The Never-Resting Mind

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For Caroline

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Contents

Introduction

Irony is a central concept in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, and it has attracted commentary from critics as different as Conrad Aiken, Lewis Untermeyer, Frank Lentricchia, and J. Hillis Miller.[1] Despite the attention the concept has received, the expression of romantic irony in Stevens' work has not been explored. The term itself may have contributed to this critical oversight. As Lilian Furst writes, "Partly because of the misleading implications of its name, romantic irony has acquired the reputation of being a peculiar caprice of a few esoteric writers at the turn of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century, resistant to common comprehension and of slight relevance anyway."[2] Its importance to the modern period, though, has been succinctly stated by D. C. Muecke: "To study Romantic Irony is to discover how modern Romanticism could be, or, if you like, how Romantic Modernism is."[3]

The first theorist of romantic irony, Friedrich Schlegel, described the concept for the most part in aphorisms scattered throughout three collections of fragments, *Lyceum Fragments* (1797), *Athenaeum Fragments* (1799), and *Ideas* (1800). As Schlegel conceives it, romantic irony rejects Newton's orderly universe of immutable laws. In its place, it posits a chaotic universe of becoming and change. While romantic irony affirms a chaotic universe, it also affirms the power of the mind to construct a world out of chaos. Aware that these constructs are finite patterns imposed by the mind on an infinite and dynamic universe and hence have no final validity, the ironist adopts a deeply skeptical attitude toward them. But skepticism is not the only attitude expressed by the iro-

nist toward the mind's patterning of experience. Though aware that all structuring concepts are, ultimately, fictions, the ironist also accepts and is committed to these concepts. This dual stance of the ironist—at once skeptically free from and deeply committed to a particular order, structure, or system—engenders a never-ending process. Skeptical reduction leads to the creation of a new structure, a new way of ordering experience. This pattern is subjected in turn to critical scrutiny, which again leads to creation, and so on endlessly. The ironist's experience of the world, then, continues to broaden and to become ever more fragmented in the never-ending process of reduction and creation.

The theory was vigorously attacked by Hegel and Kierkegaard, who view romantic irony as an unjustified and dangerous glorification of the subjective. In romantic irony, as Kierkegaard puts it, subjectivity is "raised to the second power."[4] To Hegel and Kierkegaard, the great creative power of the ironist is, finally, enclosing and isolating. The Fichtean ego of the ironist negates the world of time and circumstance and replaces it, again in Kierkegaard's words, with a "self-created actuality" (*CI* 292). The aesthetic world the ironist devises is in their view sport for the reflective consciousness of the ironist.

Both of these views of romantic irony, one that gestures toward engagement, the other toward transcendence and enclosure, were inherited by the moderns. Hegel's and Kierkegaard's emphasis on the subjectivity and caprice of the ironist was echoed, for example, early in the century by Irving Babbitt in *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919).[5] A similar view of the concept can be seen in Charles Glicksberg's later study, *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature* (1969). Glicksberg writes that John Davidson, a contributor to the *Yellow Book* and member of the Rhymers' Club, "gave expression to romantic irony at its blaspheming best and worst, a form of irony that Irving Babbitt, in *Rousseau and Romanticism,* had condemned as a species of literary perversion, a cult of irresponsibility and egocentric insolence."[6] Candace Lang's more recent study of irony also views romantic irony only in Kierkegaardian terms. "[T]he romantic irony to which I refer and from which I sharply distinguish the spirit animating such recent trends in literary and

critical practice as the *nouveau roman* or deconstruction is the romanticism that Kierkegaard sees, rightly or wrongly, in Schlegel and Tieck . . . and which remains today the prevalent conception of romanticism."[7]

Other critics have found a Schlegelian sense of irony in modern literature. Lilian Furst, for instance, finds this irony in Joyce, Italo Svevo, Borges, and Beckett, as well as in later writers such as Gil Sorrentino and Italo Calvino.[8] Gary Handwerk, who criticizes Hegel and Kierkegaard for reducing romantic irony to an "untrammeled subjective willfulness, a taking of the self at its most immediate and naive level as absolute[,] . . . cut off from both historical actuality and objective reality,"[9] argues that in romantic irony the subject moves away from isolation and toward intersubjectivity. Irony "establishes the dependence of the subject's identity on the web of social relations within which it exists."[10] For him, romantic irony is an exploration of the subject's situation in the world as it relates to the Other, and he discusses this "ethical irony" in the work of Meredith, Beckett, and Lacan. The expression of a Schlegelian sense of irony has been described by other critics in modern poets such as Frost and Yeats.[11]

