

**NARRATIVES OF IRONY: ALIENATION, REPRESENTATION, AND ETHICS IN
CARLYLE, ELIOT, AND PATER**

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In this study I argue that Victorian writers Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, and Walter Pater participated more fully than has previously been acknowledged in the aesthetic and ethical concerns surrounding romantic irony as it was articulated by philosophers such as Friedrich Schlegel and Søren Kierkegaard. In opposition to a twentieth-century critical trend that has tended to applaud German romanticism for its progressive insights, and dismiss nineteenth-century British texts as “regressive,” I show how three key Victorian texts recognized, articulated, and sought to negotiate the phenomenon of irony. More specifically, I show that the ironic features of Carlyle’s *The French Revolution: A History*, Eliot’s *Romola*, and Pater’s “Denys L’Auxerrois” are closely connected to the authors’ concerns with, and attempts to formulate, a model of ethics in the face of the metaphysical indeterminacy that is a central feature of romantic irony.

In Carlyle’s *The French Revolution: A History*, I show how the narrator maps a gulf between language and referent onto a gulf between the social classes represented by the Sansculottes and the Girondin. This association of semiotic and political fragmentation suggests that for Carlyle, irony remained an external phenomenon, which may help explain why he sought an external solution to the chaos of the revolution by invoking the military force of the hero. In Eliot’s *Romola*, I suggest that the sudden appearance of allegory toward the end of this otherwise

realist novel serves as an indirect presentation of the heroine's ethical transcendence. The temporal nature of allegory reflects the novel's formulation of ethics as a process of forming character through repeated habits of action and thought—a process that recalls Kierkegaard's association of repetition with ethical choice. In Pater's "Denys L'Auxerrois" I show that the ability of art objects to conjure up living presence is presented ironically through a series of framing devices. This irony is closely connected to Pater's formulation of ethics as a matter of character-building through aesthetic exposure, but like Eliot and Kierkegaard, Pater presents this ethical model in an indirect aesthetic mode. This study helps deepen critical understanding of irony, ethics, and representation in Victorian texts.

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1.0 AN IRONY DEFICIENCY?

Philosophy is the real homeland of irony.

—Friedrich Schlegel, *Critical Fragment* 42

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Many critical theorists have noted similarities between the metaphysical and aesthetic concerns of early German romanticism (*Frühromantik*) and those of twentieth century Anglo-American and French literary theory.¹ In this strand of criticism it has become a commonplace to remark

¹ For example, Daniel O'Hara, observes: "clearly, Derrida's playful demystification, his hermeneutics of suspicion, owes a great deal to Friedrich Schlegel's paradoxical depiction of romantic irony as permanent parabasis" (364). Similarly, in their introduction to *The Literary Absolute*, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Paul Nancy write: "What interests us in romanticism is that we still belong to the era it opened up. . . . A veritable romantic *unconscious* is discernable today, in most of the central motifs of our 'modernity'" (15). Gary Handwerk explains his interest in Schlegel in similar terms: "Schlegel anticipated many of the themes central to current critical debate, such as the relations between discourse and authority, or between subject and community" (18). Andrew Bowie, Azade Seyhan, and David Simpson have devoted entire books to the relationship between German Romanticism and twentieth-century criticism. Anne K. Mellor and E. Warwick Slinn, though they both point out differences between irony and deconstruction, still find them similar enough to warrant articulating this contrast (Mellor 5; Slinn 332–34). See also J. Drummond Bone's "A Sense of Endings," Alice Kuzniar's *Delayed Endings* 2; Andrew Michael Roberts' "Romantic Irony and the Postmodern Sublime," and Alan Wilde's *Horizons of Assent* 29.

links between irony as conceived of by Friedrich Schlegel and Søren Kierkegaard, and the semiotic and epistemological interests of poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida and, more obviously, Paul de Man. Surprisingly, however, there has been less discussion regarding what happened to irony in the intervening years of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Lingering stereotypes of the Victorian period as earnest, reactionary, and naïvely confident in the possibility of objective representation sometimes leave the impression that irony is a recessive gene that skipped this generation entirely. While scholars have long recognized links to German romanticism in early nineteenth-century writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the early Thomas Carlyle, there has been less pursuit of this connection in works of the period marked off as Victorian. Critics such as Clyde L. de Ryals, Anne K. Mellor, and Gary Handwerk have begun to question this demarcation by re-examining the importance of German philosophy to later nineteenth-century writers such as Charles Dickens, George Meredith, and Lewis Carroll. These studies have done much to establish the presence of romantic irony in the works of some of the most prominent Victorian authors, and they have laid the groundwork for further and closer examination of its emergence and its role in Victorian literature and culture.

In this study I investigate the nature, function, and significance of romantic irony in Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History*, George Eliot's *Romola*, and Walter Pater's "Denys l'Auxerrois." Through a close examination of both form and content, I have sought first to examine how and where romantic irony emerges in these texts, and then to explore some of the ways that it functioned in the thought and in the works of these authors. Because irony, as it was theorized by Schlegel and his successors, has significant implications for the understanding of subjectivity, of ethics, and of aesthetics, the guiding question with which I began this study is

whether romantic irony plays the same role in the work of Victorian authors. If, as Ryals suggests, there is a phenomenon that can be termed “Victorian romantic irony,” I would like to explore more carefully how such irony interacted with constructions of the aesthetic and the moral in this period. In this way, I hope to contribute to critical understanding of Victorian participation in some of the overarching concerns of modernity, and to help deepen critical understanding of the emergence and dynamics of irony.

1.2 GERMAN ROMANTIC IRONY: AN OVERVIEW

It is customary to begin a study of irony by acknowledging that it is paradoxical to define this term, because by definition it defies definition. Schlegel may have inaugurated this trend in his essay “On Incomprehensibility” with his warning of what happens when “one speaks of irony without using it” (*Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde* 267).² However, to heed this caveat too closely would be to risk ending up with nothing but the “deathly stillness” by which Kierkegaard characterizes irony taken to the extreme (*Concept of Irony* 275). In the following section, therefore, I propose to outline some of the major characteristics of romantic irony, including its origins in Kant, and its repercussions in philosophy and art, and I regretfully acknowledge any

² Lionel Trilling continues this trend when he cautions: “irony is one of those words, like love, which are best not talked about if they are to retain any force of meaning” (120). For other acknowledgements of the difficulties of defining irony, see Booth ix; Handwerk vii; de Man, “The Concept of Irony” 164–65; Furst 4; Miller 12; and Muecke 3.

paradoxes this may incur. As the narrator of *Middlemarch* insists, “something we must believe in and do” (198).³

In offering this overview, I would like to stress that I am not particularly interested in the question of influence in this study. Although Carlyle, Eliot, and Pater were all well-versed in German philosophy,⁴ Ryals and others have shown that romantic irony pervades the work of authors who may never have even heard of Schlegel. And of course, Laurence Sterne and Miguel de Cervantes, who are often used as representatives of romantic irony in literary practice, preceded *Frühromantik* by decades and centuries, respectively. Instead, I am presenting the German romantic response to Kant as a place where the complex of issues that came to be known as romantic irony were articulated most intensively.

1.2.1 Irony and the Self

While scholars disagree on the specific philosophical origins of romantic irony, it is commonly held that what Schlegel and his peers called “*Ironie*” emerged as a response to the problem of the transcendental ego in Kant’s *Critiques*.⁵ As one of the fundamental principles for his theory of cognition, Kant argues that, in the process of gaining knowledge, all objects must be presented,

³ The full passage reads: “But skepticism, as we know, can never be thoroughly applied, else life would come to a standstill: something we must believe in and do, and whatever that something may be called, it is virtually our own judgment, even when it seems like the most slavish reliance on another” (Eliot 198).

⁴ For an overview of Carlyle’s and Eliot’s engagement with German philosophy, see Ashton chapters 2 and 4. For an overview of Pater’s engagement with German philosophy, see McGrath, especially chapters 5, 6, and 7.

⁵ For some of the most notable explanations of the philosophical origins of romantic irony, see Benjamin; Furst; Gasché, “Ideality in Fragmentation”; Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy; and Mellor.

via sensation, to the thinking subject in order for that subject to form a conception of them.⁶ “It must be possible,” he explains, “for the ‘I think’ to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me which could not be thought at all” (*Critique of Pure Reason* 152–53). However, a problem arises when the object to be known is the thinking subject itself. If the “I think” must be present in order to form an intuition of an object, then the “I” itself can never properly be known because it must always remain on the subject side of cognition. For this reason, there is a portion of the “I” that can never be known empirically. The closest we can get to knowing this transcendental ego, Kant argues, is to infer its existence by noting the results of its unifying function. Because all presentations are referred to the “I think,” we deduce that the entity of the “I” must exist: “Only in so far, therefore, as I can unite a manifold of given representations in *one consciousness*, is it possible for me to represent to myself the *identity of the consciousness in [i.e. throughout] these representations*” (*Critique of Pure Reason* 153, brackets original). For Kant, it is a structural impossibility to know the ego in itself. Furthermore, because the transcendental “I” has been reduced to a logical necessity, it becomes more of a formal placeholder than a substantive body. Kant calls it the “completely empty, representation ‘I,’” and insists, “we cannot even say that this is a concept, but only that it is a bare consciousness which accompanies all concepts” (*Critique of Pure Reason* 331–32).

This division of the ego into “known” and eternally elusive “knowing” portions, had significant repercussions for philosophy after Kant. In the work of the early German Romantics, most notably Friedrich Schlegel, this incongruity developed into the notion of “irony.” Expanding upon the term’s classical rhetorical definition of “saying one thing and meaning

⁶ See chapter 4 for a more detailed explanation of Kantian cognition.

another,” Schlegel declares in *Critical Fragment* 48 that irony is “the form of paradox” in general (*Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde* 149). In this way, Schlegel and others associated with the Romantic school expanded the notion of irony to describe any situation in which two contradictory things are simultaneously present. In the case of the divided ego, the contradiction at stake is the necessary impossibility of the empirical and the transcendental ego being present at the same time: any attempt to know the transcendental ego must transform it into an empirical object, and must in turn require another manifestation of the subjective “I” in order to cognize it. What has come to be called “Romantic irony” thus describes an infinite process in which the self becomes aware of itself, and then becomes aware that it is aware, and so on, with no way of stopping this reflective activity.⁷

1.2.2 Irony and Modernity

Infinite self-reflection results in intensive, unrelenting self-awareness. No matter what we think, or what we think about, once we have become ironic there is a portion of our consciousness that always remains outside, observing ourselves thinking. Many writers positioned such all-consuming self-reflection as a feature that divides the consciousness of modern humanity from

⁷ Fichte articulates the process of reflective thinking as follows:

“*what* is thinking in that act of thinking must in turn be the object of a higher thinking, so that it can become the object of consciousness; and at the same time, you obtain a new subject, which is conscious itself of what previously was the state of *being* self-conscious. . . . Thus we shall continue, ad infinitum, to require a new consciousness for every consciousness, a new consciousness whose object is the earlier consciousness, and thus we shall never reach the point of being able to assume an actual consciousness.” This is Benjamin’s translation (Benjamin 125). For the original German, see Fichte 106.

that of the ancients. Closely intertwined with the notion of irony, there arose a historical narrative that mapped the shift from immanent to reflective consciousness onto a contrast between ancient Greece and the modern West. In this narrative, ancient Greece stands for a mode of existence in which consciousness had not yet become self-aware, and hence was not yet divided from itself. Instead, it existed in a state of harmonious totality with itself, with nature, and with its gods.

Friedrich Schiller was one of the first to articulate this narrative, though he did not use the term “irony” to describe it. In the sixth letter of *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* (1795), he contrasts the “all-unifying Nature” of the ancient Greek condition with the “all-dividing” intellect of the modern (39). He develops this contrast further in *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795–1801), where he argues that modern (“sentimental”) poetry is characterized by a longing to regain the unity with nature that the Greeks supposedly enjoyed with such childlike naïveté:

For this reason the feeling by which we are attached to nature is so closely related to the feeling with which we mourn the lost age of childhood and childlike innocence. Our childhood is the only undisfigured nature that we still encounter in civilized mankind, hence it is no wonder if every trace of the nature outside us leads us back to our childhood. It was quite otherwise with the ancient Greeks. With them civilization did not manifest itself to such an extent that nature was abandoned in consequence. (103–4)

The narrative of a progression from Greek unity to modern fragmentation merged with the philosophical category of irony in Kierkegaard’s dissertation, *The Concept of Irony with*

Constant References to Socrates (1841).⁸ In this work, Kierkegaard argues that prior to Socrates, Greek society was characterized by an “immediate consciousness, which in all innocence accepts with childlike simplicity whatever is given” (228). The ancient Greeks, in his formulation, lived in unquestioning harmony with their culture, their customs, nature, and their divinities, and this lack of reflection characterized their self-conceptions as well. A citizen of this society, asserts Kierkegaard, “had not yet taken himself, not yet separated himself from this condition of immediacy, did not yet know himself” (248).⁹ According to Kierkegaard, Socrates forced self-awareness upon his contemporaries by constantly questioning all received ideas and assumptions.¹⁰ Because Socrates directed his undermining critique against any and all positions, inciting self-reflection among all of his interlocutors, Kierkegaard uses the term “irony” to describe Socrates’ whole mode of existence (9).

In the early twentieth century, Georg Lukács retells this narrative with eloquent nostalgia for the “happy,” pre-ironic ages, “when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths” (*Theory of the Novel* 29). In the time of classical Greece, he asserts, there was no division between the world and the self, or within the self. In this state, although difficulties might be encountered, meaning was still immanent in the world. With the advent of self-consciousness, however, the security of the existence expressed in Homer’s epics vanished. As Lukács characterizes the alienated condition of modern humanity:

⁸ Kierkegaard was not the first to associate Socrates with irony, as Schlegel’s *Critical Fragment* 148 makes clear; however, in Kierkegaard it receives a more sustained and subtle treatment than in Schlegel.

⁹ Also see Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony* 235, 294, and 305 for associations of ancient Greece with immediacy, harmony, and naïveté.

¹⁰ See Kierkegaard *Concept of Irony*, 204 and 214 for vivid descriptions of Socrates’ method and its effect on his interlocutors.

We have found the only true substance within ourselves: that is why we have to place an unbridgeable chasm between cognition and action, between soul and created structure, between self and world, why all substantiality has to be dispersed in reflexivity on the far side of that chasm; that is why our essence had to become a postulate for ourselves and thus create a still deeper, still more menacing abyss between us and our own selves. (34)

In this passage, the language Lukács uses to describe the modern consciousness recalls Kant's separation of the empirical and transcendental ego, and his casting this in such catastrophic terms underscores the monumental implications of the romantic response. In a later section, Lukács makes this connection explicit: "The self-recognition and, with it, self-abolition of subjectivity was called irony by the first theoreticians of the novel, the aesthetic philosophers of early Romanticism" (74). Emphasizing the destruction of existential foundations wrought by the inception of irony, Lukács declares that irony "is the highest freedom that can be achieved in a world without God" (93).

1.2.3 Irony and Ethics

Lukács's rather apocalyptic portrayal of modern humanity's alienated condition speaks to the downside of irony. Once self-reflection sets in, once all positions and all possible positions are subject to ironic critique, then the grounds of existence itself become shaky. Externally, the self has no stable connection to any institution or social structure; internally, the self's reflective activity keeps it constantly unsettled. Paul de Man has provided one of the most dramatic descriptions of irony taken to its logical extreme, characterizing "absolute irony" as tantamount

to insanity.¹¹ While twentieth-century theorists like Lukács and de Man have highlighted the existential difficulties attendant on irony, theorists of the nineteenth century were more concerned with the threats it presented to traditional ethics. If every position is subject to reflection, how can moral principles exist? G. W. F. Hegel articulates this concern vividly in *The Philosophy of Right* (1821): “This type of subjectivism . . . substitutes a void for the whole content of ethics, right, duties, and laws—and so is evil, in fact evil through and through and universally” (102–3).

Some theorists attempted to cope with this problem by figuring morality as a structure of subjective consciousness rather than a code of conduct. If there is no objective anchor for knowledge or belief, then the onus must fall on the subject to develop itself into a moral entity. Kant’s own discussion of aesthetic and moral judgment in *Critique of Judgement* (1790) exemplifies this approach. Kant argues that our sense of beauty derives from our ability to apprehend, but not fully comprehend, the order and harmony that exist in nature, which he calls nature’s “purposiveness.” When we perceive an object that appears to be a part of this natural order, it gives us a feeling of pleasure that causes us to declare the object beautiful. Moral judgments, he argues, function the same way: the faculty of judgment furnishes us with a sense of a universal moral order, an idea of how things *ought* to be, and when we perceive events in the world that match up to this order, we derive a sense of pleasure from the congruence (23). Because aesthetic and moral judgments function so similarly, the more we exercise our sense of aesthetic taste, he argues, the better able we will be to sense the morally good when we encounter it: “The spontaneity in the play of the cognitive faculties, the harmony of which contains the ground of this pleasure, makes the above concept [of the purposiveness of nature] fit

¹¹ See chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of de Man’s account of irony as madness.

to be the mediating link between the realm of the natural concept and that of the concept of freedom in its effects, while at the same time it promotes the sensibility of the mind to moral feeling (34, brackets original). Kant's location of morality in the realm of the subject is further emphasized by his argument in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* that the morality of an action cannot be determined unless we know the motivation behind it. "What counts," he asserts, "is not actions, which one sees, but those inner principles of actions that one does not see" (20). Only an action performed from the proper motives of disinterested duty can be considered moral. Both aspects of Kant's moral theory thus focus on the internal state of the subject.

Kierkegaard spent much of his corpus working on this problem as well. In *The Concept of Irony*, he is careful to caution that—although irony plays a useful role in toppling outmoded institutions, customs, and structures of belief—it must be a temporary condition:

He who does not understand irony and has no ear for its whisperings lacks *eo ipso* what might be called the absolute beginning of the personal life. He lacks what at moments is indispensable for the personal life, lacks the bath of regeneration and rejuvenation, the cleansing baptism of irony that redeems the soul from having its life in finitude though living boldly and energetically in finitude. He does not know the invigoration and fortification which, should the atmosphere become too oppressive, comes from lifting oneself up and plunging into the ocean of irony, *not in order to remain there, of course*, but healthily, gladly, lightly, to clad oneself again. (339, italics added)

Kierkegaard's rhetoric in this passage seems to suggest that it is easy to leap out of the irony bath once we've been cleansed. In his later work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

(1846), however, the process becomes much more complicated. Here, the narrator Johannes Climacus presents the development of consciousness as a hierarchy of aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres. Irony, he asserts, forms the boundary between the aesthetic and ethical—so that, in order to become ethical, one must cross over the border of irony and plunge into the realm of ethical commitment. Irony, for Climacus, is a necessary, if temporary, condition, because it constitutes the state of consciousness when the subject has emerged from immediacy and become reflective, and so recognizes the infinity of paths that exist when all positions are possible and none yet chosen. In order to become ethical, however, the subject must choose a path, come down from the regions of ironic hovering, and commit itself to a course of existence. Irony, therefore, is not itself an ethical state, but rather the state in which ethics becomes possible (451). Kierkegaard's figuring of morality as an internal condition of the subject, not visible in the objective realm, is similar to Kant's association of aesthetic and ethical judgment. In response to the problem of self-reflexiveness, both develop a model of ethics that lies in the development of the subject, rather than the imposition of objective laws or moral codes for behavior.

Concern about the relationship between irony and ethics has continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One notable study in this area is Gary Handwerk's *Irony and Ethics in Narrative: From Schlegel to Lacan* (1985). In this work, Handwerk argues that irony is ethical because of, rather than in spite of, the fragmentary nature of the subject. Since ironic reflection constantly produces and recognizes other positions, Handwerk sees it as a model of community and shared meaning: "irony is more than an expression of the subject's incapacity, for it simultaneously acts to bypass the limits of that individual subjectivity by inciting pursuit of the verbal consensus on which a coherent and self-conscious community must rest—while never

underestimating the hermeneutic obstacles to such consensus” (viii). Irony is thus a social, communicative phenomenon rather than the alienating, isolating force it was for Lukács. Handwerk argues that this model of irony has its roots in Schlegel (vii), and that it is a mistake to view romantic irony as a purely negating force, in the manner of de Man (14). In Handwerk’s view, while neither meaning nor identity is ever stable and complete, irony emblemizes the process by which both are developed; “ethical irony,” he explains, “appeals to a future consensus” (4).

1.2.4 Irony and Representation

In this overview of romantic irony, I have not yet addressed the aspect with which it is most commonly associated: aesthetic form. While one of the key things that differentiated romantic irony from the irony of classical rhetoric was its association with the philosophical and metaphysical issues I’ve attempted to outline above, romantic irony did not lose its connection to aesthetic expression.¹² Again, the best way to understand this aspect of irony is to return to its roots in Kant.

In *Critique of Judgement* Kant addresses the problem of the schism that had emerged between pure and practical reason in his previous two critiques. Simply put, since pure reason (the realm of knowledge) deals only with things as they are in themselves, and practical reason (the realm of morality) deals with things as they ought to be, the question arises of how to

¹² Schlegel was careful to point out that what he called “irony” was different from irony as a figure of speech, as understood in traditional rhetoric. For example, in *Critical Fragment* 148, he writes: “Of course, there is also a rhetorical species of irony which, sparingly used, has an excellent effect, especially in polemics; but compared to the sublime urbanity of the Socratic muse, it is like the pomp of the most splendid oration set over against the noble style of an ancient tragedy” (*Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde* 158).

connect the two, how to bridge the gap between theory and practice (32–33). In response to this question, Kant posits a third cognitive faculty, judgment, which furnishes the mind with a sense of pleasure in the order and harmony that exist in nature, but that are too vast to be accounted for by the concepts of pure reason (3, 23). Judgment, in fact, does not function in terms of “concepts” at all, but instead operates via what Kant calls “aesthetic ideas” (187). It is this sense of pleasure in nature’s overarching, inconceivable harmony that provides the reference point for practical reason’s concepts of what ought to be (32–33). In other words, our notion of how the world should work is guided by the sense of pleasure we experience when we perceive a harmonious order similar to that we recognize in nature, and in this way the faculty of judgment, according to Kant, mediates between pure and practical reason.

Kant’s divisions of the cognitive faculties have several implications for, on the one hand, the status of art in relation to knowledge and morality, and, on the other, for the configurations of philosophy that followed in his wake. First, Kant’s separation of aesthetic judgment into its own realm of cognition provided an important philosophical rationale for aesthetic theory to become an independent discipline, thereby making art an object of study in its own right (Hammermeister 40–41). However, Kant is quite clear that, because only the faculty of pure reason is involved in the formation of knowledge, art and aesthetic judgment have no independent epistemological function (*Critique of Judgement* 31). This separation not only severs art from knowledge but also creates a hierarchical divide between artistic and scientific or philosophical pursuits, in which rational thought is the only mode capable of truly knowing the world.

The philosophical and aesthetic movement of *Frühromantik* maintained Kant’s division between conceptual thought and aesthetic sense, but reversed the hierarchy so that the aesthetic

realm came to occupy a higher place than the conceptual. Following Kant's assertion that the faculty of judgment senses an absolute order that the faculty of understanding cannot grasp in concepts, writers like Friedrich Schelling (in *System of Transcendental Idealism* [1800]) and Friedrich Schlegel (throughout his collections of fragments), assert that this order can only be apprehended by aesthetic means.¹³ Because conceptual systems of knowledge will always fall short of grasping the totality they strive to achieve, such thinkers maintain that the only way of relating this totality is to gesture toward it without attempting to capture it completely. Because aesthetic modes of expression do not function in terms of concepts in the Kantian sense, they are much better equipped than philosophy or science to perform such a gesture. Through figurative language, poetry and literature can suggest, imply, and hint, while philosophical and scientific language is confined to simple denotation. In this way, in addition to its philosophical implications, irony came to mark the awareness of language's inability to grasp totality.

The artist or poet whose consciousness has become ironic must find a way to express his or her relationship to totality, without presuming to express this totality in the form of the created work. She or he must avoid presuming the one-to-one relationship between language and referent that scientific and philosophical modes of writing depend upon. There are various ways that such consciousness can manifest itself in a literary work. Schlegel often draws upon dramatic references in his characterizations of irony. His definition of irony as "permanent parabasis," for example ("Zur Philosophie" 89), and his comparison of irony to "the mimic style of an averagely gifted Italian *buffo*" in *Critical Fragment* 42 suggest that the ironic author must function as a commentator on the work, even while he directs and assumes responsibility for it

¹³ See *Athenaeum* fragment 116 for a particularly enthusiastic paean to the far-reaching powers of poetry (*Friedrich Schlegel's* Lucinde 175).

(*Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde* 148). Like the comical parody of the Italian opera character, the ironic author must include a self-parodic element in his own work to indicate his awareness of its limitations. The most obvious way of accomplishing this is perhaps authorial intrusion or a narrative voice that interrupts the narrative to call attention to the constructed nature of the work. In the genre of the novel, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605–15), Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760–67), and Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist* (1796) are often cited as examples of narrative reflexivity taken to the point of absurdity, as the stories are so constantly interrupted by the narrator that they barely get told at all.¹⁴ A notable example in Victorian nineteenth-century British literature is this well-known passage from *Middlemarch*: “One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea--but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage?” (229). This kind of break in the telling of the story not only demonstrates the author's willingness to critique his or her own work, it also displays his or her awareness that the book is a constructed artifact that could be told in a variety of ways, from a variety of perspectives, and is not simply a transparent reflection of reality. Other ways of expressing romantic irony in aesthetic form might include using an eclectic mix of genres within a single work (as in Schlegel's own *Lucinde* [1799]) disruptions of linearity (as in *Tristram Shandy*) or a parody of generic convention (as in *Don Quixote*).

¹⁴ Lillian Furst devotes two chapters to Diderot and Sterne, respectively, as exemplars of romantic irony in the novel genre. Robert Alter does the same in *Partial Magic*; though he does not term his project a study of “irony,” his emphasis on narrative self-consciousness aligns his concerns with Furst's, and with others who have studied romantic irony in fiction. See also Peter Conrad's *Shandyism*, William Egginton's “Cervantes, Romantic Irony, and the Making of Reality,” and Anne K. Mellor's introduction to *English Romantic Irony*. In “Letter about the Novel,” Schlegel's character Antonio praises Sterne and Diderot for the relevance of their style to the present age (288, 294).

A study that has explored the relation of form to totality in *Frühromantik* with close scrutiny and subtlety is Walter Benjamin's dissertation, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism" (1920). In this work, Benjamin argues that romantic irony as related to artistic creation has both a subjective and an objective aspect. On the subjective side, it has to do with the artist's relationship to the created work.¹⁵ Because the artist knows that his work can never achieve representational totality, he does his best to incorporate anti-totalizing elements into the work. This kind of irony reflects the intentionality of the artist, and it expresses the artist's separation from, even disdain for, the work. This is the "subjective" aspect of irony, as Benjamin explains: "The willfulness of the true poet therefore has its field of play only in the material, and, to the extent it holds sway consciously and playfully, it turns into irony. This is subjectivist irony. Its spirit is that of the author who elevates himself above the materiality of the work by despising it" (162). Benjamin argues that this aspect of romantic irony has been over-emphasized (162), and that in addition to irony as an expression of the artistic subject, there is another understanding of artistic irony that has to do with the objective relation of the work to the absolute. In this view, the destruction of form in the individual artwork has a positive rather than a negative effect. Ironizing the form of a particular artwork dissolves its boundaries, and reveals its unity with the idea of art as an absolute. As Benjamin eloquently explains:

The particular form of the individual work, which we might call the presentational form, is sacrificed to ironic dissolution. Above it, however, irony flings open a heaven of eternal form The ironization of the presentational form is, as it were, the storm blast that raises the curtain on the transcendental order of art,

¹⁵ Benjamin explains that he follows Schlegel in using the terms "art" and "artist" to mean primarily "poetry" and "poet" (118).

disclosing this order and in it the immediate existence of the work as a mystery.
(164–65)

According to Benjamin, it is precisely through disrupting the form of the individual work that irony connects it to a higher, mystical ideal of art. Irony, in this sense, only destabilizes a work in the contingent milieu of the real; it clears the way for the assimilation of each individual work to the totality of art as a whole.

