In the preceding chapters I have purposely considered works in various genres in order to suggest how romantic irony is informative of a large body of Victorian literature. Having chosen representative texts, I am confident that examination of other poems, histories, and novels in the manner offered here could easily be extended not only to other works by the same authors but also to those by other writers, Meredith and Clough being two examples that come immediately to mind. For, as I hope to have made clear, what Schlegel called "universal poetry"—literature, in both verse and prose, in the romantic ironic mode—is appropriate for and characteristic of the historical period that recognized itself as an age of transition. To use Schlegel's terms it is "an image of the age" (A 116, KA 2:182).

The spiritual doubts, anguish, and dividedness of the literature of the era have long been recognized. As a result it has all too often been regarded as essentially melancholy or even tragic, expressive of longings for the certainties of ages past. What I propose is another way of regarding the writings of the great Victorian writers: as acknowledgment and acceptance of contradictions and paradoxes, as an embrace of possibilities. Their stance is that of Whitman, who asks: "Do I contradict myself??";
and responds, "Very well then I contradict myself / (I am large, I contain multitudes)" ("Song of Myself," ll. 48–50).

It is not that the authors in touch with the most vital levels of their culture celebrated their liberation from the claims of the transcendent; in spite of their lack of certainties in the world of the actual, Carlyle, Thackeray, Browning, Dickens, Arnold, Tennyson, Pater—none of them relinquished faith in the Absolute, the informing principle in the universe of becoming, although they experienced it in different ways. Rather, they saw that their task as artists was to make manifest in their art the values of the infinite and eternal that their age had lost sight of. "What I want," said Thackeray in speaking of Vanity Fair, "is to make a set of people living without God in the world greedy pompous mean perfectly self-satisfied for the most part and at ease about their superior virtue" (Ray, Letters 2:309). What Thackeray and the others aimed to be, were, in Arnold's words, "physician[s] of the iron age" who diagnosed accurately, to say "Thou ailest here, and here!" ("Memorial Verses").

Yet, as Thackeray commented, "it does not become me to preach" (Ray, Letters, 2:354). It was not only unbecoming but also impossible, for the cure to the ills of the age was doubtful. "One of the questions that oftenest presents itself," Carlyle wrote to John Stuart Mill, "is How Ideals do and ought to adjust themselves with the Actual?" (CL, 7:24). Carlyle's problem, as indeed that of all the authors studied here, was the relation of the relative to the Absolute, of the actual to the ideal. And for all of them literature—"universal poetry"—was the means of mediating the dualism; it was, as Browning says in The Ring and the Book, the "means to the end" and thus itself "in part the end," the "fiction which makes fact alive" and therefore becomes "fact too" (l. 697–98). Yet, as Browning knew, only "God is the PERFECT POET, / Who in his poem acts his own creations" (Paracelsus [1st ed.] 2.648–49). To use the terms I have employed earlier, no human can play the role God plays: He is both the playwright and the superstar. And so Browning and the others question the right-
ness of their formulations about fact and ideality, undercut their assertions about them, and withdraw to stations above their works where—sometimes with a smile, as in the case of Browning, or with a sad countenance, as in the case of Tennyson—they look down upon their creations.

Carlyle, who self-mockingly began to write *Sartor Resartus* as "Nonsense,"³ termed the finished book a "Satirical Extravaganza" that nevertheless contained "more of [his] opinions on Art, Politics, Religion, Heaven Earth and Air, than all the things [he had] yet written" (*CL*, 6:396). Browning interrupted Sordello's long discourse on metaphysical poetry to say that if his hero achieves what he wishes, "Why, he writes Sordello" (5.619). And at the end of *The Ring and the Book* he allows that his poem is little more than "words and wind" (12.836). Tennyson in his elegy for Arthur Hallam admitted, near the close of the poem, that what he found "in the highest place" was "mine own phantom chanting hymns" (*In Memoriam* 108.9–10). Dickens, who frequently used his own initials in the naming of his characters, insisted that his novels reflected his own experiences. When he first conceived of *A Tale of Two Cities*, he says in the Preface, he had "a strong desire to embody it in my own person." And even when the novel took its present form, "throughout its execution, it has had complete possession of me; I have so far verified what is done and suffered in these pages, as that I have certainly done and suffered it all myself."

Romantic irony is, then, both egotistically sublime and negatively capable. Flaubert, who admitted that Madame Bovary was himself and yet strove for the complete erasure of his personality in the novel, characterized it beautifully: his goal, he said, was "to be immanent in his work as God is in His creation, invisible and all-powerful; to be felt everywhere but to remain unseen."¹ Yet unlike God, the romantic ironist is not all-knowing. He is in fact ignorant: he does not know the way things are, he only considers possibilities of how they might be. His role as ironist is thus a skeptical enactment of his position of ignorance, as he
submits to his audience the adequacy of his skepticism for further evaluation. In his search for what will suffice, he always retains the stance of one recognizing that, in Gary Handwerk's felicitous phrase, "ignorance is much harder to maintain than certitude" (p. 173).

Far from being, as he is so often charged, sentimental or despairing, the Victorian writer of the type I have described is tough minded. Speaking of his father, Carlyle said: "He was never visited with Doubt; the old Theorem of the Universe was sufficient for him, he stood a true man on the verge of the Old.' But now, "so quick is the motion of Transition becoming," all is changed, and "his son stands here on the verge of the New, and sees the possibility of also being true there."5 Like Tennyson's Bedivere in "The Passing of Arthur," the Victorian romantic ironist stands alone on the verge as the old order changes yielding place to new. "All barriers seem overthrown in my inward world,' Carlyle wrote in 1833; "nothing is to prevent, to deter me, but also nothing to direct. I pause over a boundless, unpuebloed prospect; ask how I am to walk and work there" (CL, 7:24). He cannot know what the new will bring but at least he, like his fellow ironists, can be "true," as, forgoing certainties, he fronts a world of possibilities.