Numerous cultural, political, and literary factors affected the reception and influence of each of these senses of irony in the twentieth century. Though this study does not investigate these factors (indeed, such an investigation would make a lengthy study in itself), I wish to mention three that are of particular importance. The First World War had an extremely negative impact on romantic irony as conceived by Schlegel. Anne Mellor, whose study of romantic irony takes its theoretical direction from Schlegel, writes, "After such devastation, the romantic ironist's enthusiastic celebration of process and change seemed callow or philosophically absurd. . . . [The First World War] sabotaged the romantic ironist's sense of exuberant freedom in an infinitely various and infinitely possible world."[12] The strongly antiromantic character of early literary modernism also had a negative influence on the Schlegelian sense of irony. Babbitt's attack on romantic irony, for instance, was only part of a larger campaign he waged against romanticism in its broadest conception. (Kierkegaard, too, makes clear in *The*

Concept of Irony that his attack on romantic irony should be seen as an attack on romanticism itself and not on just one aspect of it. "Throughout this discussion [of irony after Fichte] I use the expressions: *irony* and the *ironist,* but I could as easily say: *romanticism* and the *romanticist.* Both expressions designate the same thing" [*CI* 292 n. 2].) Attacks on romanticism were also undertaken with enthusiasm by Eliot, Pound, Hulme, and, in France, Pierre Lassere.[13] A third factor, and one that relates to both senses of romantic irony, is the cultural response to industrialism. T. J. Jackson Lears writes that the early modern period is marked by a desire to withdraw from industrial society. "Antimodern dissenters recoiled from this ethic [capitalism] and groped for alternatives in medieval, Oriental, and other 'primitive' cultures."[14] This expression of what Samuel Hays in *The Response to Industrialism* calls a "nostalgia for a calmer, less perplexed, pre-industrial life"[15] coexisted with another impulse. In Lears' words, "Antimodernism was not simply escapism; it was ambivalent, often coexisting with enthusiasm for material progress."[16] The opposing senses of romantic irony seen in the modern period reflect in a literary context this cultural dialectic between engagement and transcendence.

And it is a dialectic that lies at the center of Stevens' poetry. James Longenbach writes that "Stevens began his career torn between an overripe *fin de siècle* desire to transcend things as they are and a rough-hewn urge to tackle the world of politics and economics head on."[17] Longenbach has explored the "tension between conflicting desires for engagement and transcendence"[18] that runs through all of Stevens' poetry in the context of the great economic and political events of Stevens' lifetime: the First World War, the Great Depression, the Second World War. These conflicting desires have also been discussed by biographical critics such as George Lensing, who writes that Stevens' "1899 concern with ideal versus fact anticipated . . . his absorption in the claims on him by the inner life of imagination and the outer world of the real. . . . The pull of both . . . set forth the scope of his future art."[19]

In looking at Stevens through the lens(es) of romantic irony, I

also explore this central aspect of his art. Before turning to Stevens, though, I discuss the Schlegelian and the Hegelian and Kierkegaardian senses of romantic irony, and I explore their expression in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers—the Hegelian and Kierkegaardian senses in J. K. Huysmans and the early T. S. Eliot, the Schlegelian sense in Nietzsche. Of course, these are not the only writers from whom Stevens could have learned of romantic irony. He might also have known of the concept from its expression in Byron, Shelley, and Keats, in Victorian authors such as Carlyle, Thackeray, Browning, Arnold, Dickens, and Tennyson, or in French writers such as Diderot, Musset, Stendhal, Gautier, Baudelaire, and Flaubert.[20] Though Stevens could have known of romantic irony from a number of sources, I discuss Eliot, Huysmans, and Nietzsche in part because of their importance to Stevens. Eliot is the modern against whom Stevens perhaps most defined himself. Five years before his death in 1955, Stevens wrote to William Van O'Connor that he and Eliot were "dead opposites" and that he had "been doing about everything that [Eliot] would not be likely to do" (*L* 677). Huysmans, particularly in *A Rebours,* expresses the "*fin de siècle* desire to transcend things as they are" that so attracted Stevens. (In a journal entry from 1906 Stevens wrote that "Arthur Symons has great weight with several fellows I know" [*SP* 163], and Stevens may have been led to Huysmans by Symons' comments on him in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* [1899].) Though Stevens in his letters distances himself from Nietzsche (see, for example, *L* 431–32), this philosopher, as B. J. Leggett, Milton Bates, and Leonard and Wharton have shown, deeply influenced the content and style of Stevens' work.[21]

The remainder of my study is devoted to exploring the expression of these opposing senses of irony in Stevens' poetry, and I look first at his relation to Schlegel. Numerous aspects of Schlegel's theory, for instance, his view of the ironist as endlessly creative, as simultaneously committed to and detached from all patternings of experience, and as engaged in a never-ending process of self-creation and self-destruction, are echoed in Stevens' work. But Stevens also differs from Schlegel. Though he does