1.2.5 Irony as Self-Creation and Self-Destruction

Benjamin's discussion of the dual nature of artistic irony makes overt a duality that will have become evident in the formulations of irony that I have discussed in this overview. Once irony is defined as infinite reflection, then it is equally creative and destructive. The dynamic of reflection is inherently destructive in that it subjects every position to ironic critique and disrupts the stability of all foundations for thought and belief. However, alongside this destruction, reflection requires the formation of a new position from which that reflection can be carried out. This new position then becomes the object of reflection, through the formation of yet another position, and so on to infinity. Schlegel captures this dynamic best in *Athenaeum* fragment 51, where he describes irony as “continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction” (*Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde* 167).

When its creative side is emphasized, irony takes on a vibrant, fecund cast. It is a chaotic force, because it undermines all order immediately upon creating it, but it is a productive chaos that continually creates new forms. In *Ideas* fragment 71, Schlegel emphasizes the positive aspects of chaos when he writes: “Confusion is chaotic only when it can give rise to a new world” (*Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde* 247). Indeed, throughout his early writings Schlegel

speaks of irony in the most enthusiastic terms. In *Critical Fragment* 42 and *Ideas* fragment 69, Schlegel describes irony as “logical beauty,” “the sublime urbanity of the Socratic muse,” and “the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos” (*Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde* 148, 247). Even when he acknowledges that irony marks the unbridgeable discrepancy between real and ideal that has caused other commentators grief, Schlegel’s terms are glowingly positive. In *Critical Fragment* 48, he declares: “Irony is the form of paradox. Paradox is everything simultaneously good and great” (*Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde* 149).¹⁶ Schlegel’s playful (bordering at times on febrile) tone throughout his fragments suggests that above all he views irony as a source of delight. For him, irony is associated with elevated consciousness, unceasing creativity, and a form of expression that breaks through the rigid bounds of philosophical discourse. He does not dwell on its destructive capacities, because he is so enthusiastic about the opportunities for creation that they produce.¹⁷

As indicated in the passage quoted above, Hegel dismissed romantic irony, in the severest terms, as immoral and irresponsible. Kierkegaard provides an interesting contrast with both Hegel and Schlegel, because while he focuses on the negative, destructive side of irony, he nevertheless claims that such destruction can have a positive role. He borrows Hegel’s characterization of irony as “infinite absolute negativity” (*Concept of Irony* 276; *Hegel’s Aesthetics* 68) but argues that this negating force can be beneficial for razing institutions that have outlived their time. On the level of the individual, Kierkegaard characterizes irony as a necessary step in the process of becoming ethical, and eventually religious. So, although his

¹⁶ In this fragment, “good” is usually understood to mean the realm of the real, “great” the realm of the ideal, or absolute. See, for example, Mellor 21.

¹⁷ See Mellor 23 for a discussion of Schlegel’s enthusiasm, contrasted with de Man’s “pessimism.”

approval of irony would seem to align him with Schlegel to some degree, he expresses greater interest in the negating function of irony. This emphasis led Kierkegaard to posit limits on irony, and in his first work on irony he is careful to stipulate that it is only “justified” at certain points in history, as with Socrates’ function in ancient Greece. Later, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Climacus insists that irony must come to an end in order for consciousness to progress to the next phase, but he is less clear about how this is to take place when he explains that “reflection can only be halted by a leap” (105). This leap, which later develops into the famous “leap of faith,” is a mystical, ineffable act of the internal consciousness. It occurs so completely in the subjective realm that it cannot be expressed in such an objective form as language, so Kierkegaard cannot tell us how to perform it (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 68–73). By saying that the only way to escape the modern predicament of reflection and alienation is to somehow “leap” out of it, Kierkegaard’s Climacus highlights the difficulties of stopping irony once it gets started.

By acknowledging and wrestling with the negative side of irony, Kierkegaard helped pave the way for Lukács’s morose views of the phenomenon that I discussed above. Later in the twentieth century, de Man approached the topic of romantic irony with an unsettling insistence that irony is a purely negating force. He argues that, once irony gets started, “it possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not to stop until it has run its full course; from the small and apparently innocuous exposure of a small self-deception it soon reaches the dimensions of the absolute” (215). For de Man, the “full course” of irony is insanity: “Irony is unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness” (215), and he sees any attempt to shut

down this process as a self-imposed delusion. In de Man's view, irony is not so much a combination of self-creation and self destruction as it is pure self-destruction.¹⁸

More recent scholars have faulted de Man for being too one-sided in his view of irony. For example, Handwerk, who calls de Man "the apostle of an endlessly self-negating subject" (10), charges that both de Man's views of the subject and of language are too restrictive, and asserts that "far-ranging and self-conscious as de Man's analysis of the dynamics of irony is, it remains from Schlegel's perspective preliminary" (14). According to Handwerk, de Man's view of the subject is too isolated, and he ignores the community-building function of irony. Furthermore, Handwerk charges, de Man emphasizes the representative and figural functions language, and ignores its communicative aspects. "Romantic irony," Handwerk asserts, "does not prepare the way for an eternal non-dialectical polarity but relocates progress in progressive communalization, It establishes the dependence of truth on the dialogic encounter, on the form of the agora. It likewise establishes the dependence of the subject's identity on the web of social relations within which it exists" (15). In less detail, Mellor also argues against de Man's position. Calling his view one-sided and pessimistic, she charges that he and other "modern deconstructionists choose to perform only one half of the romantic-ironic operation" (5).

Handwerk and Mellor represent a critical approach that would like to view romantic irony in a positive light, without, as de Man would say, "blinding" themselves to its negative side. Handwerk does this by viewing the gaps created by irony as opportunities for communal connection with other subjects, while Mellor emphasizes Schlegel's paradigm of productive chaos (3–30). I agree with Handwerk and Mellor that de Man's account of irony hyperbolically

¹⁸ See Chapter 4 for a more thorough discussion of de Man's views of irony as a negating force.

magnifies its negative side. However, the negative cannot be cancelled out by emphasizing the positive. Irony destroys precisely to the degree that it creates, and in order to come to terms with it, one has to negotiate both aspects. This view informs, in part, my approach to the Victorian writers in the present study. One of the fundamental questions with which I began this study is: How did Victorian writers negotiate this duality of irony's positive-creative and negative-destructive aspects?

1.3 RELEVANT CRITICAL STUDIES

The term "irony," prevalently used to describe the recession of totality in the thought and belief systems of both the romantic period and the twentieth century, has rarely been associated with the Victorians. This may be partly because, with few exceptions, nineteenth-century British writers rarely used the term "irony" to describe the indeterminacies they faced.¹⁹ Another reason, I suspect, is that this term clashes with the long-standing stereotype of Victorian "earnestness," which names an entire chapter in Walter Houghton's classic *Victorian Frame of Mind*. Because irony has long been associated with sophistication and urbanity, with a heightened level of consciousness and detached awareness,²⁰ it may seem an inappropriate term

¹⁹ The most notable exception is Connop Thirlwall's "The Irony of Sophocles" (1833) which uses the term "irony" to describe the equivocal moral of *Antigone*.

²⁰ Schlegel demonstrates this association in *Critical Fragment* 42 where he declares irony to be "the sublime urbanity of the Socratic muse," and speaks in mocking tones of those who lack it. In the same fragment, he also describes irony as "the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above its own art, virtue, or genius" (Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde* 148). Kierkegaard also associates irony with the detached figure of the aesthete exemplified in *Either/OR* vol. 1 and critiqued in *Eithor/Or* vol. 2 (1843).

to describe a culture in which evangelicalism, sentimentality, and moral duty were major forces. To over-emphasize the earnestness of the period, however, risks suggesting that the Victorians were unaware of, or stubbornly resistant to, the complex problems of indeterminacy that were coming to characterize so many aspects of thought and representation. Such an interpretation, I would argue, characterizes Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* and Daniel Cottom's *Social Figures*. Studies such as David Shaw's *The Lucid Veil*, on the other hand, are doing much to mitigate this imbalance by showing how deeply engaged in questions of language and meaning Victorian intellectuals actually were.

The first studies explicitly to connect irony in its German romantic version with English literature of the nineteenth century focused primarily on romantic poetry, especially Byron.²¹ Stuart Sperry's 1977 article, "Toward a Definition of Romantic Irony in English Literature," was one of the first to chart this link. Sperry acknowledges that his proposed association of the two genres is likely to puzzle, if not outright offend, scholars of both English romantic poetry and German romantic irony (3). Drawing heavily on what he calls D. C. Muecke's "learned and urbane" *Compass of Irony* (1969), Sperry explains that unlike the eighteenth-century satirical irony of Swift, Dryden, and Pope, romantic irony is primarily defined as "indeterminacy" and the attempt to negotiate this problem in a literary medium (5). In English romantic poetry, he asserts, there is evidence of "writers who, faced with the beginnings of that fragmentation and skepticism we see on all sides of us today, nevertheless struggled to achieve for themselves some alternative to a world order that was collapsing around them" (5). While he acknowledges that this type of irony has its origin in German philosophy, he does not delve deeply into the works of

²¹ In addition to Sperry and Mellor, see Frederick Garber's *Self, Text, and Romantic Irony: The Example of Byron* (1988).

any particular philosophers, instead focusing on the aspects of English romantic poetry that can be seen as wrestling with indeterminacy in a number of different forms. While, as the above quote suggests, Sperry sees clear connections between romantic irony and twentieth-century epistemological irony, he nevertheless avers that this phenomenon virtually disappears during the Victorian period: “let me add a final hypothesis by proposing that during the Victorian period in England Romantic irony goes underground to reemerge very powerfully in this century in the novel” (22). So, while Sperry’s study provides a valuable foundation for considering English literature in the context of the German romantic-ironic paradigm, he overtly excludes Victorian literature.

Sperry’s work, in this article and elsewhere, helped pave the way for Anne K. Mellor’s foundational study *English Romantic Irony* (1980).²² In this work, Mellor expands and deepens the connections between German romantic irony and nineteenth-century British literature. Mellor describes romantic irony as both a philosophical understanding of the universe as chaotic and in constant flux, and an artistic program:

Romantic irony, then, is a mode of consciousness or a way of thinking about the world that finds a corresponding literary mode. . . . As a literary mode, romantic irony characteristically includes certain elements: a philosophical conception of the universe as becoming, as an infinitely abundant chaos; a literary structure that reflects both this chaos or process of becoming and the systems that men impose upon it; and a language that draws attention to its own limitations. (24–25)

²² While Mellor does not cite this article specifically, she does cite Perry’s “Byron and the Meaning of ‘Manfred’” (196 n.12) and his *Keats the Poet* (201 n.4).

Mellor examines in some detail the philosophical origins of romantic irony in Schlegel's response to Kant, and she emphasizes Schlegel's enthusiasm for the chaotic abundance of infinite becoming that is inherent in his formulation of irony (Mellor 7). Using this framework to examine works by Byron, Keats, Carlyle, Coleridge, and Lewis Carroll, Mellor studies how the authors engage in romantic-ironic practices of self-creation and self-destruction, how they resist completion, and how they express a view of existence as continually in flux. Unlike Sperry, Mellor makes some attempt to situate irony in a historical context as well. In her introduction, she explains that a combination of political revolutions, shifts in social and class structure, mechanization of labor, and the philosophy of Hume and Locke helped to usher in "new and changing concepts of man, of the structure of society, and of the nature of the universe" (4). Mellor argues that these factors formed the backdrop for romantic irony, and she divides her book into two parts: those authors who display a positive view of change and existential flux wrought by such historical changes (Byron, Keats, and Carlyle), and those that fear and resist these changes (Coleridge and Carroll).

Mellor's groundbreaking book is admirable for its intelligence, rigor, originality, and scope. However, it reiterates Sperry's position that in English literature, Romantic irony was primarily the province of the romantic, not the Victorian, period. The one Victorian writer included in her study, Lewis Carroll, is noted primarily for his attempts to resist and control the chaos of romantic irony. "Like the other romantic ironists I have been considering," Mellor writes, "Lewis Carroll conceived the ontological universe as uncontrolled flux. But unlike the others, this Victorian don was frightened by this vision. Lewis Carroll shared his upper-class contemporaries' anxiety that change was change for the worse, not the better" (165). Mellor argues that this fear of change and instability motivates Carroll's obsession with logical games

and puzzles, as well as his creation of the fantastical world of the *Alice* books. In the creation of Wonderland, Mellor sees Carroll's attempts to build "a closed system, not out of numbers, but out of words. . . . Like all of Lewis Carroll's games, the game of Wonderland attempts to impose an overtly man-made, rational system upon a chaotic universe" (168–69). The notion of Victorian anxiety and rejection of change expressed in Mellor's reading of Carroll is reiterated in her subsequent observation that the works of many prominent Victorian writers such as George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell are antithetical to romantic irony (Rev. 435).

Despite Mellor's dismissal of irony in Victorian literature, her book nevertheless serves as a foundation for Ryals's 1990 study of romantic irony in Victorian literature. This is the first (and to date, only) book-length study of romantic irony that specifically targets works of the Victorian period. Closely following Mellor's formulation of romantic irony as it emerged in Schlegel's work, Ryals characterizes it as a philosophical stance that views existence as a process of infinite becoming, and embraces chaos as an opportunity for creating possibility (4–5).²³ Corresponding to its metaphysical aspects, Ryals reiterates Mellor's explanation that romantic irony finds expression in works that mix genres, call into question their own representative abilities, and otherwise resist closure and certainty (6–7). He then demonstrates these features in works by Carlyle, Thackeray, Browning, Arnold, Dickens, Tennyson, and Pater. Like Mellor, Ryals sees romantic irony as a response to changes in the historical situation of the early nineteenth century (1–3). Unlike Mellor, however, he views the Victorian period as embracing rather than resisting the ideal of change, and he sees the ironic features in their works as evidence of their enthusiasm for "a world of possibilities" (15). For example, Ryals sees the

²³ In addition to Ryals's acknowledgments of Mellor's work, Mellor herself recognizes his debt to her in her review of Ryals's book (434).

narrator of *Vanity Fair* as demonstrating Schlegel's concept of "sympoetry," and his interpretation of Dickens suggests that this author "shows himself in *Bleak House* as a tough-minded romantic ironist engaged in the serious business of metaphysical, aesthetic, and ethical play" (93). Summarizing his findings, Ryals argues that what he calls "Victorian romantic ironists" neither reconstruct nor deconstruct, but rather do both: "for them meaning is neither fixed nor absent; it is always becoming" (15).

Reviewers of Ryals's book have both acknowledged its significance and pointed out some of the questions it raises. While Mellor concedes that *A World of Possibilities* "convincingly makes its case for the relevance of the paradigm of romantic irony to Victorian literature and culture," she argues that it could go farther in examining the implication and scope of this irony:

It does not, however, confront the ethical problem implicit in the stance of the romantic ironist: the impossibility of making an enduring commitment to a particular political or moral program that might over time produce greater social or legal justice. Other Victorian writers—one thinks immediately of George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell—endorsed such commitments, and their non-ironic construction of social possibility must be set against any attempt to read Victorian literature as predominantly romantic ironic. (435)

Similarly, Gary Handwerk acknowledges that Ryals's book "does effectively expand the scope of Romantic irony" but wonders, "how fully the focus on irony can characterize either these individual authors or the period as a whole" (Rev. 100). Noting Kierkegaard's profound concern with the need to reign in irony, and that even Schlegel saw the need to delimit irony's workings, Handwerk observes that "Ryals stops short of that terminus here, having chosen to

leave some compelling questions unexplored” (101). Finally, E. Warwick Slinn’s review of *A World of Possibilities* probes the book’s implications most deeply. After a careful précis of Ryals’s book, Slinn concludes that “Romantic irony provides a suitable model for explaining the disruptive and disjunctive elements of Victorian writing” (332). However, he argues that more work needs to be done to determine what, if anything, is specifically “Victorian” about Victorian romantic irony. Highlighting Ryals’s claim that Victorian romantic irony avoids the nihilism of twentieth-century epistemological irony, Slinn cautions:

It is highly tempting to propose that Victorian writing may have already anticipated and solved the conflicts engendered by post-structuralist discourse, but I think more has to be said first about the relationship between conceptual mobility or uncertainty and the growing sense of the unreliability of language which emerged from the eighteenth century. . . . Is it a specifically Victorian feature of Romantic irony to emphasize the mobility and provisional nature of meaning? (333)

For Slinn, the greatest challenge posed by Ryals’s book is the need to situate the irony of the Victorian period between the romantic irony of Schlegel and the radical demystification of meaning and language that emerged in poststructuralism: “do the effects of [Victorian] irony suggest a contrast between origin and imitation, or do they dissolve that contrast, questioning the very existence of originals? If the latter, then Victorian writing would indeed be radical, with no mimetic function (of any conventional sort) and no truth (of any absolute sort) which language lies about” (334). Nevertheless, while *A World of Possibilities* leaves these questions unasked, Slinn credits it for helping to overturn “one of the old critical conventions of the displaced and melancholy Victorian, wandering between a dead past and an unborn future” (330).

In my own view, Ryals's book is an exciting first step, precisely because of the questions it provokes. Simply by demonstrating that romantic irony is a pervasive force in Victorian literature and culture, Ryals has effectively refuted Sperry's hypothesis that romantic irony went "underground" during the Victorian period. Toward the end of his book, Ryals confidently asserts that further study will reveal even more evidence of romantic irony in Victorian works, and the present study heeds this call by adding two more works by Eliot and Pater that he has not discussed. However, because Ryals and others have now so well documented the presence of romantic-ironic views and practices among Victorian writers, it is time to work toward a more careful study of the nature and function of this irony. Ryals and Mellor have both tended to take an "either/or" approach in their studies of irony: British writers either feared change, and therefore resisted irony, or they embraced change and became "tough-minded romantic ironists." In the present work, I hope to move beyond this binary, and the value judgments that often come with it. As I examine the position of irony in the following works by Carlyle, Eliot, and Pater I do consider whether the authors seem to be embracing or rejecting it. However, this consideration is part of a broader investigation into how the irony functions in their works. If irony seems to play a positive role, I ask what benefits or possibilities it has opened up to merit this treatment. If I see evidence of efforts to limit or shut down irony, I ask what dangers or problems might be leading to this impulse. So, while I don't claim to have completely addressed the insightful points that Mellor, Handwerk, and Slinn have raised, I do see my project as an attempt to examine more carefully the modes in which irony is manifested in the works and thought of three major Victorian writers.

1.4 METHODS

Contrary to the stipulations of Schlegel, I have sought to be as systematic as possible in this study. I began by examining each work for features that recall, resemble, or otherwise participate in, the dynamics of romantic irony. Because romantic irony is both a formal and a metaphysical phenomenon, this presented a wide array of attributes to watch for. On the level of form and rhetoric, I looked for features that encode self-reflection or otherwise disrupt a sense of completion or totality. For example, Carlyle's narrator in *The French Revolution* constantly pauses from his accounts of revolutionary events to comment on difficulties he has encountered in both researching these events, and in finding words to represent them. In *Romola*, I note the way that allegorical discourse in the book's final section disrupts the representational coherence in this otherwise realist novel. In "Denys L'Auxerrois," I examine the fragmentary effect of the story's multiple framing devices.

Next, I sought to determine whether the irony in the works' rhetorical features was linked to an ironic metaphysical outlook. I looked especially for narratives resembling the shift from immanence to alienation, as described by Schiller, Kierkegaard, and Lukács. I found evidence of this narrative to varying degrees in all three authors, from Carlyle's dramatic characterization of pre-Revolutionary organicity, to Eliot's portrayal of pastoral naïveté in the character of Tessa, to the interaction between Greek paganism and medieval Christianity in Pater's "Denys."

Once I established that the work in question participated in the dynamic of romantic irony in both its rhetorical and metaphysical aspects, I moved into what I consider to be the more interesting, significant, and challenging portion of the process. I sought to contextualize the irony, to consider how it functioned in each work. I examined how closely Carlyle connects fragmentation in verbal representation with the fragmentations of social relations during and

after the Revolution. In *Romola*, I observed how a lack of metaphysical stability is tied to an ethics of becoming rather than static being, an ethical model that seems to be extended and emphasized to an even greater degree in Pater.

Several factors contributed to the selection of texts for this study. To begin with, I sought to avoid works whose links to romantic irony have already been noted. Thus, I avoided *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34), the work that has been most often associated with romantic irony (and is technically not a text of the Victorian period anyway).²⁴ The main exception to this is Carlyle's *French Revolution* (1837), which serves as the subject of a chapter in Ryals's study. However, because my concerns diverge from Ryals's, and because *The French Revolution* provides such an illuminating schematic of an early Victorian author's awareness, negotiation, and ultimate rejection of romantic irony, I found it too valuable to leave out. While some critics have examined the self-reflexiveness and destabilizing aspects of some of George Eliot's novels, I have not found any that approach *Romola* (1863) in terms at all having to do with romantic irony. And, while Walter Pater's engagement with German philosophy has been well-established, I have found very few studies linking him to romantic irony specifically.²⁵

Second, I have chosen works from a variety of genres. This emphasizes the degree to which romantic irony is matter of representation in general and not simply confined to works traditionally classified as poetic or literary. Carlyle's incorporation of irony into a work of history shows how far-reaching the implications of irony could extend, and how much it was a

²⁴ For two notable studies of *Sartor Resartus* in relation to romantic irony, see Janice L. Haney's "'Shadow-Hunting': Romantic Irony, *Sartor Resartus*, and Victorian Romanticism," and chapter 4 of Mellor's *English Romantic Irony*.

²⁵ The most notable exception would be Ryals's chapter on *Marius the Epicurean*, but again, Ryals's approach differs significantly from mine. Furthermore, Ryals does not discuss *Imaginary Portraits*.

matter of existential outlook in addition to rhetorical form. Eliot's *Romola* is easily classifiable as a novel, but it is not the kind of overtly self-reflexive novel usually associated with irony. To find evidence of romantic irony here would have to impact the received view of both Eliot and of romantic irony's forms of expression. "Denys l'Auxerrois," like much of Pater's work, is difficult to classify in terms of genre. Combining elements of travel narrative, history, fiction, and myth, this "imaginary portrait" does much to suggest how irony can become intertwined, and perhaps even cause an intertwining, of multiple genres.

Finally, comparing works from the early, middle, and late phases of the Victorian period allows me to look at how irony developed throughout this period. While three texts do not provide enough evidence to definitively chart a progression of irony during these years, this number is sufficient to suggest the possibility of such a progression, and open it to further study. The fact that the authors I've studied are prominent enough that they have often been positioned as representative figures for their respective eras underscores this possibility.

1.5 LIMITATIONS

Considered in its philosophical context, as I have sought to demonstrate, romantic irony can be considered a logical extension of the problem of the transcendental ego in Kant's idealism. Viewed in a socio-historical context, as Mellor and Ryals have suggested though not explored in detail, it can be seen as an expression of the loss of totality experienced on so many fronts at the beginning of the nineteenth century: the rise of alienation that accompanied industrial capitalism, the breakdown of traditional social ties and community, the recession of religious faith in the face of scientific developments, and the sense that traditional grounds for belief and knowledge

were disappearing.²⁶ However, such historical considerations are beyond the scope of this study. Without denying the important role of historical context, I have chosen to focus this particular project on close readings and philosophical analyses of the texts. Connecting these findings to historical factors in the Victorian period could, however, be a valuable and productive topic for a future study.

1.6 AN OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Romantic irony has as much to do with an author's attitude toward indeterminacy as with the presence of indeterminacy itself. When Hegel harshly parodies the romantic ironist by saying "my consciously ironical attitude lets the highest perish and I merely hug myself at the thought," he is not criticizing the ironist's perception of the loss of totality, but rather the ironist's delight in it (*Hegel's Philosophy of Right* 102). In more recent years, Alan Wilde has argued that the main difference between modernist and postmodernist irony lies in the level of acceptance ("assent") that the authors express toward indeterminacy (*Horizons of Assent*). Jil Larson expresses a similar idea, I believe, when she refers to the "Victorians' vigorous efforts to deny anxiety about agency and the moderns' acceptance of such angst as unavoidable" (21).

My study of Carlyle, Eliot, and Pater suggests a trajectory similar to that articulated by Wilde and Larson. Like Ryals, I see in Carlyle's *French Revolution* clear evidence of romantic

²⁶ Some studies that have examined the historical context of European romanticism are Lukács's *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, Gorki, and Others*; Robert Sayre and Michael Loewy's "Figures of Romantic Anticapitalism," Azade Seyhan's *Representation and Its Discontents: The Critical Legacy of German Romanticism*, and Alice Kuzniar's *Delayed Endings: Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin*.

irony in both its ontological view and its rhetorical practice. Unlike Ryals, however, I do not see in this work an unadulterated embracing of this irony. While Carlyle's narrator waxes enthusiastic about the chaotic overthrow of traditional institutions at the beginning of the Revolution, there is a turning point toward the end of the book where he desperately wants to shut down the destruction and call a halt to the violence. Because, as I hope to show, Carlyle's book has brilliantly conflated problems with verbal representation with those of political representation, his calls for military order amount to a call to stop what Ryals would call the fertile chaos of eternal becoming. In this turn, I see poignant evidence of Carlyle coming face to face with the violent, destructive side of irony, and belatedly seeking to shut this down.

In Eliot's *Romola*, I argue that while the irony is less flamboyantly expressed, it nevertheless is evident in the novel's setting in a time of profound cultural and political changes, in the textual dynamics of repetition, and in its strange shift from realist to allegorical mode toward the end. I note that even though the lack of stability causes the novel's heroine deepest unhappiness, the novel nevertheless does not reject irony outright in the manner of Carlyle. Instead, it seeks to develop an ethics that depends upon, rather than resists, a temporal milieu, through a model of existential choice that closely resembles Kierkegaard's.

Finally, in Pater's "Denys l'Auxerrois" I see a complex narrative of the relationship between an alienated modern condition and the immanent past of ancient Greece. I argue that the multiple framing devices in the story position representational totality as something that must be carefully mediated, and cannot be accessed directly by Pater's nineteenth-century readers. By examining the role of visual art objects in "Denys" in comparison to both theories of irony and recent criticism of the rhetorical device of *ekphrasis*, I suggest that Pater transforms the spatial mode of visual art into the temporal mode of irony. Finally I argue that Pater offers a version of

morality that is compatible with irony, similar in many ways to that asserted by Kierkegaard, and that this aesthetical-ethical model helps to account for the peculiar representations of art objects in “Denys L’Auxerrois.” These three studies suggest that irony in Victorian literature was not defined so much by what it was, but how it functioned. While Carlyle engaged with it deeply but ultimately had to reject it as too destabilizing, Eliot and Pater showed how it could be transformed into an ethics based on becoming rather than a static being.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Looking at nineteenth-century British works in the terms made available by romantic irony provides a different lens than is usually applied to the category of writing called “Victorian literature.” For example, the term “indeterminacy,” which theorists of irony often use to describe the lack of a stable center for knowledge, belief, and expression, replaces the word “doubt,” that has more commonly been applied to the “Victorian” experience of this lack. Because “doubt” has a long history in the discourse of religious faith, it carries implications of emotional crisis and mental anxiety. While some Victorians certainly felt such a crisis, to approach the whole period within the discourse of doubt risks overemphasizing the affective at the expense of the intellectual. “Indeterminacy,” on the other hand, is a more emotionally neutral term. It suggests a complex philosophical notion attendant on thought rather than feeling. In this way, it helps position Victorian responses to ontological changes as attempts to understand and negotiate these changes, rather than as reactions fraught with anxiety and ennui (as Mellor argues) or suffused with elation (as Ryals argues).

In addition, examining how Victorian writers sought to develop an ethics compatible with the indeterminacies of irony not only impacts critical understanding of nineteenth-century British literature and culture, but is relevant in the twenty-first century as well. The spate of articles in the United States declaring the “death of irony” after the World Trade Center attacks in 2001 is just one manifestation of the degree to which popular culture continues to associate irony with the worst kind of moral relativism.²⁷ Examining how writers of the nineteenth century addressed the relationship between irony and ethics may suggest ways that we can negotiate these issues in a less reactionary, more productive way ourselves.

