA 2:150) and “to blurt out everything” (L 37, KA 2:151). Such a person has not learned the value of self-restriction. The writer “who can and does talk himself out, who keeps nothing back for himself, and likes to tell everything he knows, is to be pitied” because thereafter there is nothing left for him to say. Given the revolutionary potential of time in a world of becoming, a person can change his mind in a
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minute and not wish to proceed along the course inspired by his initial enthusiasm: "Even a friendly conversation which cannot be broken off at any moment, completely arbitrarily, has something intolerant about it" \((L\ 37,\ KA\ 2:151)\). The poetry of becoming, which recognizes both "the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication" \((L\ 108,\ KA\ 2:160)\), will necessarily be fragmentary.

Throughout his own literary fragments Schlegel is concerned to put a rein on the hovering subject glorifying in its own activity. Where on the one hand he endorses romantic irony's grant of transcendence to the creative subject of its image and representational system, on the other hand he is careful, as Gary Handwerk has brilliantly shown, to indicate that irony is not only aesthetic and metaphysical play but also ethical endeavor. The artist who wants to blurt out everything in self-display "fails to recognize the value and dignity of self-restriction, which is after all, for the artist as well as for the man, the first and the last, the most necessary and the highest duty." It is most necessary, Schlegel says, "because wherever one does not restrict oneself, one is restricted by the world," which is to say that one is unheeded or cast off, "and that makes one a slave." It is the highest duty "because one can only restrict oneself at those points and places where one possesses infinite power, self-creation, and self-destruction" \((L\ 37,\ KA\ 2:151)\); which is to say that the ironic artist must restrain his tendency to conquer, overcome, and in effect violate his audience by forcing his own will, his own sense of self, on an other.

For Schlegel irony is both egotistically sublime and negatively capable. As power, an unbridled assertion of subjectivity, it is imperialistic, aiming to embrace, order, and absorb everything. As love, it desires a reciprocal relationship with an other. "It contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication" \((L\ 108,\ KA\ 2:160)\). On the one hand the ironist, contemptuous of conventional representational systems, wishes to tell
all and to tell it all at once in a language of his own devising; on the other hand he wishes to share feelings and insights with an other, which means that, recognizing literature to be "republican speech" (L 65, KA 2:155), he must subdue himself to that which can be represented and communicated. Hence irony is an interplay between self-assertion and self-restraint that allows to "occur in the other person that which took place in us, and the aim of communication [thereby to be] attained" (KA 12:102).

The notion of communication and dialogue with the reader figures strongly in Schlegel's thoughts on irony. First, it is conceived of as a means of conceptualizing and attaining a sense of selfhood. As Gary Handwerk points out, "Irony is above all a certain way of dealing with the problem of the subject in language and its apparent communicative isolation" (p. 44). Schlegel says that "nobody understands himself who does not understand his fellows. Therefore you first have to believe you are not alone" (I 124, KA 2:268). Intersubjectivity—the dialogue between subjects, not between subject and object—raises the individual subject to a higher level of consciousness. "To mediate and to be mediated are the whole higher life of man," Schlegel says (I 44, KA 2:260). No one can live without a "vital center," a sense of self, and if one does not possess it, then one can seek it only in an other, for only an other's "center can stimulate and awaken his own" (I 45, KA 2:260). No endeavor is so truly human "as one that simply supplements, joins, fosters" (I 53, KA 2:261). Second, the notion of communication is conceived in a larger, ethical sense, as sympathy becomes a fundamental requisite for art. The artist must aim "to communicate and share with somebody, not simply express himself" (L 98, KA 2:178). "Real sympathy concerns itself with furthering the freedom of others, not merely with personal satisfaction (A 86, KA 2:178). As Schlegel pondered the nature of ironic art, he envisioned an increasingly larger role for the reader, to the point where the reader actually becomes engaged in the creation of the work. Unlike the "analytic writer" who wishes only to address the reader and make an
impression upon him, the ironic artist, a "synthetic writer," does not imagine the reader to be "calm and dead, but alive and critical." The synthetic writer provides the fragments which the reader must construe and discover the meaning of for himself. Thus the ironic artist does not try to make any particular impression upon the reader "but enters with him into the sacred relationship of deepest symphilosophy or sympoetry" (L 112, KA 2:161). In brief, the writer enters into "a philosophy of friendship" (Blütenstaub 2, KA 2:164) by means of "a dialogue [which] is a chain or garland of friendships" (A 77, KA 2:176). As Schlegel's contemporary, the poet Friedrich von Hardenberg (better known as Novalis) says, "The true reader must be the extended author. He is the higher tribunal, which receives the matter from the lower tribunal already preworked." Schlegel envisioned a still further step when in the future symphilosophy and sympoetry would become so universal and intimate that it would not be unusual if two minds that complement each other were "to create communal works of art" (A 125, KA 2:185).