express a sense of endless and effortless creativity, Stevens also writes of the difficulty of creating. And though, like Schlegel, Stevens affirms a chaotic world of process and change, he at times asks to be released from what he calls, in a very late poem, "facts." I take up next Stevens' affiliation with Hegel and Kierkegaard, and the relation between the Schlegelian and the Hegelian and Kierkegaardian senses of irony in his poetry. This relation is not limited to simple opposition. Though either sense of irony can predominate in individual poems, Stevens does not just oscillate from one ironic stance in one poem to the other stance in another poem. The two ironies are often present in, and can be the subject of, a single lyric. Nor does Stevens always choose one ironic stance over the other. Some of his bitterest poems are those in which he is situated *between* the two ironies. I turn in the following chapter to the issue of irony and the structure of Stevens' poetry. Schlegel felt that romantic irony could be expressed through a number of forms, including the dialogue, aphorisms, and the novel, which he considered the best vehicle for romantic irony. These forms, however, are not the only ones through which romantic irony can be expressed, and I look at three of the ironic forms that Stevens uses and modifies throughout his poetry. My final chapter is devoted to a discussion of irony in Stevens' late poetry, that is, *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950) and *The Rock* (1954). Here Stevens expresses an irony that, while recognizably romantic, is different from the irony seen in the earlier work. In a brief afterword, I suggest that the conflict between the Schlegelian and the Hegelian and Kierkegaardian senses of romantic irony is also part of the matrix of postmodern literature, and I describe the expression of this conflict in writers such as Barthelme, Ashbery, Sukenick, and Federman.

Though both the Schlegelian and the Hegelian and Kierkegaardian senses of romantic irony are expressed in twentieth-century literature, Stevens may be the modern heir who is most burdened by this aspect of his romantic inheritance. His poetry shows us not only both senses of irony, but the unresolved, indeed, unresolvable tension between them. It exemplifies, perhaps more fully and subtly than the work of any other modern

British or American poet, what Albert Gelpi describes as the "tension within poetic Modernism [between engagement and transcendence] which makes it as much a Janus-face as the Romanticism from which it evolved."[22]

Chapter 1

Antithetic Views of Romantic Irony: Schlegel, Hegel, and Kierkegaard

> Tieck and others of these distinguished people are indeed familiar with such expressions as "irony," but without telling us what they mean.
>
> —Hegel

> To the extent that one seeks a complete and coherent discussion of this concept [irony], one will soon convince himself that it has a problematic history, or to be more precise, no history at all. In the period after Fichte where it was particularly important, one finds it mentioned again and again, suggested again and again, presupposed again and again. But if one searches for a lucid discussion one searches in vain. Solgar complains that A. W. Schlegel in his *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur,* where one would certainly expect to find an adequate exposition of it, mentions it only briefly in a single passage. Hegel complains that the same is true of Solgar, and finds it no better with Tieck. And now since all complain why should not I also complain?
>
> —Kierkegaard

Neoclassical writers, following medieval and classical custom, used the word *irony* most frequently to refer to a rhetorical device that meant "blame-by-praise." The term was also used, though less often, to mean "praise-by-blame." As Norman Knox writes, "By far the most frequently used meaning of *irony* was, during the English classical period as during the preceding eighteen or nineteen centuries, 'censure through counterfeited praise.' . . . The stock definitions always linked blame-by-praise with 'praise through

counterfeited blame,' but this sense was much less frequently invoked in actual use of the word."[1] Blame-by-praise irony was particularly favored in the satiric literature of the period.[2] Some neoclassical polemicists, ingeniously exploiting irony's double nature, used it as both sword and shield. The attacker would claim that praise which was actually insincere was meant to be seen through.[3] For the most part, neoclassical irony is characterized by what Wayne Booth has termed stability. Once the meaning of an ironic work or passage has been reconstructed, the reader is not invited to undermine the reconstructed meaning.[4] Both the sense of indirection and the sense of stability in rhetorical irony are nicely captured in Kierkegaard's description of it as "a riddle and its solution possessed simultaneously" (*CI* 265). Around the end of the eighteenth century, though, irony began to take on a new meaning, a specifically philosophical one, and those who articulated this sense of irony sharply distinguished it from irony understood as a verbal device associated with satire and polemic. "Nothing is more unlike than satire, polemic and irony," writes Friedrich Schlegel.[5] Elsewhere he states, "Philosophy is the real homeland of irony."[6]

Romantic irony (a phrase that gained currency after its use by the German scholar Hermann Hettner in 1850 and was not commonly used by those who wrote about the concept)[7] rejects the world of Newton's *Principia Mathematica,* a world not only ordered by immutable laws but one whose order is able to be comprehended by the reason. Irony posits instead a universe that is infinite, abundant, and chaotic. As Schlegel writes, "Irony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos" (*LF* 247, no. 69). This "teeming chaos" is inexhaustibly vital. New forms are created and older ones die away in a never-ending process that has no goal, purpose, or design. The *absence* of order, though, is not seen as a *loss* of order. If the Newtonian world had deliquesced into fragments, these fragments were not seen as parts of a preexisting order. Nor is the mind's inability to comprehend a chaotic universe a cause for despair. The romantic ironist celebrates the universe of becoming and change and warns against a universe that is completely available to rational comprehension. "Verily," Schlegel writes, "it would fare badly with you if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become wholly comprehensible in earnest" (*LF* 268).