²⁷ Graydon Carter has been credited for initiating this trend when he said: “I think you’re going to see a seismic shift. I think it’s the end of the age of irony” (Beers). Similarly, *Newsday*’s James Pinkerton declared: “The World Trade Center has been destroyed, but this has also been a crushing defeat for irony, cynicism and hipness” (A11); and, in *Time Magazine*, Roger Rosenblatt wrote: “One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony” (79). A few weeks later, Carter recanted his statement by telling the *Washington Post*: “Only a fool would declare the end of irony. I said it was the end of the age of *ironing*” (Lloyd).

2.0 “THE FRIGHTFULLEST THING EVER BORN OF TIME”: IRONY AND HISTORY IN *THE FRENCH REVOLUTION*

A historian is a prophet facing backwards

—Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum* fragment 80

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In describing his contemporaries’ prevalent view of the French Revolution, Friedrich Schlegel declared in *Athenaeum* fragment 424: “The French Revolution may be regarded as the greatest and most remarkable phenomenon in the history of states, as an almost universal earthquake, an immeasurable flood in the political world” (*Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde* 233). Schlegel’s own view differed somewhat from the usual; he called the French Revolution “a marvelous allegory about the system of transcendental idealism” (“On Incomprehensibility” 263). As much as we need to be wary of taking any of Schlegel’s observations at face value, these passages highlight two tendencies in the way that post-Revolution intellectual productions positioned the upheaval in France. First, the French Revolution signified a cataclysmic break with the past; with the clang of the guillotine fell not only a monarch’s head, but also the historical era of feudalism. In addition to sociopolitical changes, this revolutionary fracture marked an abrupt shift in epistemology as well. As the old order dissolved, so did the foundations of knowledge and belief

that had supported it; in their place rose philosophies and worldviews that questioned not only traditional absolutes, but even the possibility of knowing any absolutes at all, as Schlegel's Kantian reference suggests. Second, Schlegel's terming the Revolution an "allegory" hints at a tendency not just to view this "universal earthquake" as an instigator of sweeping changes in politics and philosophy but also to employ it as a rhetorical trope for representing those changes. To say that the Revolution is an allegory is itself a metaphor; to say the Revolution is an allegory of transcendental philosophy is to add another layer of figuration that threatens to obscure the materiality of the event itself. On the other hand, engaging the Revolution within a network of tropes in this manner also suggests the degree to which this political event became intertwined with questions of representation in the verbal as well as the political spheres.

Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History* (1837) brilliantly illuminates both of these tendencies, albeit at greater length than Schlegel's cryptic fragments. Interspersed with the historical chronology that provides the book's narrative impetus is a myriad of reflections upon the significance of the Revolution, and self-reflections upon Carlyle's own historiographical method. These and other textual ironies are underpinned by what we might call a deeper layer of irony, as Carlyle figures the Revolution in terms that mirror the descriptions of metaphysical irony given by Schlegel and Kierkegaard. In particular, Carlyle's description of the Revolution embodies both Schlegel's definition of irony as "simultaneous self-creation and self-destruction," and Kierkegaard's characterization of irony as an irreversible shift from totality to fragmentation. If Schlegel's French Revolution is an allegory of transcendental idealism, Carlyle's is more akin to an allegory of irony.

In this chapter I investigate the nature of, the reasons behind, and the implications of this conflation of historical event with rhetorical trope. I first examine the features of *The French*

Revolution that express and describe irony in both its rhetorical and metaphysical senses. Next, I demonstrate the extent to which Carlyle interfuses this irony with the historical events he recounts, paying particular attention not only to the way he describes the Revolution as causing a gap between language and meaning but also to the way he maps this gap onto a widening gulf between the lower class Sansculottes and the emerging middle-class Girondin party. I argue that this mapping demonstrates a close connection, in Carlyle's view, between the social fragmentation of bourgeois capitalism and the semiotic fragmentation of irony. Support for this conclusion, can be found in Carlyle's early essays, "Signs of the Times" (1829), "On History" (1830), and "Characteristics" (1831) which, when read together, emphasize Carlyle's connection of non-totalizing historiography with the "mechanization" of nineteenth-century bourgeois society. In light of this, the rhetorical irony of *The French Revolution* both embodies the epistemological and social fragmentations that occurred during the Revolution and expresses the alienations of Carlyle's own historical period. Finally, I argue that the close connection between history and irony that Carlyle draws helps to explain a paradox in *The French Revolution*: while Carlyle's narrator seems to embrace the creative energy and possibilities of irony in the first part of the book, by the end he seeks to foreclose it by welcoming the military force of Napoleon. Like Kierkegaard, Carlyle welcomes the cleansing power of ironic reflection until it becomes too destructive. However, whereas Kierkegaard seeks an escape from irony in the inward sphere of religious faith, Carlyle's solution lies in the external realm of a fascist dictatorship. This solution is unsatisfying, not only because it offends modern notions of democracy but also because it offers an artificially-imposed solution. Totalitarianism seems a poor substitute for totality.

2.2 IRONIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

Seven years prior to the publication of *The French Revolution*, Carlyle had begun to wrestle with what he argued were serious difficulties in the writing of history. In the essay, “On History,” published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1830, Carlyle asserts that writing a comprehensive, definitive history of anything is virtually impossible. “Let any one who has examined the current of human affairs,” he cautions, “and how intricate, perplexed, unfathomable, even when seen into with our own eyes, are their thousandfold blending movements, say whether the true representing of it is easy or impossible” (57). The note of challenge in this injunction suggests that Carlyle inclines toward the latter, and he offers three primary reasons for this. The first is that the sheer volume of the subject matter is unmanageable and aspects of it even unknowable. “History is the essence of innumerable Biographies,” he writes. “But if one Biography, nay, our own Biography, study and recapitulate it as we may, remains in so many points unintelligible to us; how much more must these million, the very facts of which, to say nothing of the purport of them, we know not, and cannot know!” (58). For Carlyle, it is not enough to focus on appearances—the truth lies somewhere behind the visible, in a region inaccessible to ordinary study. Furthermore, not only is the “inner” truth of individuals unreachable, it changes from era to era, and we cannot transcend our own historical moment to understand the inner lives of those who lived in previous times. He explains: “The inward condition of Life, it may rather be affirmed, the conscious or half-conscious aim of mankind, so far as men are not mere digesting-machines, is the same in no two ages; neither are the more important outward variations easy to fix on, or always well capable of representation” (58). A third difficulty is the issue of perspective, that no two witnesses of the same event will experience it the same way, or give the same account of it. In all historical records there is inevitably some bias: “even honest records, where the reporters

were unbiased by personal regard” will necessarily be colored by the values and prejudices of the time period (59). Furthermore, we can never get past our *own* perspective; even if we were able to gain complete insight into the experience of others, the “most gifted man can observe, still more can record, only the series of his own impressions” (59).

In addition to the historian’s inability to reach beyond his own subjectivity and historical moment, Carlyle introduces another obstacle by turning his critique to the question of writing. The main predicament in writing history, he contends, is that conventional methods of narration tend to impose an artificial linearity on material that is cardinally chaotic and nonconsecutive. “It is not in acted, as it is in written History,” he explains, “actual events are nowise so simply related to each other as parent and offspring are; every single event is the offspring not of one, but of all other events, prior or contemporaneous, and will in its turn combine with all others to give birth to new: it is an ever-living, ever-working Chaos of Being, wherein shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable elements” (59). Carlyle sardonically implies that the methodology of science, which is grounded on the idea of cause and effect, is preposterously unsuitable for grasping such a disorderly subject: “And this Chaos, boundless as the habitation and duration of man, unfathomable as the soul and destiny of man, is what the historian will depict, and scientifically gauge, we may say, by threading it with single lines of a few ells in length!” (60). If the scientific method is not the appropriate mode for history, however, neither is the traditional model of storytelling, in which one event follows another in a direct line. Such a one-dimensional approach, according to Carlyle, cannot begin to encompass the complex tangle of actual history, in which events collide with and respond to each other chaotically and often simultaneously. As Carlyle succinctly and eloquently sums up the problem: “Narrative is

linear, Action is *solid*” (60). Given all these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, he finally declares, “the writer fitted to compose History is hitherto an unknown man” (60).

Carlyle argues, however, that historians should not be deterred by the apparent futility of the situation he has just outlined. Instead, the historical scholar needs to accept and acknowledge the impossibility of grasping, let alone representing, history in its totality, and aim instead for an “approximation.” For Carlyle, only a divine power can encompass the whole; in fact, this is precisely what constitutes divinity, as implied in his recommendation that the historian “pause over the mysterious vestiges of Him, whose path is in the great deep of Time, whom History indeed reveals, but only all History, and in Eternity, will clearly reveal” (60). Because even a glimpse of a tiny portion of the whole picture can be instructive, Carlyle admonishes that historical study should not be abandoned but rather approached with “vigilance and reverent humility” (60), as well as the constant recognition that “the whole meaning lies far beyond our ken” (61).²⁸

If Carlyle advocates historical study, but rejects logic and narrative as representational modes, then what does he propose instead? Some clue may be found in the distinction he draws between “artisans” and the “artists.” He characterizes the former as “men who labour mechanically in a department, without eye for the Whole, not feeling that there is a Whole,” and the latter as “men who inform and ennoble the humblest department with an Idea of the Whole, and habitually know that only in the Whole is the Partial to be truly discerned” (61). This

²⁸ It has been argued that Carlyle’s belief in an unreachable essence lying beyond physical appearances stems from both his Calvinist background and his interest in German idealism. Two influential studies on this topic are Charles Frederick Harrold’s *Carlyle and German Thought: 1819-1834* and A. Abbot Ikler’s *Puritan Temper and Transcendental Faith*. Harrold argues that Carlyle only achieved a superficial understanding of German idealist philosophy, and that he used it as a sort of overlay for his already entrenched Calvinistic beliefs, while Ikler argues that the Calvinist and German influences are equal forces in Carlyle’s work.

distinction is true of history as of other pursuits: “So likewise is it with the Historian, who examines some special aspect of History, and from this or that combination of circumstances will produce the like issue; which inference, if other trials confirm it, must be held true and practically valuable. He is wrong only, and an Artisan, when he fancies that these properties, discovered or discoverable, exhaust the matter, and sees not at every step that it is inexhaustible” (61). In other words, the artisan is the man who doesn’t realize that there is a whole greater than that which his own field of vision and creation encompasses, while the artist labors under the constant awareness that his work is only a small portion of this whole.

Carlyle’s choice of the terms “art” and “artist” to describe his ideal method of study is significant. In order to demonstrate that he is an artist instead of a mere artisan, the historian will need some way to signal his awareness of the inaccessible whole. To create a work that is consistent with this awareness, the historian needs a mode of expression that will incorporate reflection on his creation along with the creation itself. This layer of reflection would express the idea that there is always a perspective outside the created entity, and so would disrupt any sense of completion that the historian’s work might project. Logical reasoning and linear narrative do not allow for this kind of reflection. In order to find a mode that enables multiple layers of meaning at once, Carlyle turns to the sphere of the aesthetic, as his choice of terms demonstrates. Though he does not argue that the aesthetic sphere provides direct access to the divine, ineffable whole that has receded from modern existence, he suggests that artistic creation can express both the knowledge and inaccessibility of that whole. Thus, he writes, “Art also and Literature are intimately blended with Religion; as it were, outworks and abutments, by which that highest pinnacle in our inward world gradually connects itself with the general level, and

becomes accessible therefrom” (65). Although literature is not actually part of that higher plane, it can point us in its general direction.

Many rhetorical features of *The French Revolution: A History* seem designed to meet the requirements for a non-totalizing, self-reflexive (i.e., ironic) historiography expressed in “On History.” The most obviously ironic aspect of this work is the self-reflexiveness of the narrator, who not only continually laments the difficulties of writing this particular history, but also questions the possibility of writing accurate history in general and challenges the representational capacity of language as such. These self-conscious reflections tend to disrupt any narrative illusion the text might evoke by continually reminding readers that they are reading a constructed representation that cannot encompass the entirety of the recounted events.²⁹ Furthermore, the reflections encourage the reader to question the representational abilities of verbal productions more generally, not just this particular one. While other elements of the narrative, such as the epic and biblical discursive elements I discuss below, may work against this ironic meta-commentary, ultimately what we have here is a text that openly wrestles with the problems of writing history under the condition of irony.

In another group of narrative reflections, Carlyle’s narrator pauses at several points to rail against the inadequacies of the historical documents from which he must construct his account. Describing his attempts to depict the July, 1792 march of the Marseillaise, to take one instance, he declares: “you search in all the Historical Books, Pamphlets and Newspapers, for some light on it: unhappily without effect. Rumour and Terror precede this march; which still echo on you;

²⁹ Such moments fall within the category of passages noted by Charles F. Harrold, who points out that “There are, roughly, 17,000 paragraphs in *The French Revolution*; of these more than 500 contain no historical material whatever, but express Carlyle’s reactions to events and ideas of the Revolution” 1150n.1.

the march itself an unknown thing” (474). Here, as elsewhere, the narrator’s frustration with the historical record is palpable: “So vague are all these; *Moniteur*, *Histoire Parlemantaire* are as good as silent: garrulous History, as is too usual, will say nothing where you most wish her to speak!” (474). Similarly, in regard to the September massacres of that same year, the narrator ruefully observes: “It is unfortunate, though very natural, that the history of this Period has so generally been written in hysterics. Exaggeration abounds, execration, wailing; and, on the whole, darkness. . . . search as we will in these multiform innumerable French Records, darkness too frequently covers, or sheer distraction bewilders” (508).

The narrator’s difficulties extend beyond the material obstructions of murky historical records, however; they often take the form of more general reflections on what constitutes a historical event, how to negotiate the problem of perspective, and the near-impossibility of creating an accurate historical representation at all. Early in the book, for example, the narrator finds it necessary to define the word “event”: “Consider it well, the Event, the thing which can be spoken of and recorded, is it not, in all cases, some disruption, some solution of continuity? Were it even a glad Event, it involves change, involves loss (of active Force); and so far, either in the past or in the present, is an irregularity, a disease” (24). If the narrator seems fairly confident in characterizing the concept of the “event” in general, however (albeit with a rather odd definition), he is less confident when it comes to determining the proper angle from which to view any particular incident. This problem of perspective is evident from the first few pages of the book, when the narrator observes: “For indeed it is well said, ‘in every object there is inexhaustible meaning; the eye sees in it what the eye brings means of seeing.’ To Newton and to Newton’s Dog Diamond, what a different pair of Universes; while the painting on the optical retina of both was, most likely, the same!” (6–7). Although at times Carlyle exploits the

rhetorical possibilities of perspectival shifts to help him create a richer and more immediate account—"the Reader will perhaps prefer to take a glance with the very eyes of eye-witnesses"—he also laments the obstacle that this awareness creates for the historian whose task it is to create a coherent narrative (532). For example, pondering the predicament of trying to distil into one account the experiences of all the French citizens, he remarks: "How the Twenty-five Millions of such, in their perplexed combination, acting and counter-acting may give birth to events; which event successively is the cardinal one; and from what point of vision may best be surveyed: this is a problem" (181).

As suggested by his meditations on the word "event," the narrator's reflections on the crucial role of perspective extend from the sphere of historical writing into that of language itself. He begins book six, for example, by asserting: "Here perhaps is the place to fix, a little more precisely, what these two words, *French Revolution*, shall mean; for, strictly considered, they may have as many meanings as there are speakers of them" (178). Despite this difficulty, the narrator still attempts to work out the meaning of the word "revolution" but ends by concluding: "It is a thing that will depend on definition more or less arbitrary" (178). This passage suggests that even if the historian had access to clear and copious historical records, and could determine a reliable position from which to view and to express the events those records describe, the representational medium with which he must create his work is impossible to control completely.

Further emphasizing the obstructions of language, Carlyle's narrator insists that much of his subject matter is simply beyond verbal representation, as when he asserts: "Imagination may paint, but words cannot, the surprise of Lafayette" (384). In this, as in other passages, the narrator calls upon the reader to use his or her imagination to envision things that the historian

cannot depict. For example, in attempting to convey the immensity of the changes in France, he declares, “It is a change such as History must beg her readers to imagine, *undescribed*” (561). Similarly, he begs the reader to imagine the experience of a military officer, whose men are deserting him to join the insurrection: “Imagination may, imperfectly, figure how Commandant Besenval, in the Camp-de-Mars, has worn out these sorrowful hours” (155). It is possible to read these passages as merely part of a rhetorical strategy: insisting that an event or experience is so intense that it cannot be described is a way to convey that intensity. His repeated use of words like “indescribable,” “unutterable,” and “unspeakable,” take on greater significance, however, when juxtaposed with his reflections on the limits of historical representation more generally.

A final thread of narrative self-consciousness about the inadequacies of language that I will discuss here consists of the narrator’s repeated assertions of the virtues of silence. For example, chapter two opens with the following observation: “A paradoxical philosopher, carrying to the uttermost length that aphorism of Montesquieu’s, ‘Happy the people whose annals are tiresome,’ has said, ‘Happy the people whose annals are vacant.’ In which saying, mad as it looks, may there not still be found some grain of reason? For truly, as it has been written, ‘Silence is divine,’ and of Heaven; so in all earthly things too there is a silence which is better than any speech” (24). History, this observation asserts, emerges from dissonance and strife; its very presence signifies grief and is therefore undesirable. Later in the book, he enjoins a speedy end to the cacophony of the revolutionaries’ rage:

to Shriek, we say, when certain things are acted, is proper and unavoidable. Nevertheless, articulate speech, not shrieking, is the faculty of man: when speech is not yet possible, let there be, with the shortest delay, at least—silence. Silence, accordingly, in this forty-fourth year of the business, and eighteen hundred and

thirty-sixth of an 'Era called Christian as *lucus à non*,' is the thing we recommend and practice (545).

The narrator's dismissal of the lower-class voice in these passages is problematic, and something I will address in further detail below. At this point I would suggest that the silence he urges here has a metaphysical as well as a political sense. The quiet that the narrator describes as "divine" seems to come from an idyllic state of harmony between men, nature, and God. Taken to an extreme, this seems to suggest that when this harmony is in place, history as we know it will not exist because there will be no disruptive "events" to narrate. Furthermore, as Carlyle hints elsewhere, such a harmonious state could not be expressed in language, or at least not the language available to modern writers: "it is the Death-Birth of a World! Whereby, however, as we often say, shall one unspeakable blessing seem attainable. This, namely: that Man and his Life rest no more on hollowness and a Lie, but on solidity and some kind of Truth" (180). The "blessing" of perfect harmony between life and truth is "unspeakable." Besides providing another element of self-reflexive historical practice, this emphasis on silence also serves as a nice bit of sardonic irony, appearing in a work as long and verbose as this one. Clearly, Carlyle's history is a long way off from that idyllic, quiet state.

These reflections on history and language combine to create a layer of meta-commentary on historiographical practice in the text of *The French Revolution* that recalls Carlyle's discussion of the historian's difficulties in "On History." The narrator's acute self-consciousness in this commentary suggests that one strategy for negotiating the difficulties he describes is to bring language and referent as closely together as possible, while remaining aware (and demonstrating that awareness) of the obstacles that prevent complete overlap. He hints that the visual imagination may provide a way to negotiate, if not close, this gap; Carlyle's narrator

constantly encourages his readers to “look” at and “imagine” the Revolution’s spectacle, despite the inability of words to describe it. The historian’s role thus becomes a delicate balance of saying just enough to set the reader’s mind in creative motion, but not so much as to suggest that he has created any sort of complete picture of the events he describes.

To avoid giving too neat an analysis of this patently messy work, it is important to acknowledge that alongside the anti-totalizing elements I have been tracing are others that seem to struggle against the gaps between language and meaning that Carlyle’s narrator claims. Two of the most salient, perhaps because they engage in genres that have been analyzed by well-known literary theorists, are the threads of epic and biblical discourse that run throughout the book.

Georg Lukács, in *Theory of the Novel* (1920), and Erich Auerbach, in *Mimesis* (1946), have both argued that epic poetry is the expression of a unified consciousness, a condition of existence devoid of division between humanity, nature, and divinity. According to this line of theory, which has an important precedent in Friedrich Schiller’s *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795-1801), this genre expresses no schism between interior and exterior, no sense that anything should be other than it is, and hence no external perspective either on history or artistic creation; in Lukács’s terms, the epic genre contains no irony. Auerbach analyzes how this state of consciousness is encoded in the fabric of the epic text. He argues that the driving force of Homer’s poetic style is the eradication of depth and perspective, to treat everything with the same degree of description, to leave nothing in the background, and to bring every aspect of its subject matter into full presence: “the basic impulse of the Homeric style is to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations” (6). Similarly, Lukács maintains that the epic

consciousness understands no difference between inner and outer, or subject and object; in this condition, there “is not yet any interiority, for there is not yet any exterior, any ‘otherness’ for the soul” (30). So if Homer’s poetry focuses on the surface of things, it is not at the expense of the internal, but rather that in the epic world there *is* no separate internal sphere, nothing beyond what is present in the poem. Such poetry thus expresses a representational completeness that is unafflicted by the semiotic problems described by Carlyle’s narrator.

Critics of Carlyle have approached the profusion of epic discourse and allusions in *The French Revolution* from several angles. John D. Rosenberg argues that at times the references to Greek drama invest the tragedy of the Revolution with a note of fatality (62–63), while elsewhere they give the events of the Revolution a parodic or satiric tone (65). For Pamela McCallum, the epic references are part of a pastiche of “outworn clichés, and antiquated motifs appropriated from a long-established gestural repertoire” that make Carlyle’s historical method a “hybrid and unstable makeshift construct” (157). Feminist critics like Len Findlay and Henriette M. Morelli have examined how the association of Revolutionary women with mythical figures like Maenads and Amazons limits their individuality and their validity by figuring them as a hysterical, uncontrollable feminine collective. In light of Auerbach’s and Lukács’s discussion of the epic, as well as Carlyle’s own association of the epic genre with wholeness,³⁰ I would argue that it is productive to view these epic allusions as gestures toward totality that counteract the fragmentation of the rhetorical form.³¹

³⁰ A notebook entry for February 14, 1831 suggests that Carlyle understood the epic genre to be associated with wholeness as well. “The old Epics are great,” he writes, “because what they (musically) show is the *whole world* of those old days” (*Two Notebooks* 187).

³¹ John D. Rosenberg does note that the Homeric epithets such as “sea-green Robespierre,” “manifest Carlyle’s will to incorporate the whole of the historical and mythical

The epic allusions in *The French Revolution* take many forms. To cite just a few examples, the arrival of the Brigands in Paris is like “the clang of Phoebus Apollo’s silver bow” (107), the siege of the Bastille resembles the siege of Troy (177), and the atmosphere of Marie-Antoinette’s trial is “like the pale kingdoms of Dis” (669). Often, epic texts provide material for more extended comparison, as in this passage:

Hitherto, in all tempests, Lafayette, like some divine Sea-ruler, raises his serene head: the upper Aeolus’ blasts fly back to their caves, like foolish unbidden winds: the under sea-billows they had vexed into froth allay themselves. But if, as we often write, the *submarine* Titanic Firepowers came into play, the Ocean-bed from beneath being *burst*? If they hurled Poseidon Lafayette and his Constitution out of Space; and, in the Titanic melly, sea were mixed with sky?
(359)

Insofar as these epic allusions draw from an organic literary form, and recall a supposedly pre-ironic stage in history, they could be seen as attempts to resist the problem of irony that the narrator has so extensively described. Such a conclusion would require some qualification, however. First, Carlyle’s epic references do not adopt the same rhetorical patterns that Auerbach explicates. As suggested in the above passages, Carlyle often picks out individual places, characters, or events from the epic past simply to use as comparisons for those of the Revolution. Rarely, if ever, does he sustain an epic mode long enough to demonstrate the rhetorical impulse toward presence that Auerbach describes. Second, it is important to note that Carlyle’s epic

past into the modern moment of which he writes” (64), but he does not explain why Homeric epithets should be viewed as a manifestation of this drive toward wholeness. In my view, Auerbach’s and Lukács’s analyses of epic totality provide a useful way to understand the drive that Rosenberg mentions.

references comprise only one discursive thread among many others, a fact that in and of itself would call into question any sense of totality the references might invoke.

Biblical discourse, according to Auerbach, also strives to make meaning fully present in the text, although in a very different way from the epic. One main contrast between Homeric poetry and biblical stories, he contends, is that while the epics do not claim to present actual historical fact, the Bible stories are entirely oriented toward an absolute, universal truth:

One can perfectly well entertain historical doubts on the subject of the Trojan War or of Odysseus' wanderings, and still, when reading Homer, feel precisely the effects he sought to produce; but without believing in Abraham's sacrifice, it is impossible to put the narrative of it to the use for which it was written. Indeed, we must go even further. The Bible's claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer's, it is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims. (14)

This difference in orientation toward truth is manifest in the different rhetorical patterns of the two genres, Auerbach asserts; where the epic strives to make all of its subject matter present via exhaustive descriptions and tangential clauses, the Bible foregrounds only certain significant events and dialogue, and leaves the rest unspoken (11). Because of this, the two texts require different types of reading, or listening. Homeric epics, according to Auerbach, can be analyzed but not interpreted. Because everything of importance is present in the text, the reader, or audience, shouldn't cast about for meaning outside of what the poem describes. The Bible, by contrast, needs interpretation. Its meaning is grounded in what lies behind the stories. Insofar as the Bible depends upon an absolute truth, it, like the epic, lays claim to a kind of totality, though it locates the totality in a different place. While the truth of the epic is in the words themselves, the Bible is grounded in a truth that lies beyond the words of the text, and can only be accessed

by the activity of the reader's mind. Nevertheless, the language of the Bible is intended to evoke one, universal, absolute truth, according to Auerbach's analysis.

As with the epic, the biblical references in *The French Revolution* take many forms. Often, there are allusions to biblical stories and myths, as in the numerous references to Babel to describe the chaos of uncomprehending voices. The Bible is often used to convey images of hell as well, as in the comparison of revolutionary horrors to Azrael (713) and the many references to Tophet. At other times, they take the form of the narrator adopting oracular Old Testament tones, in passages like the following, that surely contributed to Carlyle's reputation as a Victorian prophet: "O poor mortals, how ye make this Earth bitter for each other; this fearful and wonderful Life fearful and horrible; and Satan has his place in all hearts! Such agonies and ragings and wailings ye have, and have had, in all times:—to be buried all, in so deep silence; and the salt sea is not swoln with your tears" (384).

As with the epic allusions, it is tempting to say that the strand of biblical discourse in *The French Revolution* comprises an attempt to stabilize the meaning of the text, in this case by appropriating the Bible's claim to absolute truth. The Bible, in Auerbach's analysis, offers a way to represent such truth without having to make it fully present in the text, and this seems to fit quite nicely with Carlyle's repeated appeals to the reader's imagination. The voice of the prophet is one that claims to speak truth, so to the extent that Carlyle adopts this voice, he seems to be striving toward truth as well. As with the epic, however, this assessment is challenged by the fact that in the context of *The French Revolution* the biblical discourse is only one thread among many. Whenever it emerges it is quickly subsumed by other voices: epic, narrative, philosophical, descriptive, etc. For example, the passage cited above that ends with "all the nations shall drink," continues in this way: "Remark, meanwhile, how from amid the wrecks and

dust of the universal Decay new Powers are fashioning themselves, adapted to the new time, and its destinies. Besides the old Noblesse, originally of Fighters, there is a new recognized Noblesse of Lawyers” (13). Here, the text shifts quickly from its elevated and spiritual tone back to earth with the preparations for fighting, and then becomes slightly comic with the sardonic phrase “Noblesse of lawyers.” I would argue that such juxtapositions temper the power and authority of the prophetic voice. As Albert J. La Valley points out, in Carlyle’s later works such as *Past and Present* (1843), the voice of the prophet grows stronger and moves out of the scope of reflection that tempers it in *The French Revolution* (184–85). In this work, however, the fact that prophecy appears as only one discursive thread among many serves to emphasize rather than resist the absence of totality within the text.