This ideal of complementarity, the joining of two minds together "like divided halves that can realize their own full potential only when joined" (A 125, KA 2:185), enlarges Schlegel's conception of role playing beyond the notion of mere play to an understanding that it involves entering into a closer relationship with an other so as to supplement one's own perspectives. It is in fact seen as another form of dialogue, which intends "to set against one another quite divergent opinions, each of them capable of shedding new light upon [a subject] from an individual standpoint, each of them striving to penetrate from a different angle into the real heart of the matter" (DP p. 55). In like fashion, parabasis, said to be necessary to every ironic work "for potentiation" (LN frag. 1682), is to be seen not only as the breaking of the fictional illusion but also as an opening up of space for the response of the audience and its inclusion into the making of the work. As Novalis said, "We should transform everything into a
Thou—a second I—only thereby do we raise ourselves to the Great I—which is one and all simultaneously.”

From this survey of German idealist thought on the subject we can see that if romantic irony seems to elude definition, it nevertheless has some defining characteristics. Philosophically it is founded on the gap between being and becoming, which Nietzsche later was to represent as the Apollonian and Dionysian disjuncture. Being is characterized by the Apollonian drive toward order, fixity, individuation, and objectivity; it is by nature temporal, finite, conscious, and masculine. Becoming, on the other hand, is characterized by the Dionysian drive toward chaos, fluidity, subjectivity, and cosmic oneness; partaking of the eternal and the infinite, it is by nature unconscious and feminine. Romantic irony seeks to lessen the gap, to negate the abyss between subject and object, to get at the Absolute Ego behind the finite ego, in full realization, however, that the material world can never be transformed into spirit, that the gap may be narrowed but never closed. In Nietzschean terms romantic irony wears a “Janus face, at once Dionysiac and Apollonian,” which may be expressed in the formula “Whatever exists is both just and unjust, and equally justified in both.”

A literary work in this mode has many and often all of the following characteristics. Formally it is an arabesque, a mixture of styles, modes, and genres. It avoids closure and determinate meaning as it deconstructs the invented fictional world that it pretends to offer. Essentially reflexive, sometimes to the point of infinite regress, it mirrors its author and itself. Concerned with the question of human freedom, it displays the oppressiveness of being and materiality, designated as fate, frequently by presenting characters who conceive of themselves as dramatis personae. It is distrustful of its own linguistic medium and invites the “sym-poetic” participation of the reader. Permeated by a sense of play, it permits the creative self to hover above its image and representational system and thereby glorify in its own self-activity.
I propose in the following chapters to present Carlyle, Thackeray, Browning, Arnold, Dickens, Tennyson, and Pater as romantic ironists by examining some of their works. Insofar as it has been applied to English authors, romantic irony, as I suggested earlier, has been associated chiefly with the Romantics and hardly at all with the Victorians. I do not claim that all the authors I treat were acquainted with Schlegel or other German philosophers and writers on the subject. Some of them were, and some of them probably were not: Carlyle, Thackeray, Tennyson, Arnold, and Pater were avid readers of the German idealists; Browning seemed somehow to be acquainted with them, although he disclaimed having read them; Dickens had little interest in formal philosophy. The point is irrelevant, however, for as we have seen, by 1830 the notion of change was in the air and among advanced thinkers, the concept of becoming was a dominant idea. It took no philosophical training to arrive at the conclusion that meaning had become problematical and that suspended judgment was therefore desirable. Once the doctrine of becoming, eternal change without telos, was embraced, it followed as the night the day that an ironic, a romantic ironic world view was the result. Moreover, for an author this meant that his way of regarding the world required an artistic mode correspondent to it. Which is to say, Carlyle, Thackeray, Browning, Arnold, Dickens, Tennyson, and Pater became romantic ironists in no small part because the Zeitgeist demanded it.

Because their work is what Schlegel called "an image of the age" (A 116, KA 2:182), their irony is not an eighteenth-century rhetorical irony nor a twentieth-century irony of negative absurdity. To put it another way, Victorian romantic irony is not subsumed by either the normative irony or the epistemological irony espoused by the two chief contemporary theorists of literary irony. Arguing that irony's complexities are shared by the author and the reader, Wayne C. Booth insists that irony is rhetorically functional and that beneath every ironic surface there is a stable center of determinate meaning to be uncovered. Paul de Man, on the other
hand, emphasizing the duplicitous nature of language and the consequent breakdown of understanding, holds that the interpretation of an ironic text is impossible because there is no stable center of meaning, "meaning" being an illusion of the conscious mind imprisoned within its own linguistic system but desiring release into metaphysics. In brief, Booth reconstructs, de Man deconstructs, while Victorian romantic irony does both.

For separately reconstructionist and deconstructionist theories of irony obviate possibility—the possibility of becoming. When deconstructionists insist on the death of meaning, they reify a meaning that precludes all others. And when reconstructionists maintain that a statement of meaning can be recovered, they too lapse into dogma and affirm meaning as something fixed and final. Victorian romantic ironists, however, are less concerned with meaning than with the possibility of meaning. Which is to say that for them meaning is neither fixed nor absent; it is always becoming, realizing itself in different styles, forms, modes, and perspectives. For them meaning is provisional, sometimes perhaps nothing more than a fiction but nevertheless an enabling fiction in a world of possibilities.