In addition to affirming a chaotic and abundant universe, romantic irony also affirms the power of the mind to construct a world out of chaos. "And isn't this entire, unending world constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos?" Schlegel asks rhetorically in his essay "On Incomprehensibility" (*LF* 268). Aware that the order the mind perceives is a finite pattern imposed by it on an infinite and dynamic universe and hence is, ultimately, false, a fiction, the ironist adopts a deeply skeptical attitude toward all structurings of experience. This skeptical attitude allows the ironist to transcend any particular patterning of experience. Irony, Schlegel writes, is "the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations" (*LF* 148, no. 42). Freedom from limitation is for Schlegel an escape from egocentrism and self-love. To see the universe only through the patterns the self imposes on it is to turn the universe into a mirror image of the self. Skeptical reduction shatters this mirror and leaves the self confronting a universe that no longer reflects its image. The displacement of the world as self-image does not for Schlegel result in feelings of isolation or alienation. Freed from its narrow focus on itself, the self can turn to the universe at large. "We must rise above our own love," Schlegel writes, "and be able to destroy in our thoughts what we adore; if we cannot do this, we lack . . . the feeling for the universe."[8]

Skepticism, however, is not the only attitude expressed by the ironist toward the mind's patterning of experience. Though aware that all structuring concepts are, ultimately, fictions, the ironist also accepts and is committed to these fictions. This dual stance of the ironist—at once skeptically free from and deeply committed to a particular order, structure, or system—is described by Schlegel in an *Athenaeum* fragment. "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" (*LF* 167, no. 53). Schlegel elsewhere describes this ironic attitude of the mind as one that combines playfulness and seriousness. "In this sort of irony," he writes, "everything should be play-

ful and serious" (*LF* 156, no. 108). That is, the mind is sincerely committed to its creations even as it indicates its awareness of their limitations through its playful attitude toward them. Not only are the attitudes of commitment and detachment held simultaneously, but for Schlegel both attitudes are equally necessary. Skepticism alone would leave the mind detached and isolated while commitment alone would blind the mind to its finite limitations.

The relation between commitment and skeptical detachment is not one of static opposition or balance. Rather, the two attitudes are mutually enlivening and engender a never-ending process. Skeptical reduction leads to the creation of a new structure, a new way of ordering experience. This new structure is subjected in turn to skeptical analysis, which again leads to creation, then to reduction, to more creation, and so on endlessly. Schlegel points to the dynamic quality of romantic irony when he writes that it is "an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts" (*LF* 176, no. 121). In Schlegel, two conflicting thoughts do not lead, as they do in Hegel, to a final synthesis, but remain in creative opposition. As Ernst Behler writes, Schlegel's irony "lacks the teleology and goal-oriented drive of Hegel's dialectical thought process."[9] The process of creation and destruction without goal or design repeats in miniature a similar pattern in the universe at large.

The ironist's simultaneous commitment to and detachment from the structures the mind creates results in an endless broadening and fragmenting of experience. The skeptical stance of the ironist leads to the destruction of older concepts and the creation of new ones. These new concepts are sincerely accepted even as they are critically examined, and so on. The ironist's experience of the world is thus continually changing and enlarging in the process of reduction and creation. The more the ironist reconceives the world, the richer and more diverse the experience of it becomes. From this perspective, romantic irony can be contrasted with the secularized Judeo-Christian pattern of experience that, as M. H. Abrams argues in *Natural Supernaturalism,* is presented in many German and English romantic works.[10] Experience in this pattern

is seen as being initially unified, becomes fragmented, and then moves toward a final unity.

It is not just the world that continually changes in romantic irony. In Schlegel's view, the ironist is engaged in a never-ending process of "self-destruction" and "self-creation" (*LF* 147, no. 37). Self-destruction occurs when the mind skeptically examines existing concepts of the self; self-creation takes place when it creates and commits itself to new ones. Because the process of self-destruction and self-creation is continual, the self can never acquire a sense of identity that is fixed and unchanging. Rather, the self develops through this process an ever-expanding, ever-more-complex sense of itself. As Anne Mellor writes, "For Schlegel, this self-becoming is a process of enlargement: one develops from conceptions of the self as a unity to ever-clearer conceptions of the self as flowing into a rich and manifold chaos."[11]

Schlegel's concept of irony was vigorously attacked by both Hegel and Kierkegaard. Hegel's most detailed analysis of the concept, particularly as it relates to Schlegel, is made in the *Aesthetics.*[12] Volleys are also fired in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, The Philosophy of Right, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion,* and *The Philosophy of Mind.*[13] Kierkegaard presses the attack in *The Concept of Irony* and in volume 1 of *Either/Or.* Since Kierkegaard's criticism of romantic irony, particularly in *The Concept of Irony,* owes so much to Hegel, I consider first Hegel's treatment of the concept. This irony, Hegel writes, "had its deeper root" (*A* 64) in Fichte's philosophy. "F[riedrich] von Schlegel, like Schelling, started from Fichte's standpoint, Schelling to go beyond it altogether, Schlegel to develop it in his own way" (*A* 64). Though Hegel adds that Schlegel was later to "tear himself loose" (*A* 64) from Fichte's philosophy, Hegel limits himself in the *Aesthetics* to describing Schlegel's debt to Fichte.