In this section I have attempted to establish some of the ways that Carlyle’s account of the French Revolution articulates and negotiates problems of representational totality, and to suggest that these aspects of the text are consistent with the historiography proposed in “On History.” However, the self-reflexiveness of Carlyle’s text seems to contradict the fierce objections to the blight of self-consciousness that he expresses in a different essay, published just one year after “On History.” In “Characteristics,” which first appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1831, Carlyle asserts that at certain times in the past, in certain societies like the “vigorous ages of a Roman Republic,” people lived unselfconsciously, in harmony with each other, themselves, and nature:

Society went along without complaint; did not stop to scrutinize itself, to say, How well I perform! or, Alas, how ill! Men did not yet feel themselves to be “the envy of surrounding nations”; and were enviable on that very account. Society was what we can call *whole*, in both senses of the word. The individual man was

in himself a whole, or complete union; and could combine with his fellows as the living member of a greater whole. For all men, through their life, were animated by one great Idea; thus all efforts pointed one way, everywhere there was *wholeness*. (79)

Elaborating further on such a state of immanence, Carlyle compares it to the early stages of childhood, when “We knew not that we had limbs, we only lifted, hurled and leapt; through eye and ear, and all avenues of sense, came clear unimpeded tidings from without, and from within issued clear victorious force; we stood as in the centre of Nature, giving and receiving, in harmony with it all” (68).

These images of wholeness and unity among self, society, and nature are in sad contrast to what he sees in present day England. “Never since the beginning of Time,” he declares, “was there, that we hear or read of, so intensely self-conscious a Society. Our whole relations to the Universe and to our fellow-man have become an Inquiry, a Doubt” (83). Because the very definition of self-consciousness implies division, as the self divides into the observer and the observed, this condition is fundamentally a breakdown of totality. Carlyle insists that this is not a healthy state of being. After beginning “Characteristics” with the aphorism, “the healthy know not of their health, but only the sick” (67), he declares that “self-contemplation . . . is infallibly the symptom of disease” (74).

Given Carlyle’s antipathy toward self-consciousness, why does he argue for, and do his best to carry out, such a self-reflexive writing practice? One answer, I would argue, lies in the close connection Carlyle perceived between historical moment and representational practice. In 1835, in a letter to John Sterling defending the linguistic idiosyncrasies of *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34) Carlyle wrote: “The whole structure of our Johnsonian English [is] breaking up from

its foundations,—revolution there as visible as anywhere else!” (*Collected Letters* 135). This observation speaks to Carlyle’s sense that society had shifted in some fundamental way between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that, regrettable though it may be, the older forms of representation could no longer express the new condition.³²

In “Characteristics” and in the 1829 essay “Signs of the Times,” originally published in the *Edinburgh Review*, Carlyle argues that self-consciousness is part of a larger trend of fragmentation that is permeating all aspects of nineteenth-century British society. In “Signs of the Times” he approaches the idea of a lost “wholeness” by adopting the figure of the “machine” to symbolize humanity’s severance from nature. “Nothing is now done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance. . . . There is no end to machinery. Even the horse is stripped of his harness, and finds a fleet firehorse yoked in his stead. Nay, we have an artist that hatches chickens by steam; the very brood-hen is to be superseded!” (34). In addition to the literal machines that have taken over the tasks previously accomplished by workers both animal and human, Carlyle extends the mechanical imagery to describe religion, scholarly pursuits, and matters of consciousness. “Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery,” he writes, “but the internal and spiritual also. Here too nothing follows its spontaneous course, nothing is left to be accomplished by old natural methods” (35). As part of this general trend toward mechanism, he laments the rise of the physical sciences at the expense of the moral and spiritual: “Intellect, the power man has of knowing and believing, is now nearly synonymous with Logic, or the mere power of arranging and communicating. Its implement is not

³² McCallum provides a useful gloss on the significance of Carlyle’s remark when she writes: “He must be taken as meaning that an easily comprehensible Johnsonian English is no longer an adequate vehicle for the representation of historical reality. . . . Here an older, inherited naïve naming system that relies on mimetic representation and the transparency of language can be said to have been dissolved” (156).

Meditation, but Argument. ‘Cause and effect’ is almost the only category under which we look at, and work with, all Nature” (47). Even religion has become “merely a machine for converting the heathen” (35). The severance of humanity from nature has thus taken over all aspects of life: “Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind” (37).

Taken together, “Characteristics” and “Signs of the Times” paint a picture of a society that has lost some kind of fundamental vitality. Its interminable self-reflection speaks to a disruption in its existential security, and the model of the lifeless machine has taken over its every aspect, dissolving its previous bonds with nature and with God. This fragmentation has a socio-economic manifestation as well. In “Signs of the Times” Carlyle closely associates the increase of machines with a growing gap between those who own them and those who run them. He professes to marvel at this change in economic situation: “how wealth has more and more increased, and at the same time gathered itself more and more into masses, strangely altering the old relations, and increasing the distance between rich and poor, will be a question for Political Economists, and a much more complex and important one than any they have yet engaged with” (35). This juxtaposition of proliferating machines and an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth paints a readily recognizable picture of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. Although Carlyle does not rail directly against *laissez faire* in this essay as he does in later works like *Past and Present* and *Chartism* (1839), his emphasis on the machine as a symbol of the age carries with it a strong critique of the reigning economic structures that he disparages more vehemently in later stages of his career. Furthermore, it is not just material inequality that Carlyle deplors; he argues that the new economic model has infected his contemporaries’ understanding of morality, spirituality, and humanity in general, as all has become reduced to a

theory of “profit and loss”: “the wise men, who now appear as Political Philosophers, deal exclusively with the Mechanical province; and occupying themselves in counting-up and estimating men’s motives, strive by curious checking and balancing, and other adjustments of Profit and Loss, to guide them to their true advantage” (42). Similarly, in the spiritual realm, “The infinite, absolute character of Virtue has passed into a finite, conditional one; it is no longer a worship of the Beautiful and Good; but a calculation of the Profitable” (46).

Carlyle’s contention that nineteenth-century British society is suffering from lack of totality thus takes several forms. The individual has become self-conscious and therefore divided within himself. Society has become self-conscious and infected with doubt. A proliferation of machines has divided men from nature, and the hegemony of capitalism has not only caused divisions between rich and poor, but has also reduced all understanding to an economic formula, separating men from the more spiritual aspects of existence. Fundamentally, this is a society fraught with divisions, and whether capitalism is cause, effect, or correlate, it is certainly an integral part of this situation.

When read against this account of society, Carlyle’s essay “On History” becomes an attempt to define historiographical practice in the face of lost immanence. His hyperawareness of perspective in that essay mirrors the debilitating self-consciousness he describes in “Characteristics,” while his emphatic attempts to reach the inner sphere, combined with his conviction that this is impossible, seem symptomatic of both a resistance to the overly externalized society he describes in “Signs of the Times,” and an inability to extricate himself from it. In a society that has become fragmented and separated from any kind of unified whole, it is to be expected that the scholar of history, or any other field, should approach his craft with the recognition that he will never be able to grasp his subject matter completely. Therefore, any

form of representation that professes a sense of completion, such as linear narrative, or a cause-and-effect model, is an inaccurate representation.

One answer to the question of why Carlyle chose to write history ironically, then, is that he felt he had to. To profess semiotic completion in a fragmented age would be disingenuous and naïve, as his reference to Johnsonian English implies. Though these early essays suggest that he was not particularly happy about this need, they also demonstrate his conviction that a fragmentation in self and society must find expression in a fragmented rhetorical form.³³ The close relationship that Carlyle perceived between historical moment and representational form is supported by the aspects of *The French Revolution* that characterize the Revolution itself as the event that ushered in irony, a point that becomes clearer when Carlyle's account of the Revolution is compared to Kierkegaard's account of irony. Furthermore, a second connection between irony and history is evident in the way that Carlyle maps this irony onto the divisive relations between the social classes as the Revolution progresses.

³³ Philip Rosenberg makes a similar point regarding Carlyle's concurrent recognition of, and antipathy toward, the recession of a God-centered ontology and the rise of the self in the nineteenth century: "This conflict between preference and perception has gone unnoticed by most students of Carlyle, who tend in consequence to see his longing for a god-centered universe as the totality of his thought on this matter. In fact, however, Carlyle's belief that the self should be subordinate to some higher force in no way altered his perception of the fact that it was not" (3). Albert J. LaValley characterizes these kinds of dualities in Carlyle as a feature that makes him particularly "modern"; for example, LaValley writes: "He celebrates the dynamics of change, the possibilities of the new society, but he laments the loss of roots and fears the mechanization of man and a world governed by self-interest and greed" (3).

2.3 METAPHYSICAL IRONY AND SOCIAL CLASS

In *The Concept of Irony* (1841), Kierkegaard describes irony as a shift in consciousness from unreflective immediacy to reflective fragmentation. He locates this shift at a particular moment in the history of consciousness in the West, with the appearance of Socrates. According to Kierkegaard, Socrates' incessant questioning of every belief and assumption that shored up the institutions of traditional Greek society destroyed its foundations. He caused his contemporaries to become self-aware for the first time, thus destroying the unreflective totality that supposedly characterized ancient Greek existence. Kierkegaard discusses this shift in enthusiastic terms, declaring that the classical era was over, and needed to be destroyed so that the next historical phase could begin:

Classical Hellenism had outlived itself, a new principle must come forth; but for this to appear in its truth all the fertile weeds of corrupt anticipations and misunderstandings must be ploughed under, destroyed at their deepest root. The new principle must struggle, and world history requires the services of an *accoucheur*. This role was filled by Socrates. He was not the one to introduce the new principle in its fullness, for in him it was only present cryptically (*κατακρύψιν*); instead, he must render its appearance possible. This intermediate state, which is and is not the new principle which is potentially but not actually the new principle (*potentia non actu*), is irony. (234)

This passage celebrates the destructive capabilities of irony, arguing that at this moment in history the antiquated institutions needed to be toppled. Socratic irony, Kierkegaard argues, had “world-historical validity” because it accomplished a necessary task.

The picture Carlyle paints of a worn-out *ancien regime* ripe for overthrow resembles Kierkegaard's account of classical Greece to a remarkable degree. In the years leading up to the Revolution, members of the nobility have descended into "debauchery and depravity," their only role in life consisting of "dressing gracefully and eating sumptuously" (12). In its moral decline into gluttony and self-gratification, according to Carlyle's narrator, the nobility has ceased to fulfill its duty to the poor: "Such are the shepherds of the people: and now how fares it with the flock? With the flock, as is inevitable, it fares ill, and ever worse. They are not tended, they are only regularly shorn" (13). In this sense, the bonds of duty that, in Carlyle's account, have held this society together have already become weakened before the revolutionary uprising forces its collapse. Furthermore, the fractures in feudal totality have extended into the bonds that hold sign and meaning together, as the symbols of the old regime become detached from the truth value with which they were once suffused. Laws, religious symbols, and social conventions have all become mere "hollow formulas." As Carlyle's narrator explains, "This is the way of Revolutions, which spring up as the French one has done; when the so-called Bonds of Society snap asunder; and all Laws that are not Laws of Nature become naught and formulas merely" (603). This is an age, he declares, "When Belief and Loyalty have passed away, and only the cant and false echo of them remains; and all Solemnity has become Pageantry; and the Creed of persons in authority has become one of two things: an Imbecility or a Machiavelism" (11). Even the people have become gross caricatures of the former system: "Man's Existence had for long generations rested on mere formulas which were grown hollow by course of time; and it seemed as if no Reality any longer existed, but only Phantasms of realities, and God's Universe were the work of the Tailor and Upholsterer mainly, and men were buckram masks that went about

becking and grimacing there” (179). Even the supreme symbol of feudalism, the king himself, no longer has any “fixed meaning” (141) and has become a “solecism incarnate” (19).

All of a sudden, against this ridiculous façade of a harmonious order, “the Earth yawns asunder, and amid Tartarean smoke, and glare of fierce brightness, rises Sansculottism, many-headed, fire-breathing, and asks: What think ye of *me*?” (179). The totality of feudalism has shattered, as part of it breaks off, gains a consciousness of itself, and fiercely interrogates the remainder. The formerly unified entity has become self-reflective, and this self-reflection is eminently destructive. Once underway, however, the task of the Revolution is not just to destroy what has become outmoded and meaningless, but to create new institutions and modes of signification to represent them. Unfortunately, while the revolutionary forces are remarkably adept at destroying the formulas of the status quo, they run into serious problems when they try to create something new. This points toward another key aspect of irony as discussed by Kierkegaard and Schlegel.

As suggested in the quote above, Kierkegaard is careful to point out that, while irony clears the way for the new principle, it does not *create* that new principle. This is because the movement of irony is constant reflection: it does not pick and choose what it negates; rather, its reflective destruction is directed toward everything in existence. “Thus,” Kierkegaard explains in *The Concept of Irony*, “we here have irony as infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity because it only negates; it is infinite because it negates not this or that phenomenon; and it is absolute because it negates by virtue of a higher which is not. Irony establishes nothing, for that which is to be established lies behind it. It is a divine madness which rages like a Tamerlane and leaves not one stone standing upon another its wake” (278). This passage emphasizes irony’s powers of devastation; however, Kierkegaard insists upon its value as a creator of possibility as

well: “As in life Socrates began wherever he found himself, so his significance for the world historical development is to be an infinite beginning which contains within itself a multitude of beginnings. As beginning, therefore, he is positive, but as mere beginning he is negative” (239). To put it colloquially, when nothing is certain, everything is possible. “It is this very freedom, this hovering, which gives the ironist a certain enthusiasm, for he becomes intoxicated as it were by the infinity of possibles” (279). This duality of irony is pithily captured in Schlegel’s formulation of irony as continual fluctuation between self-creation and self-destruction in *Athenaeum* fragment 51 (*Friedrich Schlegel’s* Lucinde 167).

Carlyle’s depiction of the Revolution follows a similar trajectory. Its destructive force does not end with the dissolution of the old order, but rather, continues to destroy everything new as well, including its own creations. The paradox of this dynamic is captured in Carlyle’s repeated use of the phrase “death-birth of a world” to describe the Revolution, and in his frequent invoking of the phoenix as a comparative figure, both of which appear in this passage: “Behold the World-Phoenix, in fire-consummation and fire-creation; wide are her fanning wings; loud is her death-melody, of battle-thunders and falling towns; skyward lashes the funeral flame, enveloping all things: it is the Death-Birth of a World!” (179). The vortex of simultaneous creation and destruction is also evident in the numerous failed efforts of the elected delegates to write a new constitution that encode the laws and system of the new republic, as contemptuously portrayed by Carlyle’s narrator: “These prating Senators of yours hover ineffectual on the barren letter, and will never save the Revolution” (259). The attempts to create the document that will guide the new social order degenerate time and again into strife and squabbling among the rival factions of the Constituent Assembly: “the ambitious contentious Persons, from all corners of the country do, in this manner, get gathered into one place; and there, with motion and counter-

motion, with jargon and hubbub, *cancel* one another, like the fabulous Kilkenny Cats; and produce, for net-result, *zero*” (182–83).³⁴

Through this comparison between (on the one hand) Carlyle’s portrayal of the Revolution and (on the other) the metaphysical irony described by Kierkegaard and aphorized by Schlegel, I have sought to show that the ironic interplay at the rhetorical level of Carlyle’s text is reflected in his depiction of the revolutionary dynamic itself. As the book’s narrative self-consciousness serves to disrupt any illusion of representational totality, so the Revolution as Carlyle describes it embodies a break in the totality of a traditional social structure, and a historical era. This connection suggests not only a paradoxical consistency in the form and content of the book (paradoxical because to be consistent is itself a kind of totality); it also begins to form a tie between historical moment and rhetorical structure. More specifically, it suggests that the shift in consciousness occasioned by the Revolution, which occurred approximately fifty years prior to the publication of *The French Revolution: A History*, is at least partly the impetus for Carlyle’s ironic rhetorical form.

In addition to equating the outburst of the Revolution with the inception of self-reflection, Carlyle’s account of the loss of totality has a more concrete historical aspect as well. This is visible in the way that Carlyle maps the growing gulf between meaning and language onto a growing gulf between the middle and lower classes involved in the Revolution.

³⁴ The “Kilkenny cats” refers to a legend of two cats who fought and devoured each other until all that was left were their tails. This legend is captured in a traditional nursery rhyme:

There once were two cats from Kilkenny
Which thought there was one cat too many.
So they mewed and they bit
And they scratched and they fit
Till, excepting their nails and the tips of their tails,
Instead of two cats, there weren't any! (Walsh 585)

In the initial break between the aristocracy and the insurgency, it is the latter who remain in touch with nature and truth, while the former have become a lifeless bundle of meaningless signs among whom “under the stiff buckram no heart can be felt beating” (211). The revolutionary masses, by contrast, are lively, unified, and organic: “How the whole People shakes itself, as if it had one life, and, in thousand-voiced rumour, announces that it is awake, suddenly out of long death-sleep, and will thenceforth sleep no more!” (103). Even the violent, destructive tendencies of the revolution are portrayed as events of nature, as when Carlyle’s narrator describes “how Anarchy breaks prison; bursts up from the infinite Deep, and rages uncontrollable, immeasurable, enveloping a world; in phasis after phasis of fever-frenzy” (178). Whether a gentle awakening or an eruption of fever, however, the narrator declares: “Your mob is a genuine outburst of Nature; issuing from, or communicating with, the deepest deep of Nature” (211). These associations with nature lend to the revolution a stamp of validity and genuineness lacking in the established regime.³⁵

In addition, Carlyle often gives the revolutionary uprising a miraculous or religious cast. “Fear not Sansculottism,” he advises early on in the narrative, “recognize it for what it is, the portentous inevitable end of much, the miraculous beginning of much. One other thing thou mayst understand of it: that it too came from God; for has it not *been*?” (180). Similarly, “In this manner does Sansculottism blaze up, illustrating many things;—producing, among the rest, as

³⁵ Patrick Brantlinger makes a similar, though not identical point, when he argues: “To liken the Revolution to a great natural force such as a whirlwind (or a deluge, or a volcanic eruption, or an ocean tide) suggests its inevitability and thereby grants the future to democracy (although, as we have seen already, democracy will turn into ‘quackocracy’ before the revolutionary process has burned itself out)” (66). In my view, however, nature has a more positive connotation than the neutral term “inevitability” would suggest. As opposed to the lifeless “machinery” of the nineteenth century described in “Signs of the Times,” Carlyle associates nature with a state in which humanity has not yet become self-conscious and alienated.

we saw, on the Fourth of August, that semi-miraculous Night of Pentecost in the National Assembly; semi-miraculous, which had its causes, and its effects.” (195). More succinctly, he observes: “The age of Miracles has come back!” (179). As with the strand of natural imagery, these associations with the divine give the revolution a cast of genuine truth that transcends the superficial creations of the ruling social body.

Once the monarchy has been overthrown, a new division emerges between the lower and middle class factions of the Revolution as they try to create a new social order. In this division, as Carlyle relates it, the lower classes (Sansculottes and Jacobins) still maintain their associations with nature and truth but are unable to put their misery into words, while the middle classes (Girondin) quickly seize control of the forms of representation as they struggle to create a constitution that represents their own interests. Despite the fact that they have “reality” on their side, the revolutionary voice remains unable to speak coherently; it is “a dumb tortured animal, crying from the uttermost depths of pain and debasement” (13), “a dumb generation; their only voice an inarticulate cry” (30), and only able to emit a “low-whimpering if infinite moan” (46).

Carlyle opposes this genuine but inarticulate roar outside the doors of the parliament to the “theory of defective verbs” under construction inside. In contrast to “the young Reality, young Sansculottism” (260), “an august National Assembly becomes for us little other than a Sanhedrim of Pedants, not of the gerund-grinding, yet of no fruitfuller sort; and its loud debates and recriminations about Rights of Man, Rights of Peace and War, *Veto suspensif*, *Veto absolu*, what are they but so many Pedant’s-curses, ‘May God confound you for your *Theory of Irregular Verbs!*’” (181). Try as they might, the senators cannot create constitutional language that truly represents the concerns of the people, or seemingly, anything else. Carlyle describes the senators’ efforts as an attempt to make the constitution into a living entity that can

“march” on its own, to infuse it with life: “A Constitution, as we often say, will march when it images, if not the old Habits and Beliefs of the Constituted; then accurately their Rights, or better indeed their Might;—for these two, well-understood, are they not one and the same? The old Habits of France are gone: her new Rights and Might are not yet ascertained, except in Paper-theorem” (422). Paradoxically, the only times the National representatives seem able to connect representation with “reality,” hence becoming “organic,” is when they are reflecting on their failure to do so: “In the course of the week, the Commons having called their Eldest to the chair, and furnished him with young stronger-lunged assistants,—can speak articulately; and, in audible lamentable words, declare, as we said, that they are an inorganic body, longing to become organic” (128).

In this way, Carlyle conflates the gulf between the lower and middle class factions with a gulf between meaning and representation. I mean representation in both its political and semiotic senses here, because the two are so closely connected in Carlyle’s text that they are not always distinguishable. In the emerging order following the Revolution, the “truth” remains on the side of the poor, but the means of representation are co-opted by the middle classes, just as they had been by the monarchy in the past. His view of the Gironde is particularly harsh, and he portrays its members as merely paying lip service to egalitarian political philosophy while their true interests have more to do with easing taxes and trade restrictions to benefit the capitalist pursuits of the bourgeoisie.³⁶ As the narrator declares: “The weapons of the Girondins are

³⁶ Historians such as J. F. Bosher point out that the revolutionary groups known as the Sansculottes, the Jacobins, and the Girondists, cannot be neatly categorized in terms of social class (186–91, 209–12). In Carlyle’s account, however, the Sansculottes and Jacobins (the “Mountain”) are closely affiliated with the concerns of the lower classes, and the Girondists with the middle-class. Brantlinger also points out that Carlyle’s use of the term “Sansculotte” is

Political Philosophy, Respectability and Eloquence. . . . The weapons of the Mountain are those of mere Nature: Audacity and Impetuosity which may become Ferocity” (608). Carlyle considers the Girondin indifferent to the miserable conditions of the poor, and primarily interested in exploiting the revolution for their own gain: “Most cold, on the other hand, most patronizing, unsubstantial is the tone of the Girondins towards ‘our poorer brethren’;—those brethren whom one often hears of under the collective name of ‘the masses,’ as if they were not persons at all, but mounds of combustible explosive material, for blowing down Bastilles with!” (608). This lack of concern with the needs of the populace results in the Gironde simply replacing the hollow formulas of the old regime with new, equally empty formulas of its own:

This huge Insurrectionary Movement, which we liken to a breaking out of Tophet and the Abyss, has swept away Royalty, Aristocracy, and a King’s life. The question is, What will it next do; how will it henceforth shape itself? Settle down into a reign of Law and Liberty; according as the habits, persuasions and endeavours of the educated, moneyed, respectable class prescribe? That is to say: the volcanic lavaflood, bursting up in the manner described, will explode and flow according to Girondin Formula and pre-established rule of Philosophy? If so, for our Girondin friends it will be well. (601)

Carlyle views the Gironde party as emblematic of a new reign of greed and selfishness even worse than the system it replaces: “Aristocracy of Feudal Parchment has passed away with a might rushing; and now, by a natural course, we arrive at Aristocracy of the Moneybag. It is the

primarily symbolic and does not signal a finely developed analysis of social class on Carlyle’s part (74–75).

course through which all European Societies are, at this hour, traveling. Apparently a still baser sort of Aristocracy? An infinitely baser; the basest yet known” (767).

In describing a schism between language and meaning as closely connected to a schism between social classes, Carlyle suggests that the lack of totality in verbal representation accompanies lack of totality in social relations. We could thus view Carlyle’s own textual irony as a brilliant attempt to embody the fragmentation he describes as taking place within the French Revolution. The last passage quoted above, however, suggests something further. It is not only late eighteenth-century France that experienced these schisms; Carlyle’s narrator tells us that the force behind them, the “aristocracy of the moneybag,” has seized control and continues to hold sway throughout Europe up to the present hour. This suggests that the significance of the Revolution, for Carlyle, lies in the fact that it caused a major shift not just in the social order, but in verbal representation as well. More specifically, the rise of bourgeois capitalism caused schisms in both social relations and in representational practice that are still being felt in nineteenth-century England.³⁷ Thus, Carlyle’s rhetorical irony is as much a result of his own historical location as it is an attempt to perform the break in meaning and representation he describes during the Revolution itself.

³⁷ For a useful discussion of the relationship between contemporary English politics and Carlyle’s account of the French Revolution, see chapter 3 of Brantlinger’s *The Spirit of Reform*. See also McCallum (155). For a discussion of links between the rise of bourgeois capitalism in England, and the destabilizing of traditional discourses of authority, see Chris Vanden Bossche’s introduction to *Carlyle and the Search for Authority*.

2.4 THE HISTORIAN AS AGENT

In an attempt to answer the question of why Carlyle chose to employ such a self-reflexive mode of writing in *The French Revolution*, I have suggested that the ironies in the text are an expression of the breakdown in totality that Carlyle perceived in the social, economic, and spiritual planes of nineteenth-century Europe. To view the work in these terms is to suggest a somewhat passive character to Carlyle's writing practice: he didn't like what he saw, but he felt he had no choice but to express it in his writing. It is possible to consider Carlyle's historiography in a more active light, however, as an attempt not just to record, but to overcome some of the philosophical conflicts he expresses in his early works. One such conflict is carefully explicated by Jonathan Loesberg in his careful, perceptive examination of Carlyle's historiography in *Fictions of Consciousness: Mill, Newman, and the Reading of Victorian Prose* (1986). Although Loesberg does not discuss *The French Revolution*, his analysis of Carlyle's conception of historical writing provides a useful way to highlight one aspect of Carlyle's project in that text. Loesberg demonstrates a fundamental conflict in Carlyle's early work between the belief in an eternal, unchangeable truth, and a truth based in the interpretive activity of the mind (Loesberg 185). The former can be seen in the essay "On History," in which, as I have shown above, Carlyle locates the truth of history in an atemporal whole, inaccessible through narrative or cause and effect models of understanding. However, in his essay on Novalis, published in the *Foreign Review* in 1829, Carlyle emphasizes that the aim of philosophy is to interpret appearance for the purpose of seeking the truth that lies behind it (Loesberg 185).³⁸ This

³⁸ Loesberg's interpretation is based primarily on the quotation in "Novalis" where Carlyle states that the "life and business" of philosophy involves "*interpreting appearances*" (Carlyle, "Novalis" 24).

understanding of philosophy places a high value on interpretive activity that, as Loesberg points out, is in deep contradiction with Carlyle's rejection of temporal means for reaching the atemporal truth of history. Since interpretation is an inherently temporal activity, this raises the question of how it can relate in any way to an atemporal concept of truth.

Carlyle's task as a historian thus becomes to emphasize the role of interpretation without relinquishing the idea of ontological truth. *Sartor Resartus*, Loesberg asserts, demonstrates the danger of over-emphasizing the activity of interpretation. As the "editor" recounts his attempts to deal with the obscure text of Teufelsdrökh, he spends more time reflecting on his own efforts to interpret, than on explaining the meaning of the text. Similarly, the words of Teufelsdrökh himself, when we do get them, are a record of his commentary on a text that he *could* have written, but decided to "suppress."³⁹ In this work, therefore, we get an a commentary on a commentary on a work that does not exist. The text becomes so self-reflexive that it is hermetic, unable to refer to anything outside itself. The unbridled self-consciousness of this text demonstrates some of the dangers of self-consciousness that Carlyle warns against in "Characteristics," and proves an untenable model for the writing of history.

Carlyle's task, according to Loesberg, thus becomes to create a narrative form in which the mind could become conscious of more than just itself, and to make history available for the interpretive activity in which, for Carlyle, the discovery of truth lay (Loesberg 197–98). Loesberg argues that Carlyle's doctrine of facts represents an important component in the

³⁹ See the beginning of chapter 5, where the editor quotes Teufelsdrökh's text for the first time: "'As Montesquieu wrote a *Spirit of Laws*,' observes our Professor, 'so could I write a *Spirit of Clothes* . . . nevertheless, for inferior Intelligences, like men, such Philosophies have always seemed to me uninstrusive enough . . . Much, therefore, if not the whole, of that same *Spirit of Clothes* I shall suppress, as hypothetical, ineffectual, and even impertinent'" (28–29).

development of this narrative form. In the essay “Biography,” originally published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1832, Carlyle argues that a historical fact is defined, not by its objective existence, but rather by virtue of people believing in it. This can be seen in the assertion of Carlyle’s pseudonym, Herr Sauerteig, that Homer’s poetry becomes “hollow and false” if his audience does not believe that the gods “were real agents” (49–50).⁴⁰ As Loesberg concludes, “Since for history to be history, its audience must believe it to be history, and since belief is a subjective function of that audience, history can only become history through the addition of an element of its audience, and thus the audience must necessarily see itself in something that is partly a creation of itself” (200). Historiography, then, must become a melding of self and other, with just enough “other” to set in motion an active, interpretive effort on the part of the self.

Loesberg argues that in *Past and Present*, Carlyle’s efforts to achieve this fusion are visible in his use of a first person pronoun that seems to include both nineteenth-century knowledge and seventeenth-century experience (Loesberg 201).⁴¹ A similar impulse can be seen in the deployment of pronouns in the *French Revolution*. The words “we”, “us,” and “our” are equally likely to refer to the narrator, the aristocracy, the revolutionaries, the rioting women, the

⁴⁰ Loesberg does not acknowledge that it is Sauerteig and not Carlyle who is speaking here. I have not analyzed the precise significance of this distinction, but as it is important not to confuse the voice of the editor in *Sartor Resartus* with that of Teufelsdrökh or Carlyle, or the voice of Kierkegaard with that of his pseudonyms, I would hesitate to conflate Sauerteig with Carlyle.

⁴¹ Loesberg cites the following passage as an example of the use of a pronoun that combines seventeenth-century and nineteenth-century perspectives: “Within doors, down at the hill-foot in our Convent here, we are a peculiar people,—hardly conceivable in the Arkwright Corn-Law ages, of mere Spinning-Mills and Joe-Mantons!” (Loesberg 201; Carlyle, *Past and Present* 72). I would add what seems to me the even stranger mixture of perspectives and eras in the passage where the monk Jocelyn refers to himself with the phrase “Bozzy that I was” (105). In this quote, not only does the seventeenth-century monk compare himself to someone in a future century, he does so using the past tense, creating, to my mind, a truly dizzying interplay of time and perspective.

soldiers who refuse to fire on them, or all of France, just to name a few. In all cases, however, the plural pronoun invites readers to share in the perspectives of those involved in the Revolution, as well as the historian who is documenting it.⁴² At times, the English reader's presence is required for a passage to make sense at all, as in this passage where the narrator describes the "Anglomania" of pre-Revolutionary France: "Carriages and saddles; top-boots and redingotes, as we call riding-coats" (42). While some French citizens at this time were no doubt aware of the English origin of the word "redingote," the "we" in this passage seems to be a sort of French-English hybrid. This inclusive use of pronouns is, I would argue, a rhetorical manifestation of the conflation of the Revolution with English politics in phrases such as this one: "What a work, O Earth and Heavens, what a work! Battles and bloodshed, September Massacres, Bridges of Lodi, retreats of Moscow, Waterloos, Peterloos, Tenpound Franchises, Tarbarrels and Guillotines;—and from this present date, if one might prophesy, some two centuries of it still to fight!" (113). Here, Carlyle's narrator emphasizes the continuity between the events of the Revolution and key political events in England several years later by alternating them in a single list.

In addition to the fluid, inclusive pronouns, many aspects of *The French Revolution* are geared toward bringing the action before the readers' eyes. Two features of the work's narrative

⁴² Interestingly, the pronoun "I" is rarely used in this text, except in quotations. However, it is significant for my argument regarding the pronouns' function of pulling the reader into the text, that the "we" deployed throughout the work breaks apart into an "I" and "thou" in the book's final paragraph, as the narrator makes his farewell: "And so here, O Reader, has the time come for us two to part. Toilsome was our journeying together; not without offence; but it is done. To me thou wert as a beloved shade, the disembodied or not yet embodied spirit of a Brother. To thee I was but as a Voice. Yet was our relation a kind of sacred one; doubt not that!" (775). It is notable that Carlyle refers to this relationship as "sacred," given his tendency to associate totality with the religious realm. This emphasizes that his efforts to overcome the separation of present reader with past event are aligned with an effort to create transcendence through narrative form.

structure that have been widely noted by critics are its predominant use of present tense, and its vivid visual descriptions. One of the most notable discussions of the Carlyle's use of the present tense was written by Vernon Lee in 1904. Lee observes that one key function of this tense is to eradicate cause and effect. "For," she asserts, "we cannot feel any causal connection without projecting ourselves into the past or the future. . . . The present, in this case, never becomes a past, the thing which we can keep and look into; it simply drops off into limbo, vanishes entirely" (65).⁴³ Maintaining the narrative in the present tense, then, is one way that Carlyle's historical method works to elide the determinism of cause and effect that Carlyle rejected in "On History." Closely related to this use of the present is Carlyle's tendency to appeal to his readers' visual sense. Nineteenth-century readers pointed to this as one of the book's greatest merits, calling it "a great pictorial representation" (Oliphant 64) and a "historic vision" (Channing 59), and praising "the vividness with which it brings the actors and the scenes described before the reader's eye" (Rev. of *The French Revolution*, *Monthly Review* 51). However, some cautioned that despite (or because of) its vividness, the book was nevertheless virtually unreadable. The *Literary Gazette* scoffed that it was "nothing like a history of the events which took place" (Rev. of *The French Revolution* 50), while the *Monthly Review* noted a common opinion that the events treated in this work would be "unintelligible to any one who has not previously made himself acquainted, and minutely too, with the records of the period here embraced" (Rev. of *The French Revolution* 51). These comments bear witness to the fact that what Carlyle's approach to history in this work did not fit into an established genre, and was not something readers could

⁴³ Similarly, Brantlinger notes that Carlyle's use of the present tense in this work "is part of a stylistic structure that places us inside events and that also makes them seem contemporary and on-going" (62–3). In the same vein, John D. Rosenberg writes: "Carlyle's avoidance of the past tense removes the distancing frame from the historical picture and thrusts both narrator and reader into the field of action" (58).

passively take in. Rather than deliver a neatly wrapped history lesson, *The French Revolution* attempts to make readers a part of historical events. Carlyle was no doubt pleased with the *American Biblical Repository*'s observation that "it will wake up the mind to new and more vivid impressions of the scenes of that age of confusion than any history we have read" (Rev. of *The French Revolution* 63).

Carlyle's widespread deployment of the inclusive, first-person plural pronoun, his use of the present tense, and his vivid pictorial descriptions can all be seen as part of his efforts, not just to reflect the fragmentation of historical epochs, but to resist a linear, progressive, deterministic historiography. Instead, these aspects of the text speak to Carlyle's attempts to produce what Loesberg calls an "atemporal history," a history that could point to an atemporal truth while still eliciting the temporal engagement of active interpretation.⁴⁴ This analysis helps illustrate the extent of the fragmentation to which Carlyle bears witness. Not only did he perceive it in social and economic structures, not only in aesthetic form and in the dynamics of the consciousness, but in a fundamental schism in space and time. The "truth" of this era, as expressed in Carlyle's work, has shifted out of reach, beyond the temporality of human existence, or what Carlyle's narrator calls "this Time-World of ours." Carlyle perceived this shift with remarkable perspicacity, but he also deplored it and sought to overcome it. His gestures toward totality in *The French Revolution* can be seen as attempts to "still" the flux of time, while his efforts to engage the reader's interpretation can be seen as attempts to remain authentically within the temporal realm. So, in addition to embodying the loss of totality in its rhetorical form, narrating the event that ushered in the various schisms causing this loss, and attempting to develop a new

⁴⁴ John D. Rosenberg also speaks to this phenomenon when he writes, "rooted in time, the narrative works to annihilate time" (73).

form of history to negotiate it, *The French Revolution* also exhibits Carlyle's own ambivalent relationship to the new condition. This ambivalence leads, as I show in this chapter's final section, to Carlyle's rather unsettling invocation of Napoleon as the figure who will put an end to the revolutionary violence and chaos.

2.5 THE PARADOX OF THE HERO

Attentive readers of *The French Revolution* will notice a change in the narrator's attitude—toward the Revolution in general and the Sansculottes in particular—throughout the course of the book.⁴⁵ In the first stages of recounting the Revolution, the narrator's sympathies appear to be entirely on the side of the suffering poor. His portrayal of the old regime is anything but flattering, as he calls it “A superannuated System of Society, decrepit with toils . . . and with thefts and brawls, named glorious-victories; and with profligacies, sensualities, and on the whole with dotage and senility” (113). In its degeneration, this system has caused misery and starvation on a massive scale, while hypocritically cloaking itself in the trappings of tradition,

⁴⁵ While several critics have examined Carlyle's treatment of revolutionaries, few have noted a systematic shift in the course of the narrative. Brantlinger, for example, asserts that Sansculottism “seems to have Carlyle's unambiguous approval” (70) and notes that the Girondins receive much worse treatment than the Jacobins (67). John D. Rosenberg suggests that Carlyle's language in describing the Sansculottes varies from “normally ambivalent” to sometimes hostile, but he does not posit a systematic shift in these variations (83). McCallum, Morelli, and Spear discuss Carlyle's treatment of lower class women, but again, present a fairly static view of this treatment.

The only critic I have found who discusses the shift in the narrator's treatment of the revolutionaries at any length is Albert LaValley, especially pp 160–61. John D. Rosenberg suggests that “the narrator grows in compassion as the events he witnesses gain in ferocity,” but while this may be true in a general sense, as in the passage Rosenberg cites (“Pity them all, for it went hard with them all” (87) it does not acknowledge the fact that Carlyle's treatment of the Sansculottes becomes increasingly intolerant.

resulting in: “So many millions of persons, all gyved, and nigh strangled, with formulas; whose Life nevertheless, at least the digestion and hunger of it, was real enough!” (189). The twenty-five millions that make up the “masses,” Carlyle reminds us, are individuals with the capacity to suffer: “Masses indeed . . . the masses consist all of units. Every unit of whom has his own heart and sorrows; stands covered there with his own skin, and if you prick him, he will bleed” (29). The grievances that motivate the insurrection are, these passages imply, entirely justified, and at first the narrator seems to share the revolutionaries’ excitement. He enthusiastically hails “The extreme-unction day of Feudalism!” (113), and states with apparent satisfaction that “Feudalism is struck dead; not on parchment only, and by ink; but in very fact, by fire; say, by self-combustion” (195). Furthermore, Carlyle’s repeated associations of the revolutionaries with nature and reality validate their actions in a way that has even more resonance when considered in light of Carlyle’s lamentations of his own society’s mechanical lifelessness. “How does the young Reality, young Sansculottism thrive?” the narrator asks, then explains with a flattering comparison: “The attentive observer can answer: it thrives bravely; putting forth new buds; expanding the old buds into leaves, into boughs” (260). As discussed above, Carlyle’s sympathies continue to lie with the poor as the revolutionary movement splits into class divisions. His disapproval shifts from the monarchy to the middle class, as he berates the Girondin for advocating a constitution that protects their own mercenary interests and fails to represent the needs of the underprivileged. Like the feudal despots before them, they have seized control of the means of representation without heeding the sense of duty that goes along with it.

Given such apparent sympathy for the poor, it might be expected that Carlyle would press for a political system that would give them greater voice—i.e., a democracy. It would seem

logical that one way to close the gap between meaning and representation would be to create a system in which those who embody the “truth” of the Revolution obtain the means of expressing it. Carlyle’s repeated insistence on the lower classes’ inarticulateness, however, combined with his increasing tendency to describe their voice as bestial and threatening as the Revolution wears on, suggests that empowering the poor with access to representation is not his preferred solution. In the beginning, he urges his reader to “behold how this multitudinous French People so long simmering and buzzing in eager expectancy, begins heaping and shaping itself into organic groups. Which organic groups, again, hold smaller organic grouplets: the inarticulate buzzing becomes articulate speaking and acting” (103). Once the Girondin have taken over the representational activity, however, the excited buzzing of the underrepresented becomes increasingly savage and inhuman, an “unwonted wild tumult howling all round” (529), a “carnivorous Rabble now howling round” (722), and an “inarticulate growling hum, which growls ever the deeper even by hearing itself growl, not without sharp yelping, here and there” (544). His early insistence on sympathy for the individuals who feel the prickings of hunger loses its humanizing force when it is repeated in this passage: “This huge mooncalf of Sansculottism, staggering about, as young calves do, is not mockable only, and soft like another calf; but terrible too, if you prick it; and, through its hideous nostrils, blows fire!” (546). In addition to being unable to speak coherently, the revolutionaries are incapable of listening to reason, as Carlyle’s narrator observes: “To insurrection you cannot speak; neither can it, hydra-headed, hear” (497). As the howling, shrieking, and growling of the lower classes shows no signs of letting up, and if anything only promises to increase, the patience of Carlyle’s narrator finally breaks, as he snaps: “O shrieking beloved brother blockheads of Mankind, let us close those wide mouths of ours; let us cease shrieking, and begin considering!” (545).

The narrator's call for silence from the "blockheads" occurs at around the same point in the narrative that he begins to admit the necessity for the revolution to be quashed by outside force. "Twenty-five millions of men," he acknowledges, "suddenly stripped bare of their *modi*, and dancing them down in that manner, are a terrible thing to govern!" (563). Pondering the coming end of the revolutionary government in the military order of Napoleon's regime, the narrator asks rhetorically whether the violence and destruction will continue "till something that *has* order arise, strong enough to bind it into subjection again? Which something, we may further conjecture, will not be a Formula, with philosophical propositions and forensic eloquence; but a Reality, probably with a sword in its hand!" (601). By the end of the book, the narrator's musings on the dialectics of order and chaos have shifted to urgent exhortations to order: "For Arrangement is indispensable to man; Arrangement, were it grounded only on that old primary Evangel of Force, with Sceptre in the shape of Hammer! Be there method, be there order, cry all men; were it that of the Drill-sergeant! More tolerable is the drilled Bayonet-rank, than that undrilled Guillotine, incalculable as the wind." (746). Similarly: "And so Vacancy and general Abolition having come for this France, what can Anarchy do more? Let there be Order, were it under the Soldier's Sword" (769). So, while Carlyle opposes the oppression and exploitation to which the lower classes had for centuries been subjected, he doesn't view them as capable of organization or coherent speech, and in the end he just wants them to shut up. Instead of listening to what the lower classes have to say, he seems to advocate a system in which the upper classes will feed them so they won't have to speak at all. Carlyle's account of the poor suggests that, to his ears, their voice will never be anything other than an irritating dissonance that, eventually, needs to be silenced by force.

For a reader who has followed Carlyle through this history of the revolution, it may not be difficult to understand why he ends by welcoming martial law. This history contains some of the most vivid descriptions of revolutionary atrocities that have ever been written. Clearly, Carlyle was deeply troubled by the violence perpetrated by the Sansculottes, and sanctioned by the Jacobin leaders and when this violence showed no promise of letting up, either of its own accord or through its newly-created governing institutions he concluded that the whole thing needed to be stopped by force. There is something unsatisfying about this conclusion, however. After taking so many pains to show that the sufferings of the poor were genuinely egregious, and furthermore that their voices were the only instance of pure, complete truth in a society that had become corrupt, it's a bit startling to find that the solution is just to silence them at sword point. Second, with so much of Carlyle's narrative mode geared toward indeterminacy, in history and in the telling of history, to end the book by embracing the notion of a totalitarian regime seems at odds with these ideals.

I would like to suggest that some light can be shed on this contradiction by returning to the parallels between Kierkegaard's treatment of irony and Carlyle's portrayal of the Revolution. In a previous section, I sought to demonstrate how Carlyle's account of the Revolution in terms of a social shift from immanence to fragmentation, and as cleansing self-reflection, corresponds to the model of irony presented by Schlegel and especially by Kierkegaard. In seeking a way out of the destructive momentum of the Revolution, Carlyle also calls to mind Kierkegaard's injunctions that irony must be temporary in order to be effective.

A major problem for Kierkegaard, and one that he spent much of his work attempting to address, is the question of how, exactly, to halt the process of irony once it gets started. He recommends "plunging into the ocean of irony, not in order to remain there, of course, but

healthily, gladly, lightly to clad oneself again,” but neglects to explain exactly how this re-cladding will take place (*Concept of Irony* 339). Given that the movement of irony is infinite, as Kierkegaard repeatedly insists, if one could simply hop out of the irony bath it wouldn’t truly be irony. In later works like *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), Kierkegaard invokes the sphere of religious faith as an antidote to ironic reflection. In this work, his narrator Johannes Climacus explains that “reflection can only be halted by a leap” (105), but insists that because this “leap” is completely internal, and cannot be made external via any representational form. Climacus cannot tell his readers how the leap occurs because to do so would be to represent the unrepresentable. He even argues that “when anyone proposes to communicate such truth directly, he proves his stupidity; and if anyone else demands this of him, he too shows that he is stupid” (73). This “solution” can seem like a kind of *deus ex machina*, because it doesn’t address the problem of irony on its own terms. The fact that he has to reach outside the realm of language in order to escape the problem of irony only seems to emphasize irony’s inescapable power.

Carlyle’s mapping of irony onto the social landscape of the Revolution illustrates the problems of irony in a more urgent light than Kierkegaard’s metaphysical approach. When he writes hopefully in the first half of the book that “in all vital Chaos there is new Order shaping itself free,” he is describing civil war (327). The “chaos” here, the continual destruction of all new beginnings, is not an abstract speculation but concrete devastation and death. By the end of the book the hopeful possibilities of chaos have become self-destruction in the most gruesome sense of “cannibalism,” as the narrator describes the human tannery at Meudon and the making of Perukes from the scalps of aristocratic women (712). Given such horrors, it is perhaps not surprising that Carlyle welcomes the coming of Napoleon’s “whiff of grapeshot.”

Despite their differences, I would like to suggest that both Carlyle and Kierkegaard were dealing with essentially the same problem of indeterminacy, and how to find foundations for existence in an era characterized by the breakup of traditional structures of belief, of government, of social relations, of knowledge, and of aesthetic form. For Kierkegaard, the problem was how to find a basis for morality and religious faith in the face of self-reflection, while for Carlyle, it was how to deal with the multitude of voices that had suddenly broken through the iron barricades of feudalism. Comparing Carlyle with Kierkegaard reveals the extent to which Carlyle's work participates in the larger metaphysical questions that are usually associated with continental philosophy at this time. The degree to which Carlyle intertwines these more abstract issues with the social and historical changes ushered in by the French Revolution gives a more concrete basis to their origins. For him, irony is overtly a function of social, political, and economic conditions. Furthermore, Carlyle's distaste for the blight of self-consciousness suggests that for him the problems of irony could not be solved through internal means, as this would only intensify the inwardness and focus on the self that he associated with social alienation. So, while Kierkegaard's solution is entirely internal, Carlyle's quest to quell the madness of the Revolution lies in the political realm, as he advocates a return to authoritarian order.

Carlyle's narrator's laudatory view of Napoleon's military dictatorship prefigures Carlyle's subsequent focus on the hero as the means of returning order and meaning to society. In fact, "On Heroes and Hero Worship" (1840) was Carlyle's next published work, and this emphasis on the "hero" has led some critics to view him rather too narrowly a reactionary proto-

fascist.⁴⁶ Carlyle's yen for a grounding authority also embodies a truism about irony: once one has recognized a crack in the totality, one is already outside of it, and a push for totality becomes an imposition of totalitarianism—which is not the same thing at all. However, in the context of *The French Revolution*, Carlyle's welcoming of Napoleon must itself be taken ironically, since it was written from the perspective of the mid-nineteenth century, after the Napoleonic Wars. Carlyle knew that Napoleon himself had proved anything but the savior of France—he had in fact perpetrated gruesome violence of his own, and his regime had proved only temporary. So the exhausted narrator of *The French Revolution* who welcomes order at any cost becomes the victim of retrospective irony, as his voice remains only one among the many.

The French Revolution: A History not only provides a remarkable example of romantic irony in a major Victorian text, it also vividly illustrates how such irony emerged from a network of historical, social, and ontological upheavals. Furthermore, it offers an instructive example of one early Victorian's struggle with problems of indeterminacy that have come to characterize modernity. In Carlyle's work, one can trace a complicated, multifaceted response to the

⁴⁶ William McGovern was one of the first to express this view when he wrote in 1941 that Carlyle's works "appear to be little more than a prelude to Hitler" (200). That this connection persists into the present is suggested by McCallum's assertion: "It is indeed difficult to escape the impression that Carlyle's coldly despotic and inhuman image of the bronze-lipped artillery officer is somehow closely related to the aestheticized politics of fascism" (164n.122). I would agree that it is difficult to escape this impression when reading Carlyle's writings on the hero from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. I would caution, though, that it's important not to casually impose a twentieth-century fascist ideology anachronistically on Carlyle's views.

My view of this issue is more in line with LaValley's, when he writes: "In the social proposals of the later Carlyle, and in both Nietzsche and Lawrence as well, the problem of alienation finds expression in a kind of totalitarian and fascistic program and personal pose. While the word 'fascism' is unfortunately charged with the recent horrors of Nazism, from whose programs it is obviously important to disassociate these authors, we cannot overlook, gloss away, or 'reinterpret' the common syndrome that lurks behind such proposals, the common note of desperation, the extremity of solution to an extreme sense of deprivation" (11).

emergence of irony, as he perceived it, sought to negotiate with it, and ultimately tried to shut it down. That his efforts led him to embrace the forceful violence of the military hero perhaps bears witness to the immensity of the threat he perceived irony to be. Nevertheless, his clear-sighted articulation of the social and semiotic fragmentation he perceived demonstrates that he neither oversimplified nor resisted engagement with these issues.

3.0 “THIS TRANSCENDENT MORAL LIFE”: IRONY, ALLEGORY, AND ETHICS IN *ROMOLA*

Morality without a sense for paradox is vulgar.

—Friedrich Schlegel, *Ideas* fragment 76

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Since its earliest reception, critics of George Eliot’s fourth novel, *Romola* (1863), have noted a tension in the work between realism and something other than realism. At the time of its publication, readers decried the encyclopedic detail that, they felt, sucked the life out of the characters and the events, a view that was eventually crystallized in Henry James’ assessment that the novel “does not positively seem to live” (675).⁴⁷ This criticism may have some merit regarding the novel’s meticulous detailing of Florentine architecture and the sometimes stilted

⁴⁷ An unsigned review of *Romola* in *The Athenaeum* observed that the amount of research Eliot must have done for the novel was impressive, but “neither the politics nor the people are really alive,—they are only well dried, preserved and coloured, and the reader feels as though he were ungrateful, in not being better entertained by all that has cost so much time and labour” (109). Similarly, a review in *The Westminster Review* noted: “The historical background, too, somewhat oppresses the human interest of the tale, and in its ultimate impression affects us like a mediaeval painted window, in which the action has to be disentangled from the blaze of colour and overwhelming accessories” (112).

vernacular of its inhabitants, such as when Nello the barber greets a visitor to his shop by saying: “‘Good day, Messer Domenico,’ . . . ‘You come as opportunely as cheese on macaroni’” (86).

However, it is doubtful that such charges were ever intended for passages like the following, describing Romola’s sojourn in the plague-stricken village: “Many legends were afterwards told in that valley about the blessed Lady who came over the sea, but they were legends by which all who heard might know that in times gone by a woman had done beautiful loving deeds there, rescuing those who were ready to perish” (649). Indeed, more recent critics have focused on the episode of Romola’s second flight from Florence as a point where the novel leaves its realistic ambitions behind and becomes something else entirely.⁴⁸

In keeping with this line of criticism, I would like to suggest that the duality of narrative modes in *Romola* helps to mark an intersection of ethics and representation within an ironic milieu, that links Eliot’s novel to the other works studied in this project. In this chapter I first show how *Romola* demonstrates a dynamic of irony in the depiction of competing religions and philosophies of fifteenth-century Florence, in the novel’s pervasive preoccupation with the gap between real and ideal, and in its emphasis on the inadequacy of any established doctrine to account for the characters’ experiences or guide their conduct. Next, I show how Eliot’s negotiation of this ironic play helps shape the content and the fabric of her text. I suggest that Kierkegaard’s notion of repetition can help illuminate the novel’s contention that moral character

⁴⁸ Shona Elizabeth Simpson calls this village “a strange blank space” in contrast to the carefully detailed Florence. J. B. Bullen calls this part of the novel “its most puzzling, symbolic, and, in terms of the allegory, the most difficult stage” (433). George Levine observes “It is at this point that the inescapably symbolic sequence begins. When Romola drifts away, the book can no longer be regarded as a novel in the traditional sense. . . . [Romola enters] a setting that is frankly unrealistic” (90).

is formed through habits of action and thought. Furthermore, Tito's death and Romola's transcendence into an allegorical mode at the end of the novel suggest that as repetition brings the real and the ideal closer together, it exceeds the limits of realist representation. Drawing on Paul de Man's discussion of irony and allegory, I argue that the novel's shift into allegory keeps it in the temporal mode that is fundamental to irony. Finally, I examine how the novel negotiates the question of ethics in a temporal, rather than spatial, mode. I suggest that the different fates of Tito and Romola are in part a function of the characters' different relations to time, and to conflict. While Tito continually seeks to cut himself loose from the past and live from moment to unconnected moment, Romola is deeply engaged with her past experiences. And, while Tito tries to avoid conflict, Romola constantly clashes with those around her. The fact that the narrative rewards these qualities in Romola by turning her into a sainted figure in the end suggests that, for Eliot, morality in an age of shifting foundations depends upon both a dialectic encounter with difference, and the actively synthesizing powers of the consciousness.

3.2 IRONY IN *ROMOLA*

3.2.1 Irony and the Novel

The genre of the novel has often been associated with irony. This association is perhaps best epitomized in Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, but it is also evident in the frequency with which scholars of irony point to *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*, and *Jacques the Fatalist* as prime

examples of the ironic mode.⁴⁹ Writers associated with German romanticism advocated the novel as the literary form best suited to express and embody irony as well. In *Critical Fragment* 26, for example, Schlegel declares: “novels are the Socratic dialogues of our time” (*Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde* 145). Furthermore, in Schlegel’s “Letter about the Novel,” the character Antonio defends the “colourful hodgepodge of sickly wit” found in Jean Paul Richter’s novels on the grounds that “such grotesques and confessions are the only romantic productions of our unromantic age” (288). Devoid of the rigid formal rules traditionally required of poetry, the form of the novel was flexible enough to include devices like the self-reflexive narrator, nonlinear plot, and eclectic literary modes, that helped convey the central romantic tenet that representational totality is impossible.

The novels discussed by theorists of irony, however, are usually considered to be in a different tradition than the “realism” with which Eliot is associated.⁵⁰ If the goal of realism, as many have understood it, is to create an accurate depiction of the world, or, in twentieth-century critical parlance, to bring word and referent together as closely as possible, then this genre seems to strive for precisely the totality that romanticism and its heirs believe to be impossible. Such a view, I would argue, is evident in Roland Barthes’ influential distinction between “readerly” and

⁴⁹ Lillian Furst devotes two chapters to Diderot and Sterne, respectively, as exemplars of romantic irony in the novel genre. See also Peter Conrad’s *Shandyism*, William Egginton’s “Cervantes, Romantic Irony, and the Making of Reality,” and Anne K. Mellor’s introduction to *English Romantic Irony*. In “Letter about the Novel,” Schlegel’s character Antonio asserts that Sterne’s and Diderot’s novels may be only “arabesques,” but that arabesques “are the only romantic products of nature in our age” (294).

⁵⁰ Robert Alter’s *Partial Magic*, for example, opposes the tradition of the “self-conscious novel” to the tradition of novels that express “verisimilar representation of moral situations in their social contexts” (ix).