Hegel's attack on romantic irony is conducted through an analysis of the Fichtean concept of the ego.[14] Hegel argues that the world generated by the Fichtean ego has no substantial reality since it is only a product of the ego. "[N]othing is treated *in and for*

itself and as valuable in itself, but only as produced by the subjectivity of the *ego*. . . . Consequently everything genuinely and independently real becomes only a show, not true and genuine on its own account or through itself" (*A* 64, 65). Hegel is also critical of the capricious and whimsical nature of the Fichtean ego, which can create and destroy at its pleasure. The world is "a mere appearance due to the *ego* in whose power and caprice and at whose free disposal it remains. To admit or cancel it depends wholly on the pleasure of the *ego*, already absolute in itself simply as *ego*" (*A* 65).

Hegel's third point concerns the ego as "a *living*, active individual . . . making its individuality real in its own eyes and in those of others. . . . Now in relation to beauty and art, this acquires the meaning of living as an artist and forming one's life *artistically*" (*A* 65). While the individual ego can create a self and world for itself, this creative activity encloses the ego and isolates it from any actuality external to it. Though enclosed, the ego has two kinds of freedom. First, it is not bound to its own creations. The "virtuosity of an ironical artistic life apprehends itself as a divine creative genius for which anything and everything is only an unsubstantial creature, to which the creator . . . is not bound, because he is just as able to destroy it as to create it" (*A* 66). Second, in enclosing itself in its own world, the ego negates the validity of the external world and no longer recognizes the claims of the world on it. Hegel portrays the ironical artist as looking down in lordly fashion on those who *do* feel bound by the legal and moral obligations of life. "[H]e 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" (*A* 66). Even when the ego "does give [itself] relations to others," that is, "lives with friends, mistresses, etc.," because of its divine ironical standpoint, these relations are "null" (*A* 66), a characterization that looks forward to Kierkegaard's portrait of the romantic ironist in "Diary of the Seducer." The seducer has a relation to another, Cordelia, but his relation to her is completely "null" by virtue of his ironic stance.

Hegel has three other criticisms of the Fichtean ego. First,

Hegel writes of the narcissistic component of the ego. He describes "the divine irony of genius" as "this concentration of the *ego* into itself, for which all bonds are snapped and which can live only in the bliss of self-enjoyment" (*A* 66). Second, he writes of the moment in which the ego may "fail to find satisfaction in this self-enjoyment," recognize that it is cut off from reality, and feel a longing, a "craving for the solid and the substantial" (*A* 66). Finally, Hegel deftly identifies the sense of paralysis that the "divine creative genius" can experience. On the one hand, "the subject does want to penetrate into truth and longs for objectivity, but, on the other hand, cannot renounce his isolation and withdrawal into himself or tear himself free from this unsatisfied abstract inwardness" (*A* 66). This paralysis, Hegel suggests, results not from a lack of self-knowledge, but from a lack of will. The subject "lacks the strength to escape from this vanity and fill himself with a content of substance" (*A* 67).

Hegel's view of the romantic ego strongly influenced Kierkegaard, who offers a highly critical analysis of it in *The Concept of Irony*, which was completed three years after the first edition of the *Aesthetics* (1835–38). Kierkegaard's attack on romantic irony in *The Concept of Irony*, though, is not conducted solely through a formal analysis of the ego. He writes in *The Concept of Irony* that "one cannot overrate Hegel's great contribution to the conception of the historical past" (*CI* 295), and it is the romantic ego understood within a fundamentally Hegelian conception of history that underlies Kierkegaard's criticism of Schlegel's concept of irony. For Hegel, history is the gradual unfolding or dialectical actualization of Mind or Spirit. Each historical epoch both embodies Mind and yet is only a partial and limited expression of Mind as it progresses toward complete, self-conscious actualization. Central to this view of history is the idea of negation or displacement. As Kierkegaard puts it, "With every such turning point in history there are two movements to be observed. On the one hand, the new shall come forth; on the other, the old must be displaced" (*CI* 277). Because irony is the movement that negates a given actuality, it is at the turning point between one age and another that "we meet the ironic subject" (*CI* 278). Irony in the "eminent sense,"

or what Kierkegaard also terms absolute irony, "directs itself not against this or that particular existence but against the whole given actuality of a certain time and situation" (*CI* 271). Absolute irony is the "determination of subjectivity" (*CI* 279); they arise simultaneously. "[W]hen subjectivity asserts itself, irony appears. Subjectivity feels itself confronted by the given actuality, feels its own power, its own validity and significance" (*CI* 280). The subject asserts its own "validity" against the given actuality and destroys this actuality. In doing so, it negatively frees itself from the world. "With irony the subject is negatively free. The actuality which shall give him content is not, hence he is free from the restraint in which the given actuality binds him, yet negatively free and as such hovering, because there nothing is which binds him" (*CI* 279).

Kierkegaard views Socrates as an ironist in the eminent sense. He destroyed Hellas, and as he destroyed it, he became "ever lighter and lighter, always more negatively free" (*CI* 287). Though Socratic irony is "infinite absolute negativity" (*CI* 287), a phrase Kierkegaard borrows from Hegel's *Aesthetics,* Kierkegaard limits what this irony destroys, a limitation that he will later use in distinguishing between Socratic irony and romantic irony. It is not "actuality altogether that [Socrates] negated, but the given actuality of a certain age, of substantiality as embodied in Hellas" (*CI* 287–88). It is because Socrates only destroys the Hellenic world that Kierkegaard judges Socrates' irony to be "world historically warranted" (*CI* 288). Essentially, it "takes place in the service of the Idea" (*CI* 280). "This," Kierkegaard writes, "is the genial quality of an irony that is warranted" (*CI* 280).

There is no genial quality in Kierkegaard's description of romantic irony. He writes that "such an irony was wholly unwarranted, and . . . Hegel's efforts to oppose it were quite in order" (*CI* 292). While Socratic irony is the determination of subjectivity, yet "subjectivity was already given by the conditions of the world" (*CI* 292). Irony arises within, though it negates, a given actuality, and it is in the service of Mind. This is not so in romantic irony. Kierkegaard argues that Schlegel and Tieck accept the Fichtean principle that the infinite ego "has constitutive validity,

that it alone is the almighty" (*CI* 292). In accepting this Fichtean view of the ego, they raise subjectivity "to the second power," and they negate not just a given actuality but "all historical actuality" (*CI* 292). Hence, Kierkegaard writes, "it is evident that this irony was not in the service of the world spirit" (*CI* 292). What takes the place of the given actuality is a "self-created actuality" (*CI* 292), which the ironist can posit and abrogate at will.

> Now [irony] took its choice, had its own way, and did exactly as it pleased. . . . At one moment it dwelt in Greece beneath the beautiful Hellenic sky, lost in the presentational enjoyment of the harmonious Hellenic life, dwelt there in such a way that it had its actuality in this. But when it grew tired of this arbitrarily posited actuality it thrust it away so far that it wholly disappeared. Hellenism had no validity for it as a world historical moment, but it had validity, even absolute validity, because irony was pleased to have it so. At the next moment it concealed itself in the virgin forests of the Middle Ages. . . . But no sooner had this love affair lost its validity than the Middle Ages were spirited away back into infinity, dying away in ever weakening contours on the undercloth of consciousness. (*CI* 294–95)

True history has been negated by the absolute subjectivity of the romantic ironist. Historical epochs are simply aesthetic creations of the ego and demonstrate the ego's complete freedom from history. "With a twist of the wrist all history became myth, poetry, saga, fairy tale—irony was free once more" (*CI* 294).

The ironic ego enjoys and changes identities with the same ease that it creates and dispenses with various environments.

> For irony, as for the Pythagorean doctrine, the soul is constantly on a pilgrimage, except irony does not require such a long time to complete it. But if irony is a little skimpy with time, it doubtless excels in the multiplicity of determinations. And there is many an ironist who . . . has traversed a far more extraordinary fate than the cock in Lucian, which had first

> been Pythagoras himself, then Aspasia the ambiguous beauty from Miletus, Crates the Cynic, a king, a beggar, a satrap, a horse, a jackdaw, a frog, and a thousand other things. . . . All things are possible for the ironist. (*CI* 298–99)

Kierkegaard's description of the ironic ego as whimsically sporting with a world it creates and then destroys, as inhabiting and then discarding various personalities, and as enjoying a "divine freedom acknowledging no bonds, no chains, but, abandoning itself heedlessly to reckless play, romps like a leviathan in the deep" (*CI* 296), recalls Hegel's description of the romantic ironist as a capricious ego, creating and destroying the world at its pleasure.

Kierkegaard's portrait of the romantic ironist recalls Hegel in two other respects. Even though the ego can enjoy its self-created world, it comes to recognize the emptiness of this world and to long for reality. In a striking oxymoron, Kierkegaard describes the ironist's bored existence as a "hungry satiety" (*CI* 302), a figure that brilliantly conveys the sense of the fullness of the ego that, godlike, can create its own reality, the utter emptiness of this complete subjectivity, and the ego's "hunger" for actuality. Second, in Hegel's view there can be no ethical life without a recognition of the substantiality of the world apart from the ego. Hence, in negating actuality, the romantic ego sets itself above the ethical. Kierkegaard makes a similar point. "When the given actuality loses its validity for the ironist, therefore, this is not because it is an outlived actuality which shall be displaced by a truer, but because the ironist is the eternal ego for whom no actuality is adequate. Hence it is evident how this relates to the fact that the ironist sets himself above ethics and morals" (*CI* 300).