“writerly” texts,⁵¹ and it appears to inform Paul de Man’s casual mention of the “regression from the eighteenth-century ironic novel, based on what Friedrich Schlegel called ‘*Parekbase*,’ to nineteenth-century realism” (222).⁵² In the discussion of *Romola* that follows, I hope to complicate such assumptions by demonstrating how, despite its realist aspects, this novel figures a loss of totality in both its content and form. Furthermore, I hope to show that the narrative neither wholly rejects nor enthusiastically embraces this loss but, rather, recognizes it as a phenomenon to be investigated and negotiated.

3.2.2 Irony and Historical Moment

Romola is set during a time of political and metaphysical upheaval. As the proem tell us, Renaissance Florence is characterized by its “strange web of belief and unbelief; of Epicurean levity and fetishistic dread; of pedantic impossible ethics uttered by rote, and crude passions acted out with childish impulsiveness; of inclination towards a self-indulgent paganism, and inevitable subjection to that human conscience which, in the unrest of new growth, was filling the air with strange prophecies and presentiments” (48). The novel opens with the death of Piero de’ Medici, which marked the end of the Medici family’s rule in Florence, and the ascension of Girolamo Savonarola; it ends with Savonarola’s fall from power and his execution. During this time span, political factions vied with each other for power, as Savonarola’s popular party struggled to maintain its seat, the Medicean oligarchy sought to regain control, and the Arrabati

⁵¹ See Barthes, *S/Z*.

⁵² “Parekbase” is German for “parabasis,” or, in ancient Greek drama, the moment when the chorus addresses the audience directly to express the views of the poet, outside the action of the play.

malcontents violently opposed both. As Tito explains to Romola, “There are three strong parties in the city, all ready to fly at each other’s throats” (351). In this turbulent period, any group holding power is subject to violent attack by its opponents, and adherents to any party are liable to lose their lives if another party gains control—as shown in the fate of Romola’s godfather, Bernardo del Nero.

In addition to its political turmoil, Florence is fraught with the clash of Christian and pagan traditions that Pater was later to highlight as an essential feature of the Renaissance.⁵³ As contemporary reviewer R. H. Hutton observed, the novel highlights “the strife between the keen definite knowledge of the reviving Greek learning, and the turbid visionary mysticism of the reviving Dominican piety” (201). This clash is made manifest in the fanaticism of Savonarola and Romola’s brother Dino, in opposition to the classical scholarship of Bardo, Tito, and Baldassare. These two factions are shown to be completely incompatible in the novel, and members of each heap ridicule and contempt upon the other, as when Bardo describes with disdain Dino’s decision to join the Dominican order: “my son . . . left me and all liberal pursuits that he might lash himself and howl at midnight with besotted friars” (99). Similarly, “with a

⁵³ In his essay on “Winckelmann,” for example, Pater asserts that during the Renaissance, “When the actual relics of the antique were restored to the world, in the view of the Christian ascetic it was as if an ancient plague-pit had been opened” (145). Similarly, in “Pico della Mirandola,” he asserts: “no account of the Renaissance can be complete without some notice of the attempt made by certain Italian scholars of the fifteenth century to reconcile Christianity with the religion of Greece” (20).

David Carroll observes that Pater’s essay on Winckelmann “reads at times like an extended commentary on *Romola*,” (177), and he places Tito Melema and Denys L’Auxerrois in the same “lineage” of characters “where an amoral classical past bursts into the modern present with shattering results” (170). Pater has been quoted as saying that of all Eliot’s works, *Romola* was his favorite (Wright 179). David Delaura has taken this remark as a starting point for his argument that Pater’s conception of the Renaissance was highly influenced by Eliot’s novel. In a recent dissertation, Francesca Muscau has compared the construction of the Renaissance in Eliot and Pater.

slight touch of scorn on his lip” (76), Tito dismisses the splendor of the San Giovanni Cathedral: “I have a shuddering sense of what there is inside—hideous smoked Madonnas; fleshless saints in mosaic, staring down in idiotic astonishment and rebuke from the apse; skin-clad skeletons hanging on crosses, or stuck all over with arrows, or stretched on gridirons; women and monks with heads aside in perpetual lamentation” (77). On the other side, Dino recalls with horror the classical education he received under his father’s tutelage, as he describes to Romola “the stifling poison-breath of sin that was hot and thick around me, and threatened to steal over my senses like besotting wine. . . . for worldly ambitions and fleshly lusts made all the substance of the poetry and history he wanted me to bend my eyes on continually” (211). Thus, Renaissance Florence lacks both political and metaphysical stability. For every position that establishes itself there is another that undermines it through destructive reflection, resulting in the stubborn fanaticism of monks like Dino or the detached cynicism that eventually develops in Tito and his historical double who appears throughout the narrative, Niccolò Machiavelli.

The fragmentation of the novel’s historical moment is echoed in the thoughts of Tito and Romola at various points in the narrative. Tito, with habitual disdain, considers society to be “a mere tangle of anomalous traditions and opinions” (168) and Romola reaches a similar conclusion in a moment of acute despair: “The vision of any great purpose . . . was utterly eclipsed for her now by the sense of a confusion in human things which made all effort a mere dragging at tangled threads” (586). Despite its associations with Tito’s license and Romola’s misery, however, fragmentation sometimes has a more positive cast in the novel. This is best emblemized by the studio of Piero di Cosimo, where a mixed variety of objects is thrown together in an incongruous jumble:

in one corner, amidst a confused heap of carved marble fragments and rusty armour, tufts of long grass and dark feathery fennel had made their way All about the walls hung pen and oil sketches of fantastic sea-monsters; dances of satyrs and maenads; Saint Margaret's resurrection out of the devouring dragon; Madonnas with the supernal light upon them; studies of plants and grotesque heads; and on irregular rough shelves a few books were scattered among great drooping bunches of corn, bullocks' horns, pieces of dried honeycomb, stones with patches of rare-coloured lichen, skulls and bones, peacocks' feathers, and large birds' wings. (245)

Here, the eclectic collection of religious and scholarly objects emphasizes the age's disparity of influences. However, the fact that this confused heap is located in an artist's studio suggests that the discord can be a fertile ground for creation as well. The association of chaos with creation recalls Schlegel's elevation of "chaos" as a creative force, as in *Ideas* fragment 171: "Confusion is chaotic only when it can give rise to a new world" (*Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde* 247). Further underscoring this alignment, the narrator of *Romola* remarks in a later chapter that in this society there is "a mixed condition of things which is the sign, not of hopeless confusion, but of struggling order" (560). Although *Romola* demonstrates that pain and anxiety can result from being caught in an instable crosscurrent of epistemological forces, these passages acknowledge the creative and regenerative benefits that can emerge from such disorder.

3.2.3 Irony and the Reflective Consciousness

Reflecting the lack of totality suggested in *Romola's* historical setting, and receiving deeper scrutiny from Eliot, there is a corresponding fragmentation in the internal world of the novel's

main characters. This often emerges as an acute awareness of a discrepancy between internal experience and the external forms available for expressing them.

The discrepancy between inner and outer is a source of great anxiety for many of the novel's characters. This is manifest most literally in Bardo, the blind old scholar who forbids Romola from making the slightest alteration to the arrangement of his library because he is "perpetually seeking the assurance that the outward fact continued to correspond with the image which lived to the minutest detail in his mind" (95). On a broader scale, Bardo laments that circumstances will prevent him from achieving his ideal as a famous and respected scholar, blaming his son's conversion to Christianity as the main cause:

"Yes," he went on, "with my son to aid me, I might have had my due share in the triumph of this century: the names of the Bardi, father and son, might have been held reverently on the lips of scholars in the ages to come; . . . For why is a young man like Poliziano (who was not yet born when I was already held worthy to maintain a discussion with Thomas of Sarzana) to have a glorious memory as a commentator on the Pandects—why is Ficino, whose Latin is an offence to me, and who wanders purblind among the superstitious fancies that marked the decline at once of art, literature, and philosophy, to descend to posterity as the very high priest of Platonism, while I, who am more than their equal, have not effected anything but scattered work, which will be appropriated by other men?" (98)

Bardo's final years are thus marked by a painful anxiety that the world within him will not match up to the world without.

Similarly, Baldassarre laments the shattered dream of joint scholarly labors with his stepson Tito. The intergenerational betrayal in both cases suggests that the tradition of filial piety that both fathers had assumed they could rely on is another principle that has eroded in the new Florence.⁵⁴ Baldassarre must face the further trial, however, of bearing within his faltering memory a narrative of the past that is at odds with what Tito has constructed in Florence. Having no way of proving his story of Tito's betrayal, Baldassarre is rejected first as a madman, then as a criminal. This soul-shattering experience causes Baldassarre's longing for the connection of inner and outer to become concentrated in his obsession with revenge on his traitorous stepson, a murder that, ironically enough, will bring the inner and outer together for only a brief moment before it extinguishes forever.

It is Romola, of course, who suffers the most from the disparity between her internal and external worlds. Her search for a unifying existential framework begins with a sharp pang, as she struggles to make sense of the disparity between her brother's moribund frailty and Tito's glowing vibrancy:

What thought could reconcile that worn anguish in her brother's face—that straining after something invisible—with this satisfied strength and beauty, and make it intelligible that they belonged to the same world? Or was there never any reconciling of them, but only a blind worship of clashing deities, first in mad joy and then in wailing? Romola for the first time felt this questioning need like a sudden uneasy dizziness and want of something to grasp; it was an experience

⁵⁴ See David Carroll for an excellent analysis of how the interaction between fathers and sons in *Romola* relates to the larger epistemological forces at play in this novel (173–77).

hardly longer than a sigh, for the eager theorizing of ages is compressed, as in a seed, in the momentary want of a single mind. (238)

This first stirring of a desire for unity is the beginning of a search that informs the period of Romola's life covered by the novel, as she passes from her father's patriarchal classicism, to Tito's egoistic hedonism, to Savonarola's fanatical Christian asceticism without finding any of them to be an adequate expression for her internal life. In keeping with this pervasive existential struggle, Romola has a fastidious repugnance for false appearances. When she puts on the clothing of a nun the first time she plans to flee Florence, she feels "an uneasiness in her religious disguise, a shame at this studied concealment" (401). Later in the novel, the extent of her despair is marked by her lack of concern regarding this same disguise: "Why should she care about wearing one badge more than another, or about being called by her own name? She despaired of finding any consistent duty belonging to that name" (586). This last passage suggests that for Romola, the discrepancy between inner and outer extends so deeply as to call into question the unity of her own identity.

Like Romola, Tito experiences a gap between his internal and external life, but instead of being pained by this he manages to turn it to his own advantage, becoming a master of duplicity as the narrative progresses. This development is foreshadowed early in the novel, in Piero di Cosimo's observation that it is precisely Tito's cheerful, attractive face that would make him a perfect subject for a painting of Sinon's deception of Priam: "A perfect traitor should have a face which vice can write no marks on—lips that will lie with a dimpled smile—eyes of such agate-like brightness and depth that no infamy can dull them—cheeks that will rise from a murder and not look haggard. . . . he has a face that would make him the more perfect traitor if he had the heart of one" (87). Unlike Romola, whose face is nearly always consistent with her internal

state, Tito's face is an inscrutable mirror, a "cipher" that "attracted or repelled according to the mental attitude of the observer" (153). Tito himself first becomes conscious of this discrepancy when he decides not to go in search of his stepfather, who has been sold as a slave. This decision causes "the crisis of the first serious struggle his facile, good-humoured nature had known" (147). Even though he talks himself into acting selfishly, this is "a choice which he would have been ashamed to avow to others," and he feels twinges of "the inward shame, the reflex of that outward law which the great heart of mankind makes for every individual man" (151). This seed of deception finds fertile soil in Tito's psyche, and soon after the narrator informs us that "Tito's talent for concealment was fast being developed into something less neutral" (166). By the end of the novel, Tito has deceived and betrayed just about everyone in his personal and professional lives, becoming an adulterer and a triple-agent spy.

Despite the fact that self-consciousness enables Tito's treachery and drives Romola to the brink of despair, the novel presents it as preferable to living in a state of naïve immediacy with one's surroundings. "It would be paradise to us all," the narrator intones, "if eager thought, the strong angel with the implacable brow, had not long since closed the gates" (161). A more sustained development of the idea is suggested by the character of Tessa, the simple-minded dairymaid who becomes Tito's mistress. With her trusting blue eyes that fill with tears at the slightest disappointment, her "baby features," and her relentlessly "childlike" air, Tessa seems to manifest precisely the sort of immediate, unreflective consciousness that philosophers like Kierkegaard and Lukács describe. Furthermore, Tessa's pastoral associations recall the mapping of immediate consciousness onto the culture of ancient Greece, also found in Kierkegaard and Lukács. This parallel is emphasized by Tito's observation upon first meeting Tessa: "Here is a little contadina who might inspire a better idyl than Lorenzo de' Medici's 'Nencia da Barberino,'

that Nello's friends rave about" (158). A rural peasant who seems to get herself into a crisis every time she comes to town, Tessa is integrally affiliated with the bucolic world of green grass, pear trees, and flocks of goats, and she possesses none of the "urbanity" that Schlegel associates with irony.

If Tessa embodies the idea of an unreflective consciousness, however, she does so without the atmosphere of nostalgia that characterizes Lukács's account of lost totality. While Tessa is a sympathetic character, it is clear that the narrator does not idealize her innocent naïveté. Tessa's essential helplessness makes her completely unfit for any sort of worldly interaction; she is constantly losing her way in the labyrinthine streets of Florence and in need of rescue from unruly city crowds. In fact, the narrative's emphasis on Tessa's simple-mindedness is so extreme that it often borders on outright condescension. For example, when Tito falls asleep with his head in her lap, "Tessa sat quiet as a dove on its nest, just venturing, when he was fast asleep, to touch the wonderful dark curls that fell backward from his ear. She was too happy to go to sleep—too happy to think that Tito would wake up and that then he would leave her, and she must go home" (161). In paraphrasing Tessa's thoughts, the narrator adopts a simplistic and childish tone that sharply diverges from the worldly-wise attitude of the sentence which follows, in which the narrator reflects: "It takes very little water to make a perfect pool for a tiny fish, where it will find its world and paradise all in one, and never have a presentiment of the dry bank" (161). In this way the novel positions both the narrator's and the reader's perspective as more astute and advanced than Tessa's. While there may be a tinge of regret for the loss of paradise that "eager thought" has destroyed, the implication is that the only way to regain such an idyllic existence is to be the ignorant little fish in the little pool that Tessa is.

In its eclectic setting, its questioning of established theory, and its presentation of fragmented consciousness, *Romola* expresses a deep engagement with irony in its metaphysical and romantic sense. However, it does not seem to incorporate irony into its form, at least not in the manner that theorists of irony like Schlegel, Kierkegaard, and Lukács have insisted upon. Unlike the examples of Sterne, or Diderot, or even Eliot's own *Middlemarch* (1871–72), *Romola* does not contain self-reflexive intrusions that call its own representational practice into question. Instead, this novel is presented in a primarily linear, straightforward, earnest manner that, if such theorists are correct in their assertions, would seem to contradict its own metaphysical insights.

3.2.4 Irony and Narrative Form

If *Romola* does not demonstrate formal irony in the ways we have come to expect from the genre of the ironic novel, I would argue that in its use of repetition and allegory it nevertheless maintains its connection to the temporal mode. This is evident in the two episodes where Romola flees Florence, ready to leave her life behind and plunge into an undefined future. I will suggest that, insofar as these episodes are figured as moments of infinite possibility and disengagement, they embody irony, especially as figured by Kierkegaard. Second, I submit that the second egression marks a notable shift in the narrative that demonstrates an allegorical more than a realist mode, and I will draw on de Man's work to suggest that allegory fulfills the same temporal function as irony. In *Romola*, this temporality is emphasized by the fact that the second episode is a repetition of the first, fulfilling de Man's often-quoted observation that allegory is "repetition in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term" (207).

The first time Romola leaves Florence, her departure is an attempt to escape the bond of marriage that Tito's betrayal has made meaningless to her. Up until now, Romola has felt that

“there could be no law for her but the law of her affections,” and since those affections have been impaired, she sees no reason why she should stay with her husband (391). As she begins to remove her wedding ring, however, she is seized by the impression that “she was somehow violently rendering her life in two: a presentiment that the strong impulse which had seemed to exclude doubt and make her path clear might after all be blindness, and that there was something in human bonds which must prevent them from being broken with the breaking of illusions” (391). The simple state of immediate existence has been shattered by Tito’s callousness, and, although Romola feels that by leaving Tito she is continuing to follow the same “law” she always has, the fact that she has become aware of doing so suggests that she is already moving toward a more self-reflective mode of consciousness.

Continuing with her plans in a state of tearful anguish, she takes off the ring, writes Tito a bitter farewell letter, disguises herself as a nun, and makes her escape. She has nothing but the vaguest notion of where she might go, having formed a rather hazy plan to seek out “the most learned woman in the world, Cassandra Fedeles, at Venice, and ask her how an instructed woman could support herself in a lonely life there” (393). As a runaway young wife in a strange city, Romola’s options would have been quite limited, but she does not think this through; her impulse is only to “sever herself from the man she loved no longer” (392). The emptiness of Romola’s position at this point is underscored in the scene where she stops to rest on the road out of Florence:

When Romola sat down on the stone under the cypress, all things conspired to give her the sense of freedom and solitude: her escape from the accustomed walls and streets; the widening distance from her husband, who was by this time riding towards Siena, while every hour would take her farther on the opposite way; the

morning stillness; the great dip of ground on the roadside making a gulf between her and the somber calm of the mountains. For the first time in her life she felt alone in the presence of the earth and sky, with no human presence interposing and making a law for her. (428)

Romola's position in this scene recalls Kierkegaard's description of the ironic subject in *The Concept of Irony* (1841). A consciousness becomes ironic when it becomes alienated from the forms of existence offered by society, and these have lost their "validity." The ironic consciousness becomes disengaged and reflective, and stands apart from the "given actuality" of the age. "With irony," Kierkegaard explains, "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" (279). This negative freedom stems from the fact that in the condition of irony, all things are possible, because no path has yet been chosen: "It is this very freedom, this hovering, which gives the ironist a certain enthusiasm, for he becomes intoxicated as it were by the infinity of possibles; and should he require consolation for all that has passed away, then let him take refuge in the enormous reserves of the possible" (279). This seems a remarkably apt description of the disillusioned Romola; severing ties and journeying toward an undefined collection of possibilities, her exhilaration is vacuous, formed by relinquished hope and worldly disengagement.

After *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard's formulation of irony became more of an individual, internal phenomenon than a matter of world-historical change. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), his pseudonym Johannes Climacus posits irony as forming the border between the aesthetic and the ethical sphere (448). In the aesthetic sphere, Climacus

explains, the consciousness lives only in the moment, committing itself to nothing beyond immediate pleasure. With the inception of irony, the subject becomes aware of all the possible choices to be made, and the transition to the ethical occurs when the subject decides to leave the realm of possibility and commit to a particular path of existence. So it is with Romola. Having removed herself from the structure of her life in Florence, Romola experiences a moment of heady freedom as she stands between the bonds she has left behind and the possibilities of an undefined future; she is “free and alone” (401). Like Judge Wilhelm’s description of the aesthete of *Either/Or* (1843), Romola is at this point “hovering above” herself as a disinterested observer. Also congruent with the Kierkegaardian model, Romola is only allowed to remain in this state for brief moment before she is pulled back into her worldly existence via her chance encounter with the magnetic Savonarola, who recognizes her as he happens to be passing by.

“[Y]ou are flying from your debts,” the charismatic priest reproaches her, “the debt of a Florentine woman; the debt of a wife. You are turning your back on the lot that has been appointed for you—you are going to choose another. But can man or woman choose duties? No more than they can choose their birthplace or their father and mother. My daughter, you are fleeing from the presence of God into the wilderness” (430). As Romola begins to listen in spite of herself, the narrator describes a monumental change occurring within her. Although Savonarola speaks of duty to her husband and her community, and admonishes her not to break her marriage vows, she seems less persuaded by his reason than transformed by the encounter in some more fundamental way. By the end of the interview she has fallen to her knees, completely overcome: “While Savonarola spoke with growing intensity, his arms tightly folded before him still, as they had been from the first, but his face alight as from an inward flame, Romola felt herself surrounded and possessed by the glow of his passionate faith. The chill doubts all melted

away; she was subdued by the sense of something unspeakably great to which she was being called by a strong being who roused a new strength within herself” (436). Even by the middle of the conversation Romola feels that a permanent alteration has occurred within her; she finds herself “trembling under a sudden impression of the wide distance between her present and her past self. What a length of road she had traveled through since she first took that crucifix from the Frate’s hands!” (432–33). The numerous references to heat and flame in this scene contribute to the impression that Romola’s consciousness has in effect been melted down and forged into something new.

The transformation is emphasized by the fact that after her return to Florence she begins to conduct her life quite differently, performing good works and helping the Florentines through the plague. The fact that these works of charity are not described with nearly the same degree of detail or intensity as her encounter with Savonarola, however, suggests that the narrative renders her inner transformation more significant than her external behavior. In this sense, the novel shares both Kant’s and Kierkegaard’s characterization of the moral as involving a state of consciousness rather than the specific actions performed. The remarkable parallels between this episode in *Romola* and Kierkegaard’s discussion of irony and the ethical suggest that, while Eliot might not have used the same terminology, she conceived of the relation between reflection, consciousness, and morality in much the same way as the Danish philosopher. Romola’s flight from Florence takes her just far enough beyond the bounds of the city to give her a chance to reflect; then she experiences merely the briefest brush with an undefined sea of possibility before she experiences an inner transformation that takes her back into the life she has left, with a new mode of consciousness.

The next time Romola leaves the city, her state of mind may more accurately be described as despair than desperation. Her relations with her husband has gone from bad to worse, her kindly godfather has been executed, and Savonarola faces impending trial by fire. The “works of womanly sympathy” in which she had immersed herself since her first decision to remain in Florence are no longer enough to sustain her through the sorrows of her life in the city. Now, “A new rebellion had risen within her, a new despair. . . . What force was there to create for her that supremely hallowed motive which men call duty, but which can have no inward constraining existence save through some form of believing love?” (586). Standing on the Mediterranean shore, disillusioned by all human relationships and laws, she decides to leave once more. She buys a small boat from a local fisherman and puts out to sea, with no attempt whatsoever to guide her movements. The narrative description of this episode emphasizes Romola’s longing to be free from the world altogether: “And so she lay, with the soft night air breathing on her while she glided on the water and watched the deepening quiet of the sky. She was alone now: she had freed herself from all claims, she had freed herself even from that burden of choice which presses with heavier and heavier weight when claims have loosed their guiding hold” (590). Romola has relinquished all attempts to control her own life, all “teleological relation to her activity,” to adapt Climacus’s phrase.

When Romola wakes the next morning to find herself in an unfamiliar, plague-stricken village, she enters a part of the narrative that hardly seems to belong to the same novel. For the next two chapters she devotes herself entirely to helping the sick villagers. Although this recalls her humanitarian work with the Florentines, this time her work is cast in tones that are distinctly religious. Even the village priest mistakes her for a Madonna when he first sees her, and after several months the villagers still regard her as a holy figure:

Every day the Padre and Jacopo and the small flock of surviving villagers paid their visit to this cottage to see the blessed lady, and to bring her of their best as an offering—honey, fresh cakes, eggs, and polenta. It was a sight they could none of them forget, a sight they all told of in their old age—how the sweet and sainted lady with her fair face, her golden hair, and her brown eyes that had a blessing in them, lay weary with her labours after she had been sent over the sea to help them in their extremity. (649)

The religious discourse that surrounds Romola during this event is overtly associated with the change in her inner state. Immediately upon her entry into the village, “She felt no burden of choice on her now, no longing for death” (645). The period is described as a religious rebirth: “The experience was like a new baptism to Romola. In Florence the simpler relations of the human being to his fellow-men had been complicated for her with all the special ties of marriage, the State, and religious discipleship, and when these had disappointed her trust, the shock seemed to have shaken her aloof from life and stunned her sympathy” (650). Through her work in the village, however, she seems to transcend the ethical ties of duty and human relation, and in the process becomes something holy. Even upon her return to Florence a tinge of the sacred clings to her. The depraved Tito having met his fate at last, she sets up house with the other unattached women of the story and takes on the role of matriarch of the predominantly feminine household. Although she has aged, we are told in the epilogue, “there was a placidity in Romola’s face which had never belonged to it in youth” (673), and she continues to inspire “awed wonder” in those around her (675). Evidently, her experience in the anonymous village has caused a significant and permanent change.

In the village episode, there is much to suggest that the novel has shifted into the mode of allegory. Unlike the other settings, which are described with the meticulously detailed historical precision characteristic of Eliot's novels, both the name and location of this village remain uncertain, suggesting that their significance does not lie in material specifics. The pastoral nature of the village, the calamity of the plague, and Romola's Madonna-like status, combined with a significant change in the narrative tone, all suggest allegory as well. Romola is no longer an individual young woman struggling with her personal relationships; she has become the stuff of legend, a "blessed Lady" with a capital "L." Furthermore, the temporal specificity has dropped from this section, as the scope of time suddenly expands to include future generations, something which does not even happen in the novel's epilogue. For these reasons this episode stands in strong contrast with the rest of the novel. If in the first episode Romola turns away from irony, in the second she seems to have plunged headlong into allegory, from which she emerges permanently altered, if indeed she emerges at all.

The sudden appearance of allegory in a novel better known for its meticulous, realistic detail begs further attention. The fact that the shift in narrative mode corresponds with Romola's ethical transformation recalls Climacus's assertion that such a condition of consciousness cannot be expressed in direct terms. As a double-layered literary mode whose surface meaning only stands in for something else, allegory would seem to fit Climacus's call for indirect communication.

In "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1983) de Man compares the figural devices of symbol, irony, and allegory in terms of their relation to the modern predicament of lost totality and the corresponding instability of the subject. He argues that the symbol, particularly as theorized in English romanticism, represents the attempt to overcome this instability by positing the

possibility of “expression of unity between the representative and the semantic function of language” (189). For those, such as Coleridge, who view the symbol as an instance of organic connection between the particular and the absolute, it functions as an antidote to alienation. De Man casts this concept in terms of time and space: because consciousness is essentially temporal, and therefore constantly in flux, it seeks to borrow stability from the spatial (and therefore unchanging) nature of the symbol. Irony and allegory, by contrast, are both essentially temporal and so would seem to provide a much more authentic representation of consciousness. The difference, according to de Man, is that irony’s temporality occurs via the synchronic mode of reflection, as in Schlegel’s mirror analogy, while allegory consists of repetition: “The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition* (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority” (207). Both irony and allegory, however, are alike in their deferral of meaning. Because reflection and repetition both continually point toward another position, they refuse the stability promised by the symbol. As de Man explains, “Allegory and irony are thus linked in their common discovery of a truly temporal predicament. They are also linked in their common demystification of an organic world postulated in a symbolic mode of analogical correspondences or in a mimetic mode of representation in which fiction and reality could coincide” (222). For this reason, de Man asserts, “the knowledge derived from both modes is essentially the same” (226).

De Man’s description of allegory as repetition in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term requires further explanation. Repetition is a key category in Kierkegaard’s thought. It is treated most directly in *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est* (1843), in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), and, of course, in the work titled *Repetition* (1843). In *Johannes Climacus*, the

narrator explains that repetition is a concept that paradoxically mediates the contradiction between the real and the ideal. As Climacus explains, in order for two sequential events to be considered repetitive, they need to be referred to a common principle that lies outside the temporal realm of actuality. Without this reference to a unifying idea, the events are, as Constantin Constantius observes in *Repetition*, just “empty, meaningless noise” (149). There can be no repetition in the realm of the real, Climacus explains, because even “If everything in the world were completely identical, in reality there would be no repetition, because reality is only in the moment” (171). Nor can there be repetition in the sphere of the ideal, because it is a timeless realm: “In ideality alone there is no repetition, the idea is and remains the same, and as such it cannot be repeated” (171). So, repetition can only occur “when ideality and reality touch each other” (171). This assertion raises the question of how these two realms can connect. Climacus claims this happens in the realm of consciousness: “Ideality and reality therefore collide—in what medium? In time? That is indeed an impossibility. In eternity? That is indeed an impossibility. In what, then? In consciousness—there is the contradiction” (171). As suggested by de Man’s reference to repetition as the key that links allegory and irony, repetition emphasizes the temporality of existence. By definition, something cannot be repeated without referring both to something present and something prior; it is a paradoxical expression of presence and nonpresence simultaneously.