It is from the point of view of "ethics and morals" that Kierkegaard attacks Schlegel's *Lucinde,* which he describes as "a very obscene book" (*CI* 303). Kierkegaard does not object to Schlegel's ironic treatment of love and marriage. "There is a moral prudishness, a strait-jacket in which no rational human being can move. In God's name let it be sundered! There is, on the other hand, the moonlit kind of theatre marriages of an overwrought romanticism for which nature, at least, has no purpose. . . . Against all these let irony rage!" (*CI* 304). What Kierkegaard objects to is that Schlegel does not limit his attack to "untruths such as these" (*CI* 304) but "seeks to abrogate all ethics" (*CI* 306), which he does by virtue of the "special pursuit of irony: to cancel all actuality and set in its place an actuality that is no actuality" (*CI* 306). That is, the ironist substitutes a self-created actuality for a true actuality, a self-created actuality being for Kierkegaard "no actuality" at all.

In "Diary of the Seducer" Kierkegaard dramatizes the way in which the creativity and enclosure of the ironist abrogates the ethical. The seducer is another guise for the romantic ironist. The identification is made early in the essay when Kierkegaard writes of the seducer, "His life had been an attempt to realize the task of living poetically."[15] Living poetically, or as he sometimes puts it, poetically to produce oneself, has a special meaning for Kierkegaard. In *The Concept of Irony* he describes the concept along with its opposite, to let oneself be poetically produced. "The man who allows himself to be poetically produced also has a specific given context to which he must accommodate himself, and hence is not a word without meaning for having been divested of connection and context. But for the ironist this context . . . has no validity, and as he is not inclined to fashion himself to suit his environment, so his environment must be fashioned to suit him, that is, he not only poetically produces himself but his environment as well" (*CI* 299–300). To produce oneself poetically is to substitute a self-created actuality for actuality itself. In doing so, the ironist raises himself above the actual world, his true "context," which now "has no validity." To live poetically is to abrogate the ethical since the ethical rests on the ego's recognition of a substantial and concrete reality external to it. This kind of recognition is made when the ego allows itself to be poetically produced. Here, the ego acknowledges that it can to some extent shape reality, but it equally acknowledges that it must accommodate itself to reality, that is, be produced by it.

Because the ego poetically produces itself and its environment, life becomes for the ironist a kind of internal drama, a performance of the self for the self. As Kierkegaard puts it, "Life is for him [the ironist] a drama, and what engrosses him is the ingenious

unfolding of the drama. He is himself a spectator even when performing some act" (*CI* 300). The "Diary of the Seducer" can be thought of as a record of this kind of performance. The seducer poetically produces himself through the role he plays in public with Cordelia, and Cordelia and the people around her are part of the environment that the seducer is poetically producing. Hegel had written that because the ironic self exists in a world of its own making, it has no true relations with others. This observation is borne out in a late passage in the "Diary." "Now she lets drop numerous remarks. . . . They do not pass my ear unheeded, they are the scouts of my operation in the domain of her soul, who give me enlightening hints; they are the ends of the thread by which I weave her into my plan" (*E/O* 420). To the seducer, these remarks are seen only as indications of how far he has progressed in his artistic "plan," that is, how far he has poetically produced Cordelia. Apart from this plan, she has no reality for the seducer. Yet even as he is poetically producing himself and his environment, in writing the diary he is also watching the entire performance.

When the seduction is complete, the seducer breaks off with Cordelia. He feels no remorse. The end of the affair is for him only the starting point of another dramatic performance, and the "Diary" ends with these chilling words:

> It would, however, really be worth while to know whether or not one might be able to poetize himself out of a girl, so that one could make her so proud that she would imagine that it was she who tired of the relationship. It could become a very interesting epilogue, which, in its own right, might have psychological interest, and along with that, enrich one with many erotic observations. (*E/O* 440)

Despite the power over events that his own enclosure seems to offer him, the seducer may not be the victor in this relationship. In the introduction to the "Diary," Kierkegaard acknowledges that Cordelia has suffered, but he also writes that the suffering of the seducer will be even more terrible than Cordelia's. "[A]t the moment his anxious soul believes that it already sees daylight breaking through, it turns out to be a new entrance, and like a startled deer, pursued by despair, he constantly seeks a way out, and finds only a way in, through which he goes back into himself" (*E/O* 304). Kierkegaard is describing here the ironist's painful recognition of his absolute isolation and of his inability to break out of this isolation. Every way out of the self turns out to be another entrance into the self. In poetically producing himself and his environment, the ironist completely encloses himself, an enclosure that renders "null" the ironist's relation to any other person and thereby eliminates the possibility of overcoming isolation through the bond of human sympathy or love.

Kierkegaard ends his discussion of irony in *The Concept of Irony* by contrasting romantic irony and Socratic irony to "mastered irony." This concept rests on the idea that every "segment" of history has "validity," but that the validity of the segment is only a "relative validity" (*CI* 296). Because each segment of history has validity, Kierkegaard describes mastered irony as a return to the actual. "When irony has first been mastered it undertakes a movement directly opposed to that wherein it proclaimed its life as unmastered. Irony now limits, renders finite, defines, and thereby yields truth, actuality, and content" (*CI* 338). Mastered irony in this respect is unlike Socratic irony, which does not recognize the validity of a given actuality, and is unlike romantic irony, which, in Kierkegaard's view, does not recognize the validity of any actuality. Since mastered irony also recognizes that a given actuality has only relative validity, it "prevents all idolatry with the phenomenon" (*CI* 341). Though the ironist longs for the ideal, the "higher and more perfect," this longing does not "hollow out actuality; on the contrary, the content of life must become a true and meaningful moment in the higher actuality whose fullness the soul desires" (*CI* 341). Paradoxically, the ironist is both in experience since he accepts the validity of a given actuality and yet is above experience since he recognizes that the given actuality is not congruent with the ideal that he seeks.

The view of romantic irony that emerges in Hegel's and Kierkegaard's criticism of it differs from Schlegel's concept in a

number of ways. First, Kierkegaard criticizes romantic irony because it is "not in the service of the world spirit" (*CI* 292). To argue, however, that irony is not in the service of the world spirit as it actualizes itself is to presume that there is an ordered, teleological universe in which irony can be of service. But it is exactly this presumption that irony in Schlegel denies. For him, irony posits a universe that has no underlying order or direction. The true point of difference between Kierkegaard and Schlegel here is not whether irony is or is not in the service of an ordered universe but their underlying assumptions about the nature of the universe itself. Is it ordered or is it chaotic? For Kierkegaard, this is not an issue that is open to question. The order is presumed, and he does not debate Schlegel on this point. Perhaps, as Muecke shrewdly speculates, it is Kierkegaard's commitment to a "closed-world" ideology and his inability to take an "open view of the totality of existence," a view that acknowledges the instability of existence, that is the "real basis of his objections to irony."[16]

Second, Kierkegaard and Hegel interpret Fichte as denying content to reality since the world is essentially a manifestation of the ego. Both read this view of Fichte's philosophy into Schlegel, and both see the romantic ironist as a subjective idealist who denies nature positive content in itself. There is no doubt that Schlegel was influenced by Fichte. In an aphorism, Schlegel praises Fichte highly, saying that his philosophy along with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* and the French Revolution are the "greatest tendencies of the age" (*LF* 190, no. 216). But Schlegel does not accept Fichte's absolute idealism. Eichner writes, "Whereas to Fichte, Nature was merely the 'non-ego,' a mere obstacle in man's way to Freedom or a mere field for his activity, Schlegel endowed Nature with a life of its own."[17]

Third, because the ironic ego in Schlegel's view is both committed to and also skeptically detached from its own ordering or patterning of experience, it is both in and yet above experience. As Hegel and Kierkegaard present the ironic ego, it remains above experience, enclosed in its self-created actuality. In *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard describes the ironic ego in a way that appears to place it back in experience. He writes, "At one moment it [romantic irony] dwelt in Greece beneath the beautiful Hellenic sky, lost in the presentational enjoyment of the harmonious Hellenic life, dwelt there in such a way that it had its actuality in this" (*CI* 294). Though the ironic ego may have its "actuality" in Greece, it remains above experience because its actuality is one that is "arbitrarily posited" by the ego, has no substantiality in itself, and depends for its continued existence upon the ego, which can whisk it away when it pleases. "[W]hen it grew tired of this arbitrarily posited actuality it thrust it away so far that it wholly disappeared" (*CI* 294).

Kierkegaard does describe in *The Concept of Irony* a kind of irony in which the self is both in and above experience, mastered irony. The similarity between this concept of irony and Schlegel's concept of irony, however, is only superficial since the two concepts are based on entirely different assumptions. Mastered irony presumes an ordered, teleological universe. It recognizes that the revelation of Spirit in a particular historical epoch is valid, but only relatively valid. In mastered irony the self accepts the validity of its own historical moment while acknowledging that this reality is *only* a moment in the movement of Spirit toward complete actualization. Thus, the self can both accept reality and seek the ideal without hollowing out reality through this seeking. Irony in Schlegel presumes not that the universe is ordered but that it is chaotic. The self stands above experience because it skeptically acknowledges that all experiential patterns or structures are imposed by the mind on the world and hence are, ultimately, false. However, the self's acknowledgment that no structure or pattern has final validity does not hollow out the experience that the self has through a particular structure since the self is also sincerely committed to the patterns it creates.

Fourth, romantic irony as Schlegel presents it expresses a sense of endless self-creation and self-destruction. The self continually destroys and creates new conceptions of itself and of the world. This aspect of romantic irony can also be seen in Kierkegaard. The ironist creates one actuality and then thrusts "it away so far that it wholly disappear[s]" (*CI* 294) only to create another, and so forth. The same process can be seen in the many selves or "personages"