In light of this insight it seems especially significant that the narrative of Romola’s second flight out of Florence emphasizes its repetitious relation to the first: “Again she had fled from Florence, and this time no arresting voice had called her back. Again she wore the grey religious dress; and this time, in her heart-sickness, she did not care that it was a disguise” (586). Not only the narrator, but Romola herself, seems to be struck by the juxtaposition of similarities

and differences between the two episodes. De Man's characterization of allegory as the repetition of non-coincident signs suggests that this episode's emphasis on repetition is highly significant for the novel's structure. By recalling the first episode so overtly, the description of the second directs the narrative backward into a circular motion that overlays, and contradicts, the primarily linear direction of the narrative. By virtue of being repeated, the first episode is drawn into the allegorical structure implied by the second; it becomes the anterior sign that is gestured toward but never repeated exactly. If the essence of allegory is temporal repetition, then the repetitious linking of these two episodes enacts the structure of allegory itself.

If Romola the heroine drifts off to a religious state that offers an unrepresentable escape from the temporality of consciousness, *Romola* the novel does not necessarily follow her. Instead, the presence of allegory creates a sort of feedback loop that keeps the narrative in what de Man would consider the authentically temporal realm. Therefore, while the form of *Romola* does not signal the presence of irony by the usual rhetorical features of the self-conscious novel, its use of allegory serves to express the same type of awareness.

3.3 REPETITION AND THE ETHICAL IN *ROMOLA*

A question that preoccupies both *Romola* and *Romola* is how to formulate an ethics in an age of shifting foundations, and an ironic representational medium. This is a question that has concerned theorists and philosophers since irony became a metaphysical concept and not just a rhetorical term. Because irony is inherently a temporal category, for Kierkegaard the question becomes, how to formulate an ethics in a temporal mode. While an ethics based on a specified code of conduct, such as the Ten Commandments, is a static model, an ethics of temporality

would lack such a stable, unchanging touchstone. Kierkegaard sought the solution in the category of repetition, which became closely intertwined with his understanding of ethical existence. In this section I will examine the ethical aspect of Kierkegaardian repetition, and I will suggest that *Romola* adopts a similar understanding of ethics, in its emphasis on character-building through repeated, habitual choice, and its treatment of Tito's and Romola's relations to time.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Virgilius Haufniensis, asserts that time has not been properly dealt with in the history of philosophy. "If time is correctly defined as an infinite succession," he argues, "it most likely is also defined as the present, the past, and the future" (85). However, because time is an infinite movement, these divisions are artificial. "If in the infinite succession of time a foothold could be found, i.e., a present, which was the dividing point, the division would be quite correct. However, precisely because every moment as well as the sum of the moments, is a process (a passing by), no moment is a present, and accordingly there is in time neither present, nor past, nor future" (85). Any attempt to divide time into discrete, thinkable chunks involves an egression from the temporal mode into the spatial: "If it is claimed that this division can be maintained, it is because the moment is *spatialized*, but thereby the infinite succession comes to a halt, it is because representation is introduced that allows time to be represented instead of being thought" (85).

Haufniensis sees this spatializing tendency in both Greek philosophy and in the Hegelian dialectic. In Greek philosophy, he argues, "time and eternity were conceived equally abstractly, because the concept of temporality was lacking" (88). Instead of engaging with time as an unceasing forward process, Greek philosophy focused on the category of recollection, which related the present to an irrecoverable past eternity. "For the Greeks," says Haufniensis, "the

eternal lies behind as the past that can only be entered backwards. However, the eternal thought of as the past is an altogether abstract concept, whether the eternal is further defined philosophically (a philosophical dying away) or historically” (90). The category of recollection thus defines the present in terms of a loss, and directs the attention backward in the attempt to recover what was lost, rather than facing time in its authentically forward movement.

Kierkegaard felt that Hegel’s model of mediation contained a similar backward-facing thrust, an opinion expressed most directly by Judge Wilhelm, the narrator of the second volume of *Either/Or*. Because mediation can only function with terms that have already come into being, it is not equipped to work within the present. As Wilhelm asserts: “Philosophy⁵⁵ turns towards the past, towards the whole enacted history of the world, it shows how the discrete factors are fused in a higher unity, it mediates and mediates” (174). As in Greek philosophy, this backward-facing perspective involves a spatializing element, by turning time into artificially circumscribed units. Wilhelm explains: “The time in which the philosopher lives is not absolute time, it is itself a relative moment Our age therefore will in turn appear to a subsequent age as a discrete factor, and a philosopher of a subsequent age will in turn mediate our age, and so forth” (177). In Wilhelm’s view, the Hegelian dialectic is just as deficient as Greek philosophy in the ability to deal with time as perpetual motion forward.

In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Constantin Constantius presents the category of repetition as a preferable alternative to both recollection and mediation. Whereas recollection begins with a loss, and turns its gaze backward in an attempt to recover what it has lost, repetition is a continual coming into being: “Repetition and recollection are the same movement,

⁵⁵ When Kierkegaard uses the word “philosophy,” he nearly always means the Hegelian philosophy with which much of the philosophical community of contemporary Denmark was occupied during this time.

except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward” (131). Repetition links the present with both the past and the future, “for that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new” (149). But, because it is pure motion, it creates this link without spatializing. As Haufniensis explains, the present cannot have any content, because it is only an instant: “The present, however, is not a concept of time, except precisely as something infinitely contentless, which again is the infinite vanishing” (86). The category of repetition does not try to force content on the present, and so, unlike Greek recollection and Hegelian mediation, it does not resist but instead embraces, the human experience of time.

Repetition is a key concept for Kierkegaard’s ethics, and it is closely tied to the category of choice. One problem with the Hegelian dialectic, as expressed by Judge Wilhelm in *Either/Or*, is that by progressing smoothly from state to state, it keeps all of existence in the realm of necessity, thus providing no space for ethical choice. This is both because its orientation toward the past provides no guidance for how we ought to act in the future (175), and because it subsumes everything under the inevitable law of thesis, antithesis, synthesis. As Wilhelm explains: “in our age as the order of the day we have the disgusting sight of young men who are able to mediate Christianity and paganism, are able to play with the titanic forces of history, and are unable to tell a plain man what he has to do in life, and who do not know any better what they themselves have to do” (175). “If we concede mediation,” he maintains, “then there is no absolute choice, and if there is nothing of that sort, then there is no absolute either/or” (177). Repetition keeps existence in the realm of freedom because each instant is undetermined by the previous one, and as such, it allows for choice.

An ontology of pure temporality raises the problem of continuity: if the present can have no content at all because it is in constant flux, then how can anything be the same from one moment to the next? And perhaps a more urgent question is, what can maintain the integrity of the individual consciousness? For Kierkegaard, or at least for Wilhelm, the answer lies in the power of choice. We must choose over and over again to be ourselves, or risk the dissolution of consciousness. Otherwise, the personality will become “volatilized,” as he admonishes his friend A, the aesthete of *Either/Or* volume 1: “The choice itself is decisive for the content of the personality, through the choice the personality immerses itself in the thing chosen, and when it does not choose it withers away in consumption” (167). This helps illuminate why Wilhelm insists it is so imperative for A to emerge from the realm of aesthetic immediacy and begin to live deliberately: “You are constantly hovering above yourself, but the either, the fine sublimate into which you are volatilized, is the nullity of despair” (203). Again, the substance of the choice does not matter so much as the act of choosing: “That which is prominent in my either/or is the ethical. It is therefore not yet a question of the choice of something in particular, it is not a question of the reality of the thing chosen, but of the reality of the act of choice. . . . it is to an apprehension of this I would strive to arouse you” (180–81). In an environment ruled by repetition, however, the choice must be made over and over again, from one moment to the next; this is the only way to remain in pure temporality. For the man who chooses himself in freedom, not in necessity, “the very instant he chooses himself he is in motion; concrete as his self is, he has nevertheless chosen himself in accordance with his possibility, . . . but he can remain in his freedom only by constantly realizing it. He, therefore, who has chosen himself is *eo ipso* active” (236).

The categories of repetition, temporality, choice, and ethics are closely linked in the moral framework of *Romola* as well. The most clearly-articulated moral dynamic in the novel is the rule that, with every moral decision we make, we increase the likelihood of making the same sort of choice in the future: “Our lives make a moral tradition for our individual selves,” the narrator explains, “as the life of mankind at large makes a moral tradition for the race; and to have once acted noble seems a reason why we should always be noble” (420). While this notion of a “moral tradition” pervades the book, it is Tito who experiences its machinations most thoroughly. When Tito makes his monumental decision not to go in search of his father, he sets in motion the pattern that will determine his life throughout the rest of the novel: “He had made it impossible that he should not from henceforth desire it to be the truth that his father was dead; impossible that he should not be tempted to baseness rather than that the precise facts of his conduct should not remain for ever concealed” (151). For, the narrator reminds us, the “contaminating effect of deeds often lies less in the commission than in the consequent adjustment of our desires” (151). This prescient maxim comes to fruition later in the book, when Tito encounters his father in public, and reflexively refuses to acknowledge him, denouncing him harshly as a “madman.” Tito is unsettled by his own unthinking actions: “he seemed to have spoken without any preconception: the words had leaped forth like a sudden birth that had been begotten and nourished in the darkness” (287). But the narrator attributes this act to the fact that “Tito was experiencing that inexorable law of human souls, that we prepare ourselves for sudden deeds by the reiterated choice of good or evil which gradually determines character” (287). In this way, through his repeated ignoble choices, Tito goes from being a virtual blank slate to a highly skilled deceiver who “had sold himself to evil” (170).

The imagery Eliot uses to describe this phenomenon is notable for the way it combines the temporal and the spatial. As a result of Tito's choice not to seek his father, his character undergoes a structural change: "the little rills of selfishness had united and made a channel, so that they could never again meet with the same resistance" (151). This image emphasizes both the lasting effect of Tito's bad decisions, and the fluidity of the mental processes that are always in a state of becoming.

Romola experiences this law too, though her choices are of a different sort. Repeatedly forced to submit to wills other than her own, Romola develops a habit of self-restraint. When she discovers Tito's involvement in a plan to ambush Savonarola, instead of rebelling outright at this fresh betrayal, she remains calm, with "memories of impulse subdued" (483). Later, she obeys a summons from the prophetic Camilla Rucellai, disregarding her distaste for fanatic prophecy because "it had become so thoroughly her habit to reject her impulsive choice, and to obey passively the guidance of outward claims" (524). Furthermore, after two years as a disciple of Savonarola, during which time she devotes herself to works of charity, we are told that "enthusiasm of fellowship has become Romola's habit" (456). Unlike Tito's "little rills of selfishness," her psyche is informed with "old, deep channels of use and affection" (651).

The fact that the model of character-building as a result of repeated choices is so often discussed in moral terms suggests that this is an integral part of Eliot's ethical model, at least in *Romola*. That this model is not enough to guarantee moral goodness, however, is emphasized by Tito's descent into wickedness. Despite its narrative innovations, *Romola* contains vestiges of a more traditional novel form, in which vice is punished and virtue rewarded. Tito's depravity is met with the poetic justice of being murdered by his own stepfather, while Romola's goodness is rewarded by the trappings of sainted matriarch. This raises the question of what, exactly, Tito

and Romola have done differently to deserve their respective fates. I would like to suggest that one answer lies in their different relations to time.

While Romola is constantly conscious of the past, Tito seeks to live only in the present moment. At first, this is part of his charm for Romola. When they first meet, “It seemed like a wreath of spring, dropped suddenly in Romola’s young but wintry life, which had inherited nothing but memories—memories of a dead mother, of a lost brother, of a blind father’s happier time” (105). Tito holds out the promise of “delicious languors” in a timeless, Arcadian bliss: “‘I should like to see you under that southern sun, lying among the flowers, subdued into mere enjoyment, while I bent over you and touched the lute and sang to you some little unconscious strain that seemed all one with the light and the warmth. You have never known that happiness of the nymphs, my Romola.’” To this idyllic vision Romola answers: “‘No; but I have dreamed of it often since you came’” (249).

As the novel wears on, however, Tito’s insistence on living in the present becomes pathological. It is this quality that enables his betrayal of his stepfather, leads to his first real tryst with Tessa, and feeds his ability to be duplicitous. All these come into play in chapter ten, which opens with Tito sauntering down the streets of Florence on his way to meet his newly betrothed Romola, three weeks after having decided to invest his money rather than use it to pay his stepfather’s ransom: “On the day of San Giovanni it was already three weeks ago that Tito had handed his florins to Cennini, and we have seen that as we set out towards the Via de’ Bardi he showed all the outward signs of a mind at ease. How should it be otherwise? He never jarred with what was immediately around him, and his nature was too joyous, too unapprehensive, for the hidden and the distant to grasp him in the shape of a dread” (153). When he meets Tessa, and rescues her from being the butt of a carnival joke, he becomes easily drawn in by her

childish charms, and finds himself unable to leave her: “It was very hard upon him: he was a long way off the Via de’ Bardi, and very near to Tessa” (160). Later, his seductive promises to Romola of a timeless paradise are transformed into his cruel injunction that she forget the past while he sells off her deceased father’s cherished library to the highest bidders.

Romola, on the other hand, is fully, painfully conscious of the past. For her, memories hang “like the weight of broken wings that could never be lifted” (590). As she prepares to leave Tito after his sale of the library, she is “carried, by a sudden wave of memory, back again into the time of perfect trust, and felt again the presence of the husband whose love made the world as fresh and wonderful to her as to a little child that sits in stillness among the sunny flowers” (389). After taking off the ring, “That heart-cutting comparison of the present with the past urged itself upon Romola till it even transformed itself into wretched sensations: she seemed benumbed to everything but inward throbbings” (393). After she has been called back from her flight by Savonarola, she is struck by the “widening distance between her present and past self” (433). Even at the end of her journey, as she lies resting and contemplating her experiences in the farmhouse of the anonymous village, she thinks in terms of both past and future: “In those silent wintry hours when Romola lay resting from her weariness, her mind, traveling back over the past, and gazing across the undefined distance of the future, saw all objects from a new position And then the past arose with a fresh appeal to her” (650).

Romola’s constant awareness of the past as she seeks a way to achieve peace of mind in the present is closely connected to her ethical development. It is the pain caused by the discrepancy of past and present that motivates her to flee her life with Tito, and then re-enter it with a new state of awareness. This enables her to develop a greater understanding of others: “But the persistent presence of these memories, linking themselves in her imagination with her

actual lot, gave her a glimpse of understanding into the lives which had before lain utterly aloof from her sympathy—the lives of the men and women who were led by such inward images and voices” (395). By the end of the novel she has developed “a sympathetic nature keenly alive to the possible experience of others,” and this allows her to take the morally mature step of caring for Tessa and the children after Tito’s death. Tito, by contrast, despite the fact that “the constant bent of his mind was toward propitiation” (382), lacks the ability to see things from anyone else’s point of view: “His conduct did not look ugly to himself, and his imagination did not suffice to show him exactly how it would look to Romola” (352).

The relationship to temporality is a crucial part of the ethics of *Romola*. Despite its realist aspects, this novel is geared toward an epistemology of temporality, as I sought to show in part one. Within this approach, the way to the ethical lies in a paradoxical fusion of reiterated ethical choices, and the function of the consciousness in linking the continually vanishing moments of the present. The notion in *Romola* that we choose ourselves anew with every moral decision, yet by doing so we create a continuity of character, helps to illustrate Johannes Climacus’s assertion that “consciousness is contradiction” (*Johannes Climacus* 168). In Kierkegaard’s model of radical temporality, there is no guarantee that life will not “dissolve[] into an empty, meaningless noise” (*Repetition* 149). The only thing that can prevent this dissolution is the deliberate will of the consciousness to play the role of mediator by accepting what Romola calls the “burden of choice” (589). In the realm of temporality, reiterated choice becomes the only glue that can hold things together, so choosing is the most ethical act possible. This suggests that the reason Romola navigates the moral terrain so successfully is that she feels the full weight of this burden, and takes her choices seriously.

Through these parallels with Kierkegaard I have sought to show that *Romola*'s ironic aspects privilege the temporal over the spatial. The sympathetic depiction of the heroine's misery as she struggles to find her footing in this shifting milieu recognizes the difficulties of living ethically in an ironic age. However, the fact that the novel refuses to reject this struggle suggests that even the pain of uncertainty is preferable to the "impossible ethics learned by rote" that characterized an earlier era.

In her fourth and most problematic novel, the one that she claimed to have begun as a young woman and finished as an old woman (Cross 255), Eliot thus engages with some of the major questions of post-Kantian philosophy. That she chose to do so in the medium of fiction suggests a congruence with romantic philosophers of irony in their insistence on the limitations of philosophical language. The language of fiction allows her to gesture, to illustrate, and to turn the narrative back on itself to perform its own interrogation of both the realist mode and a spatial ontology. Like Carlyle, she perceives the loss of totality and the metaphysical difficulties that come with it. Where Carlyle sought an external solution in the force of the hero, however, Eliot turns her efforts inward. In this way she avoids the overt contradiction that takes over Carlyle's *French Revolution*, and instead transfers the contradiction to the individual consciousness.

4.0 “THROUGH THE EYE AND EAR”: IRONY AND *EKPHRASIS* IN “DENYS L’AUXERROIS”

Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written.

—Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum* fragment 24

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In *Li Amitiez de Ami et Amile*, one of the “Two Early French Stories” examined in Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance* (1877), the protagonists are given two beautifully crafted cups on the occasion of their baptisms. These two cups, Pater notes, play an important role in the story: “They cross and recross very strangely in the narrative, serving the two heroes almost like living things, and with that well-known effect of a beautiful object, kept constantly before the eye in a story or poem, of keeping sensation well awake, and giving a certain air of refinement to all the scenes into which it enters” (6). This passage describes with admirable succinctness the phenomenon of *ekphrasis* in both its traditional and modern senses. In classical rhetoric the term *ekphrasis* means to describe something so vividly as to create *enargeia*, that is, to make the audience feel

as if the described object or event were actually present before their eyes.⁵⁶ In more recent Anglo-American critical theory the definition of *ekphrasis* has shifted from designating vivid description of any object or event, to description of visual artworks specifically.⁵⁷ Many recent critics have positioned *ekphrasis* as a site of tension between verbal and visual—hence temporal and spatial—modes of representation,⁵⁸ and many have suggested that the notion of *enargeia* indicates an attempt to transcend the signifier and present the signified in immediacy and totality.⁵⁹

Pater's remarks on the cups in *Li Amitez* would seem to support this view of *ekphrasis*: they evoke *enargeia* by being “kept constantly before the eyes” and “keeping sensation well

⁵⁶ In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle defines *enargeia* as “putting a thing before the eyes” and “putting things directly before the eyes of the audience” (3.11). In *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian discusses the rhetorical technique in which “the images of absent things are presented to the mind in such a way that we seem actually to see them with our eyes and have them physically present to us. . . . The result will be *enargeia*, what Cicero calls *illustratio* and *evidentia*, a quality which makes us seem not so much to be talking about something as exhibiting it. Emotions will ensue just as if we were present at the event itself” (6.2).

⁵⁷ Ruth Webb details this shift in the meaning of the term “*ekphrasis*” in “*Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern*.” The modern concept of *ekphrasis* is nicely exemplified in James A. W. Heffernan's influential definition: “*ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation*” (299, italics in original).

⁵⁸ One of the most influential works to define literature as a temporal mode and painting and sculpture as spatial is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766). Although Lessing was not the first to discuss verbal and visual arts in terms of time and space, W. J. T. Mitchell points out that this eighteenth-century philosopher's “originality was his systematic treatment of the space-time question, his reduction of the generic boundaries of the arts to this fundamental difference” (98).

⁵⁹ Some of the most salient works in this critical trend include: Svetlana Leontif Alpers, “*Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes*”; Michael Davidson, “*Ekphrasis and the Postmodern*,” James A. W. Heffernan, “*Ekphrasis and Representation*”; Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis*; Martine Lambert-Charbonnier, “*Poetics of Ekphrasis*”; Rosemary Lloyd, *Shimmering in a Transformed Light*; W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (especially chapter 5); and Wendy Steiner, *Pictures of Romance* (especially chapter 1).

awake.” And the rather uncanny role that the cups play in the story—they become “almost like living things”—seems to connect them with some sort of transcendental function. However, because this effect remains embedded within a text that Pater is analyzing and does not here become a feature of his own rhetorical approach, the *enargeia* of this *ekphrasis* remains a step removed from Pater’s readers. By placing this phenomenon in a text within a text, Pater sets it at a distance from his own readers, and, paradoxically, ekphrastic immediacy appears here as a mediated experience. This suggests a more complex relation between visual art and verbal representation than much contemporary critical discourse on *ekphrasis* seems equipped to account for. While Pater describes the cups as transcending the boundaries of the text in a manner that critics such as Murray Krieger would probably classify as naïve, the fact that this phenomenon is presented at a distance makes it difficult to attribute such naïveté to Pater’s own narrative point of view.

The passage on *Li Amitez* offers a snapshot of a trend that is developed at greater length in some of Pater’s other works, and is particularly evident in the fictional piece “Denys l’Auxerrois” (1886). In this “imaginary portrait,” art objects have a remarkable ability to conjure up the presence of the culture that created them, a phenomenon that gets progressively more powerful in the inner, framed layers of the story. In this chapter I argue that approaching the story of “Denys l’Auxerrois” through the lens of recent *ekphrasis* theory reveals a complex relation between fragmentation and totality, between presence and absence, and between form and content that more closely resembles the dynamic of irony than the allegedly more stable trope of *ekphrasis*. What I call the “*enargeia*” of the narrator’s vision not only offers an example of the imaginative, sensory response to art that Pater advocates in his model of art criticism, it is also rhetorically geared to incite such a response in Pater’s readers. The story’s emphasis on the

formal, subjective aspects of aesthetic experience is congruent with Pater's understanding of morality as a matter of building individual character through exposure to the beauty of art and nature. The connection Pater draws between aesthetics and ethics recalls Kant's moral theory in *Critique of Judgement* (1790), and it is significant that both authors turn to classical Greek terms in their attempts to articulate a relationship between the beautiful and the moral. Like Kant's introduction of the phrase *hypotyposis* at a crucial moment in his *Critique*, Pater's use of the phrase *metabasis eis allo genos* in *Plato and Platonism* (1893) does little more than simply translate what has already been stated. While this unproductive deployment of Greek translation may create an aporia in Kant's critical system, as critics like Paul de Man have argued, it is potentially less problematic in Pater because his extensive use of literary, aesthetic modes of writing offers a means of indirect expression. Pater offers a version of morality that is compatible with irony, similar in many ways to that asserted by Kierkegaard, and tracing the role of art objects in "Denys l'Auxerrois" helps to shed light on the connection between the ethical and the aesthetic that Pater develops throughout his work.

4.2 IRONY AND *EKPHRASIS*

Before I begin my discussion of Pater's work, it may be useful to outline some of the major issues at stake in recent *ekphrasis* theory, and to show how a recent critical trend has effectively placed *ekphrasis* and irony on opposite ends of the same set of metaphysical questions. Irony, according to critics like Paul de Man, enacts the temporal flux of existence through its dynamic of infinite reflection, and resists representational totality by continually deferring the complete correspondence of signifier and signified. By contrast, *ekphrasis* (as it

has been characterized by critics like Murray Krieger) seeks to escape the temporal flux of language (and existence) by borrowing from the stasis of the visual arts, and in doing so seeks to bypass the problems of verbal representation by bringing the signified fully into the presence of the reader's senses. By outlining the main points of this opposition I hope to demonstrate why a discussion of *ekphrasis* is relevant in a study of irony, and to show how the role of visual art objects in Pater's "Denys l'Auxerrois" troubles the critical opposition between irony and *ekphrasis*.

In his seminal essay on irony, allegory, and symbol, "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1983), de Man continues in the tradition of German romanticism by arguing that irony is as much an existential as a linguistic matter. As a condition of consciousness, irony emblemizes the notion that the self is in a constant state of change, hence essentially temporal. In defining subjectivity as a function of time, de Man implicitly recalls Kant's assertion that everything relating to the "inner sense" is presented in the form of time, not space.⁶⁰ De Man's repeated use of phrases like "authentically temporal destiny" and "authentically temporal predicament" emphasizes his alignment with this understanding of subjectivity. Irony, according to de Man, expresses both the temporal condition of the self, and the self's awareness of this condition. A consciousness becomes ironic when the self divides into a portion that is unreflective, and a portion that observes it. Immediately upon this doubling, however, a third portion breaks off to observe the observing portion, and so on, with self reflecting upon itself to infinity. "Irony," de Man explains, "engenders a temporal sequence of acts of consciousness which is endless. . . .

⁶⁰ See Kant's discussion of time and space in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), Part 1, Chapter 1, "Transcendental Aesthetic": "Time is nothing but the form of the inner sense, that is, of the intuition of ourselves and of our inner state. It cannot be a determination of outer appearances; it has to do neither with shape nor position, but with the relation of representations in our inner state" (77).

irony is not temporary (*vorläufig*) but repetitive, the recurrence of a self-escalating act of consciousness” (220). De Man defines this reflective process as temporal because it never stops—every point of view becomes immediately the object of another point of view. If this dynamic were halted, we would have an inauthentic picture of it; it would no longer be temporal and it would no longer be irony.

While irony may be an accurate expression of the essentially temporal nature of existence, it also carries dangerous implications for the stability of the subject. The self may be in a constant state of flux, but to realize this is to come face to face with the knowledge that it has no fixed identity. And a self without unity is tantamount to insanity:

The moment the innocence or authenticity of our sense of being in the world is put into question, a far from harmless process gets underway. It may start as a casual bit of play with a stray loose end of the fabric, but before long the entire texture of the self is unraveled and comes apart. . . . absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself. (215–16)

De Man’s discussion implies that we are faced with a paradoxical choice: either allow our consciousness to become authentically ironic and descend into insanity, or remain blind to the true state of affairs and delude ourselves into thinking we possess existential stability.

If irony is the trope that expresses our “truly temporal predicament,” according to de Man, then the impulse to evade this predicament finds expression in the symbol. The symbol is implicated in this evasion both because of its structure, which is inherently spatial rather than temporal, and because this structure provides a way, albeit illusory, for the self to become a part

of the totality of nature. Citing Coleridge and Gadamer as theorists of the symbol, de Man explains that this trope is synecdochical in structure; that is, it involves a part standing in for a whole. Because the part is conceived of as an extension of the whole, this trope allows for the expression of totality. And, because the part and the whole exist simultaneously, the mode of the symbol is spatial. As de Man explains, “In the world of the symbol it would be possible for the image to coincide with the substance, since the substance and its representation do not differ in their being but only in their extension: they are part and whole of the same set of categories. Their relationship is one of simultaneity, which, in truth, is spatial in kind, and in which the intervention of time is merely a matter of contingency” (207). De Man argues that this trope was valorized by romantic poets such as Wordsworth, who used it as a way to stabilize the temporal self by connecting it with totality of nature. He asserts: “The temptation exists, then, for the self to borrow, so to speak, the temporal stability that it lacks from nature, and to devise strategies by means of which nature is brought down to a human level while still escaping from ‘the unimaginable touch of time’” (197). The structure of the symbol seems to offer a way to solidify our place in the “metatemporal” stability of nature.

De Man thus divides rhetorical tropes into those that accurately convey the temporality of existence and those that seek to evade this temporality by imposing spatial form upon it. The latter grouping, which includes the symbol and mimetic representation (which he mentions but does not discuss in detail in this essay), he terms “mystified forms of language” because they enable the “tenacious self-mystification” of a consciousness that seeks to hide from the knowledge of its own instability (208, 226). The emphasis on the symbol in romantic poetry, and on mimesis in the realist novel, leads de Man to assert that “Wide areas of European literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appear as regressive with regards to the truths

that come to light in the last quarter of the eighteenth century” (208). This division between the spatial and the temporal is thus closely tied to an evaluative judgment that positions irony (and allegory), as more advanced and clear-sighted than the symbol and mimesis.

The critical discourse that has grown up around the trope of *ekphrasis* in recent decades places this figure within the same hierarchical framework of space and time, often with a value judgment that recalls de Man’s. Murray Krieger and other critics in this line of analysis argue that *ekphrasis* stems from an attempt to escape the essential temporality of language by borrowing from the spatial fixity of the visual arts, that it strives to attain representational totality, and that it is an attempt to make the represented object present to the senses of the reader through the effect of *enargeia*,

In Krieger’s work, *ekphrasis* bears a striking similarity to the symbol as de Man has characterized it. According to Krieger, the verbal representation of visual artworks serves to “interrupt the temporality of discourse, to freeze it during its indulgence in spatial exploration” (7). Wendy Steiner adopts a similar characterization when she refers to “the literary topos of *ekphrasis* in which a poem aspires to the atemporal ‘eternity’ of the stopped-action painting, or laments its inability to achieve it” (13–14). Working within the modern understanding of *ekphrasis* as description of visual artworks, Krieger adds that because visual art has already captured an image of nature in a static representation, it is particularly effective in halting language’s temporal flow. As he explains: “if [an author] would impose a brief sense of *being*, borrowed from the plastic arts, in the midst of his shifting world of verbal *becoming*, the already frozen pictorial representation would seem to be a preferred object” (8). Krieger argues that what he calls variously the “ekphrastic impulse,” the “ekphrastic principle,” and the “ekphrastic aspiration” stems, like de Man’s symbol, from the aspect of the human consciousness that craves

the security and fixity of the spatial (10). Both Krieger and Steiner cast the desire to escape the temporal flux, even if only for a moment, in terms of emotional longing. Steiner's poem "laments" that it can't stop moving, and Krieger asserts that *ekphrasis* arises from the impulse that "craves the spatial fix" (10).

For both de Man and Krieger, the drive toward the spatial is closely associated with a desire for totality. Because irony involves a continual series of deferrals, it can never be captured in a single concept. As de Man explains, "The act of irony, as we now understand it, reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality" (222). The spatial relations of the symbol, however, can enable the conception of a whole, since "the symbol is always a part of the totality that it represents" (191). The spatial nature of *ekphrasis*, according to critics in Krieger's line, also makes it a locus for the impulse toward totality. The association of *ekphrasis* with totality is overtly expressed in the work of Grant F. Scott and James A. W. Heffernan. Scott asserts that in the most famous classical examples of *ekphrasis*, such as Homer's description of Achilles' shield, "*ekphrasis* attempts to convey nothing less than the whole ancient world, from the immensity of the cosmos to the specific details of a shared local or mythological culture" (15). In an argument that recalls the theories of irony I have discussed above, Scott asserts that while the possibility of conveying such wholeness in an *ekphrastic* passage died out with the ancient world, the poetry of the romantic era sought to use *ekphrasis* as a vehicle to heal the historical and cultural breach between the modern and the ancient: "the challenge of romantic *ekphrasis*—if not to provide the artworks with the kind of totalizing cultural milieu enjoyed by the epic shields—is somehow to overcome the remoteness, the otherness, of the objects and recover for them even a partial context" (16). While most

associations of *ekphrasis* with the desire for totality agree with Krieger's view that language seeks to borrow stability from the visual arts, Heffernan argues that the totality of *ekphrasis* stems rather from language adding temporality to the static image. Heffernan explains:

the ekphrastic conversion of graphic art into narrative seems to restore the totality that is just fractionally represented—hence misrepresented—by graphic art; on the other hand, the Heraclitean flow of narrative overrides—and hence misrepresents—the reality of what can be experienced in a single instant, or what might be experienced forever if, as Kenneth Burke suggests, we could move beyond the process of becoming into the eternal present of pure being. (307)

Despite Heffernan's departure from Krieger's model, however, he still views *ekphrasis* as the site of an attempt to create a unity of space and time. Furthermore, as the subjunctive mood of this passage suggests, Heffernan would agree that the existential wholeness attempted in the union of the visual and the verbal remains illusory.

Closely related to the desire for totality that *ekphrasis* expresses, according to these critics, there is an urge to overcome the distancing effect of the verbal medium and bring the represented object directly to the senses of the reader. Krieger, for example, argues that language's spatial impulse is closely tied to the desire to become what he calls a "natural sign." That is, it seeks to attain a motivated, nonarbitrary relation to its referent in the manner of the pictorial arts. Krieger explains:

In speaking of *ekphrasis*, or at least of the ekphrastic impulse, I have pointed to its source in the semiotic desire for the natural sign, the desire, that is, to have the world captured in the word, the word that belongs to it, or, better yet, the word to which it belongs. . . .Throughout the history of the ekphrastic temptation, we

sense the desire to overcome the disadvantage of words and of the verbal arts as mere arbitrary signs by forcing them to ape the natural signs and the natural-sign art that they cannot turn themselves into. (11–12)

W. J. T. Mitchell offers support for this view when he notes a tendency in Western aesthetics to associate writing with absence and images with presence: “If writing is the medium of absence and artifice, the image is the medium of presence and nature, sometimes cozening us with illusion, sometimes with powerful recollection and sensory immediacy” (114).

The connection of *ekphrasis* with the desire to transcend the representational limits of language emerges most prominently in the association of *ekphrasis* with *enargeia*. As Ruth Webb observes: “What distinguishes *ekphrasis* is its quality of vividness, *enargeia*, its impact on the mind’s eye of the listener who must, in Theon’s words, be almost made to see the subject. . . . *Enargeia* is at the heart of *ekphrasis*” (13). Many critics have argued that in its attempt to touch the senses of the audience, *enargeia* represents a strenuous attempt for language to overcome its own representational mediation. Paul Julian Smith expresses this view eloquently:

In its attempt to “place things before the eyes” (the invariable definition of the figure from Cicero to Herrera and beyond) *enargeia* attempts the impossible: the fusion of word and thing, of orator and public in the single moment of representation. . . . *enargeia* seems to correspond, in its initial movement at least, to an ingenuous and impassioned desire for the union of language and concept which will transcend both terms and embody a primal, linguistic plenitude. In other words, a rhetoric not of communication (relative and determinate), but of presence (absolute and integral). (45–46)

As in the previous sections, these critics use language that is emotionally charged, and at times condescending, in describing the desire to elide the mediating function of language. For Smith, this desire is “ingenuous and impassioned”; for Mitchell it is an “ekphrastic hope” to attain the impossible (151); for Krieger, “It is the romantic quest to realize the nostalgic dream of an original, pre-fallen language of corporeal presence, though our only means to reach it is the fallen language around us” (10). Here too, *ekphrasis* appears as the naïve counterpart of irony; while irony accepts and even embraces temporal flux and the disjunction between what de Man calls the “semantic and semiotic functions of language,” *ekphrasis*, like the symbol, seeks to escape them.

Walter Pater’s “Denys l’Auxerrois” troubles this opposition. While visual art objects in this story play a powerful and evocative role that would seem to support the association of *ekphrasis* with an urge toward totality and presence, a series of concentric, increasingly fictional, narrative frames places this effect at an ironic distance from the reader. In fact, the greater art’s power to bring its represented object into the presence of the beholder’s senses, the more deeply this phenomenon is embedded in the fictional layers of the story. So, the story paradoxically combines the deferring function of irony with the presence-evoking qualities of *ekphrasis*.

4.3 *EKPHRASIS AND PRESENCE IN “DENYS L’AUXERROIS”*

In her essay on the role of visual arts in Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits* (in which “Denys l’Auxerrois” is included) Martine Lambert-Charbonnier draws upon Krieger’s model of *ekphrasis* to describe how art objects seem to act as a conduit to “recreate” past culture in the present moment. *Ekphrasis*, she argues, “conveys the aspiration of language to present a fully

composed image. It provides the necessary framing for the poet's complete vision of culture" (204). Lambert-Charbonnier finds evidence of this aspiration in Pater's admiration for Homer's description of Achilles' shield and of the house of Alcinous in Pater's earlier essay "The Beginnings of Greek Sculpture" (1880). She asserts: "Pater admires Homer's *ekphraseis* for their effect of wholeness—they convey a full image of ancient life within the imaginary spaces of the shield and of the house" (202). She thus sees the congruence between Pater's understanding of Homer's descriptions and his own verbal depictions of visual arts as evincing Pater's attempt to convey a portrait of culture in its totality. In her view, this function of *ekphrasis* is visible in the way that "In the 'Imaginary Portraits' the recreation of culture is often inspired by the contemplation of art" (202). *Ekphrasis* does not just describe a work of art, it makes culture fully present to Pater's readers.

Before moving into my discussion of "Denys l'Auxerrois" I would like to examine briefly the two passages on Homer to which Lambert-Charbonnier refers. I submit that while Pater does associate Homer's descriptive passages with totality and immediacy as she notes, there is another element in Pater's treatment of them that complicates this association and that prefigures the role of art objects in "Denys." Regarding Homer's description of Achilles' shield, Pater observes: "The various activities of man are recorded in this description in a series of idyllic incidents with such complete freshness, liveliness, and variety, that the reader from time to time may well forget himself, and fancy he is reading a mere description of the incidents of actual life" ("Beginnings of Greek Sculpture" 202). Comparing this passage to Homer's description of Alcinous' palace, Pater writes: "Still more fascinating, perhaps, because more completely realizable by the fancy as an actual thing—realisable as a delightful place to pass time in—is the description of the palace of Alcinous in the little island town of the Phaeacians, to

which we are introduced in all the liveliness and sparkle of the morning, as real as something seen last summer on the sea-coast” (“Beginnings of Greek Sculpture” 204). Pater’s observations on both passages emphasize wholeness and presence: the incidents painted on the shield are “complete” in their effects, and the description of the palace is even “more completely realizable by the fancy.” Furthermore, Pater’s reiteration of the word “liveliness” to describe Homer’s account of these creations seems to bear out the very definition of *ekphrasis* as “vivid description.” And, his emphasis on the intensity of the reader’s response to the passages seems to evince the *enargeia* that *ekphrasis* is supposed to evoke.

However, there is an aspect of Pater’s accounts of Homer’s descriptions that seem to counter this evocation of presence. In the first passage, Pater does not say that the description of the shield will make readers think that the shield is actually before their eyes, but rather, that instead of reading a description of an art object, they will feel they are reading a “description of the incidents of actual life.” Similarly, in the second passage, Pater does not say that the description of the palace will make readers think that they are actually gazing at its glittering walls, but rather that this view will seem as real as a memory of “last summer on the sea coast.” While these passages offer a testament to the powers of *ekphrasis* to make a described object appear real in some way, Pater does not go as far as to say the objects will seem fully present, in the same time and place as the reader. The reader who feels she is reading a description of real life instead of scenes etched into a shield is still aware that she is reading a text. Similarly, the house that seems as real as a memory is still a mental representation, distanced from the present moment by the passage of time. While both passages, as Pater describes them, promote a strong response in the reader, neither is said to close the representational gap completely, as *ekphrasis* allegedly aspires to do. Instead, while he notes the vivifying qualities of Homer’s *ekphraseis*,

Pater maintains both spatial and temporal distance from this effect. So, while I agree with Lambert-Charbonnier that these passages on Homer provide a useful reference point for the role that art objects play in Pater's fiction, I would add that this role is more complex than might at first sight appear. In the following discussion of "Denys l'Auxerrois" I argue that, like the passages on Homer, and like the remarks on the cups in "Two Early French Stories" (1872), the art objects in this story both evoke and resist totality and presence.

The bulk of "Denys l'Auxerrois" tells the story of an uncanny, pagan-like character named "Denys" (nicknamed "Frank") who appears somewhat mysteriously during a thirteenth-century Easter celebration in the town of Auxerre. Though born and raised on the outskirts of the town, he seems to have remained unknown to the townspeople until he is grown. His appearance in the cathedral one Easter Day has a strange effect on the churchgoers, and their normal celebration of playing a ball game inside the cathedral becomes crazed and frenzied: "Leaping in among the timid children, he made the thing really a game. The boys played like boys, the men almost like madmen, and all with a delightful glee which became contagious" (65).⁶¹ From that time, Denys becomes a minor celebrity in the town, fascinating the women, inspiring the artists, and encouraging a progressive political movement. Furthermore, his arrival in the town correlates to a period of plentiful harvest and general prosperity. Denys' association with the bountiful grape crop, and a number of other events in his life, figure him as a kind of latter-day Dionysus, a parallel noticed by one of the more perceptive monks (75).⁶² After a while, however, the harvests begin to fail, and the townspeople become suspicious of Denys's

⁶¹ For a confirmation of the tradition of playing ball inside the cathedral of Auxerre, see E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* vol. 1 (28n.4).

⁶² See John Smith Harrison for a detailed account of the correspondences between Denys and Dionysis.

more preternatural traits, such as his ability to maintain his youthful, fair complexion in spite of continual exposure to the wind and sun, and his extraordinary gift for taming animals. Denys himself becomes miserable and begins to fear for his own sanity; sinister occurrences and deaths in the town are attributed to him, and even he believes he may be responsible. Fleeing the increasing hostility of the town and his own troubled mind, he eventually joins the monastery and his last achievement is to build an organ for the cathedral. Upon seeing the reviled Denys at the celebration of the organ's unveiling, however, the townspeople become infuriated and tear him to bits in a frenzy, incited by a trickle of blood caused by a scratch from his haircloth shirt.

This story is introduced in the first person voice of a nineteenth-century traveler who, wandering into a "*bric-à-brac*" shop in southern France one rainy day, discovers a fragment of stained glass depicting a mysterious medieval figure with an organ. Intrigued, the traveler tracks down more evidence of the thirteenth-century organ builder, and is eventually able to construct the story as it appears on the pages of Pater's work. Thus, the nineteenth-century narrative serves as a frame for the thirteenth-century story of Denys. Although they are more subtly differentiated, an attentive reading reveals that two more narrative frames precede this one. The opening paragraph of "Denys l'Auxerrois" is written in tones of philosophical meditation on the prevalence of a "golden age" motif throughout world mythology: "Almost every people, as we know, has had its legend of a 'golden age' and of its return—legends which will hardly be forgotten, however prosaic the world may become, while man himself remains the aspiring, never quite contented being he is" (51). After cautioning that the return of the golden age might not be so desirable after all, "since we are no longer children," this sagacious voice informs readers that they are about to encounter "a quaint legend, with detail enough, of such a return of a golden or poetically-gilded age (a denizen of old Greece itself actually finding his way back

among men) as it happened in an ancient town of medieval France” (52). Instead of heading immediately into the story of Denys, however, the narrative voice shifts from reflective philosophical treatise to that of an informative travel guide detailing the towns and landscape of southern France, beginning with this sentence:

Of the French town, properly so called, in which the products of successive ages, not without lively touches of the present, are blended together harmoniously, with a beauty specific—a beauty cisalpine and northern, yet at the same time quite distinct from the massive German picturesque of Ulm, or Freiburg, or Augsburg . . . the town of Auxerre is perhaps the most complete realization to be found by the actual wanderer. (52)

After elaborately describing both the natural and constructed attractions of the area, the travel guide enjoins the reader to imagine “blue-frocked Jacques Bonhomme” going about his labor in the vineyards, and at this point the text shifts into a new narrative register, written in first person: “To beguile one such afternoon when the rain set in early and walking was impossible, I found my way to the shop of an old dealer in *bric-à-brac*” (57).

The tale of Denys is thus nested within three narrative frames that become progressively more fictional, in the sense that they increasingly adopt conventions of fiction the nearer they approach the thirteenth-century portion of the work. The frames proceed from a philosophical statement of universal truth, to an elaborately descriptive travel guide, to a fictional first-person tale, to the fully fictionalized story of Denys. Accompanying this progression is a change in the role of art objects from frame to frame. The deeper we get into the narrative layers, the more closely associated art objects become with totality and completion, and the greater their powers

to evoke presence for their beholders. Furthermore, it is the encounter with art, or with the aesthetic properties of nature, that seems to motivate the shifts from one frame to another.

In the outermost, philosophical frame, there is not much art to speak of, as the impersonal narrator pontificates on matters of consciousness and universal trends in mythology. However, in light of the pattern that emerges in the ensuing sections, it is perhaps worth noting that this frame ends with the mention of *literary* art: the “quaint legend with detail enough” that makes up the story of Denys. As soon as this reference appears, the philosophical voice dissolves and a new voice takes over.

In the second frame, that I am calling the travel guide, the narrator initially retains a tranquil critical distance, as in this passage describing the town of Sens: “In harmony with the atmosphere of its great church is the cleanly quiet of the town, kept fresh by little channels of clear water circulating through its streets, derivatives of the rapid Vanne which falls just below into the Yonne” (55). As the description closes in on the town of Auxerre, however, the tone becomes more lively: “Auxerre.—Auxerre! A slight ascent in the winding road! and you have before you the prettiest town in France” (56). After extolling both the architectural delights of the purple-tiled cathedrals, and the picturesque beauty of the river and vineyards, this frame culminates in the creation of an imaginative figure that seems to embody the spirit of the locale: “A fine summer ripens its grapes into a valuable wine; but in spite of that it seems always longing for a larger and more continuous allowance of the sunshine which is so much to its taste. You might fancy something querulous or plaintive in that rustling movement of the vine-leaves, as blue-frocked Jacques Bonhomme finishes his day’s labour among them” (57). At this point, the travel guide section ends and we enter into the first-person tale of the glass fragment found in the *bric-à-brac* shop.

As long as the narrator retains his cool equanimity, his description of the town retains a critical distance. When he becomes moved by the beauty of Auxerre (Auxerre!), however, it seems to produce an impulse toward physicality on two fronts. First, the narrator's aesthetic raptures seem to crystallize in an imaginary figure, the archetypal vineyard laborer Jacques Bonhomme, in his frock of blue. Second, in shifting to the next frame the narrative voice itself transforms from disembodied omniscience to an individual character with a corporeal presence and an distinct voice. Here, the first outlines of the trend I am tracing become visible. The narrator's encounter with aesthetic beauty seems to evoke the presence of two characters, while at the same time moving the narrative into a more fictional mode.

In the third frame, that of the individualized nineteenth-century traveler, the pattern becomes more clearly apparent. In this frame, the narrator is a fully realized character, interacting with the town instead of merely observing its appearance. Rather than a general impression of beauty, this narrator's attention is focused on a collection of particular art objects. First, he discovers in the shop "a large and brilliant fragment of stained glass . . . of the very finest quality in colour and design" (58). Although this fragment appears to have come from the local cathedral, it depicts the image of "a figure not exactly conformable to any recognized ecclesiastical type; and it was clearly part of a series" (58). Fascinated by the mysterious image in the fragment, the narrator inquires where he might find the "remainder" of the work, upon which the shopkeeper directs him to a priest in a neighboring village who possesses "an entire set of tapestries, apparently intended for suspension in church, and designed to portray the whole subject of which the figure in the stained glass was a portion" (58). Accordingly, the narrator sets out the next day, finds the priest and the tapestries, and with these artifacts, combined with "the help of certain notes, which lay in the priest's curious library," and a good dose of his own

“fancy,” is able to reconstruct the history they portray (60). At this point, the narrative shifts to the story of Denys, the innermost narrative level, told by an omniscient third-person narrator.

The narrator, the objects of art, and the figure portrayed in the glass all suggest a greater tangibility in the nineteenth-century, first-person frame than in the previous one. Nevertheless, there remains a sense of incompleteness associated with the art in this frame. The glass shard is manifestly a “fragment,” part of a greater series that is now gone. Although the set of tapestries is “entire” and depicts the whole story, the narrator notes that in this medium the images have lost their luster. Lacking the brilliance of the stained glass, the tapestry portrays the “oft-repeated figure translated here out of the clear-coloured glass into the sadder, somewhat opaque and earthen hues of the silken threads” (59). Although the tapestry depicts all the images that enable the narrator to reconstruct the story, its faded state lacks the vividness of the glass. It is as if the brilliant, compelling quality of the glass fragment cannot survive its translation into the more complete medium of the tapestry. Finally, even with the vividness of the glass and the fullness of the tapestry, the narrator still requires the aid of written text in order to reconstruct the story, suggesting an inadequacy of the visual medium. Although these remnants all work together to create a complete vision in the narrator’s mind, none of them is sufficient to contain or evoke the story in its entirety.⁶³

In the innermost layer, the story of Denys, art objects become more complete, and their power to evoke presence becomes stronger. This story begins at the time of the completion of the cathedral of Saint Étienne. As one of the stone carvers works at his craft one day, “with a labour he could never quite make equal to the vision within him,” he discovers “a finely-

⁶³ This aspect of the frame recalls Heffernan’s argument that *ekphrastic* texts demonstrate the need to supplement visual art with text, quoted above (307).

sculptured Greek coffin of stone” that seems to express the achievements unavailable to a medieval craftsman (62).⁶⁴ Within the coffin lies “an object of a fresh and brilliant clearness among the ashes of the dead—a flask of lively green glass, like a great emerald” (62–63). At the feast celebrating the completion of the cathedral the townspeople sip wine from this mysterious flask that seems to embody “the riotous and earthy heat of old paganism itself” (63). It is shortly after the discovery of these ancient objects that Denys appears in the town, followed by a time of plentiful grape harvest. Rather coyly, the narrator refuses to state definitively that these three events are connected: “And, whether or not the opening of the buried vessel had anything to do with it, from that time a sort of golden age seemed indeed to be reigning there for a while . . . at the prompting, as it seemed, of the singular being who came suddenly and oddly to Auxerre to be the centre of so pleasant a period, though in truth he made but a sad ending” (63–64). Despite the narrator’s reservations, however, the unearthing of a Greek coffin and wine flask, followed by an abundant vintage and the appearance of a Dionysus-like figure makes this caveat seem overly cautious. In this portion of the story, the trend I have been tracing comes to its fullest fruition. Here, it is not a mental vision that art objects evoke, but a character who exists on the same physical plane as the citizens of Auxerre. If we place Denys in the line of figures that have emerged in the outer frames, he is certainly the most real and present. From the imaginary Jacques Bonhomme, to the more concrete but still inanimate figure in the glass and tapestries, we

⁶⁴ The idea that medieval workers possessed a wider vision than their art was able to express appears also in Pater’s “Winckelman” chapter of *The Renaissance*: “For the thoughts of the Greeks about themselves, and their relation to the world generally, were ever in the happiest readiness to be transformed into objects for the senses. In this lies the main distinction between Greek art and the mystical art of the Christian middle age, which is always struggling to express thoughts beyond itself” (131). Furthermore, it recalls Ruskin’s discussion of the connection between the “freedom” of the medieval workers and the imperfections of their creations (“The Nature of the Gothic,” especially 204–15).

now encounter a living, breathing, character that interacts with the townspeople in a concrete way. Furthermore, unlike the fragmented glass and faded tapestries of the previous frame, the art objects in this section are whole and complete.

All three instances seem to bear out the notion in recent *ekphrasis* theory that art, described in a verbal setting, is geared to create a sense of presence by stirring the senses, particularly the visual. However, the multiple framing layers emphasize the distance that lies between this effect and Pater's readers. Furthermore, the fact that the strata of the story become increasingly fictionalized in proportion as this power increases, disassociates the *ekphrastic* effect from any sense of "reality." In addition, even the innermost frame does not achieve full totality. Although the flask and the coffin come to thirteenth-century Auxerre intact, they still suggest a sense of distance from the ancient culture that created them. The flask contains only a small residue, if anything, of the wine for which it was originally intended; it is "Coated within, and, as some were persuaded, still redolent with the tawny sediment of the Roman wine it had held so long ago" (63). And the very nature of the coffin, which still contains "the ashes of the dead," emphasizes the historical distance of antiquity. The coffin is full, but filled with the remnants of death, so that even in this innermost level of the story there is still a strong sense of absence associated with the art objects.

This combination of presence and absence is emblemized in the character of Denys, who is both a living citizen of Auxerre, and an incomplete Greek god. The conceit of ancient Greek gods surviving as persecuted beings during the hegemony of medieval Christianity originates in Heinrich Heine's "The Gods in Exile" (1853), and seems to have held a special fascination for Pater. He quotes from Heine's essay at length in "Pico della Mirandola" (21), and makes reference to it in "Leonardo da Vinci" (76). Similarly, in "Two Early French Stories" he

describes the pagan medieval romantic ideal in these terms: “It was the return of that ancient Venus, not dead, but only hidden for a time in the caves of the Venusberg, of those old pagan gods still going to and fro on the earth, under all sorts of disguises” (16). In these essays, all part of the *Renaissance* collection, Pater’s interest in the juxtaposition of Greek gods with Christian society corresponds to his argument that the heart of the Renaissance consisted of the interaction, at times antagonistic, between Christianity and classical antiquity. Heine’s conceit seems to have offered Pater a way to illustrate the interaction between these two cultures in a manner that emphasized the occasionally furtive presence of ancient Greek culture in Christian society. Pater’s fascination with this idea develops to its fullest extent in “Denys l’Auxerrois” and in “Apollo in Picardy,” included in the *Miscellaneous Studies* (1895). That both of these stories take place in medieval France emphasizes Pater’s argument that a Renaissance of smaller proportions emerged there during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. So the appearance of Denys in the town of Auxerre can be read as part of this trend in Pater’s work.

The figure of Denys as a symbol of ancient Greece participates in another context as well. The idea that ancient Greek culture embodies an ideal of unreflective, immanent existence that contrasts with the fragmentation of the modern consciousness recurs in both continental philosophy and nineteenth-century British intellectual culture. Schiller works with this idea in *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795-1801), Kierkegaard’s *Concept of Irony* (1841) centers on it, Lukács finds it a source of great melancholy in *Theory of the Novel* (1920), Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1946) analyzes its manifestation in terms of literary style, and in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that it defines the history of western consciousness. The notion was common enough in Pater’s time that in “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone” (1876) he could make reference to it as a well-known generalization regarding

the ancient Greeks: “Their religion has been represented as a religion of mere cheerfulness, the worship by an untroubled, unreflecting humanity, conscious of no deeper needs, of the embodiments of its own joyous activity” (111).⁶⁵ In contrast, as he expresses in “Prosper Mérimée” (1890), Pater finds the nineteenth century to be an age when “Fundamental belief gone, in almost all of us, at least some relics of it remain—queries, echoes, reactions, after-thoughts; and they help to make an atmosphere, a mental atmosphere, hazy perhaps, yet with many secrets of soothing light and shade, associating more definite objects to each other by a perspective pleasant to the inward eye against a hopefully receding background of remoter and ever remoter possibilities” (15).

Given that ancient Greece had by Pater’s time become a stock emblem of immanence, it is not surprising to find that it is a Greek god who represents the closest thing to immediate presence in the story of “Denys.” In fact, it is perhaps more interesting to note the ways that even Denys seems dissociated from what Lukács has called the “rounded totality” of antiquity, in which humans, gods, and nature all existed as part of the same harmonious cosmic order. In his proper context of ancient Greece, Dionysus occupied a divine position, worshipped and unquestioned by the humans at his mercy. Denys, however, is far from enjoying such glory. While this uncanny being has the mark of something out of the ordinary, his existence is primarily one of conflict and collision with the society of Auxerre.

After the period of his initial popularity, Denys’s relationship with the community becomes increasingly antagonistic. A growing number of people in the town come to see his

⁶⁵ For a discussion of how British attitudes toward ancient Greek culture were influenced by this aspect of German philosophy, see Frank Turner’s *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*, 41–42. In *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture* Gregory Jusdsanis demonstrates how Greece occupied a privileged place in the European imagination, as a source of western culture.

strange, otherworldly qualities as demonic, and regard him with suspicion and hatred: “People turned against their favourite, whose former charms must now be counted only as the fascinations of witchcraft” (76). This hostility gives rise to an attempt on his life: “And then, one night, the night which seemed literally to have swallowed up the shortest day in the year, a plot was contrived by certain persons to take Denys as he went and kill him privately for a sorcerer” (77). Denys manages to escape this attack, but is left “a subdued, silent, melancholy creature,” and eventually takes refuge in the local monastery (79). Here, as he works primarily by wordlessly inspiring the artists and craftsmen among the monks, the townspeople forget all about him for a time. Finally, during a ceremony intended to inaugurate the new church organ that Denys has helped build, the people attack him and tear his body apart, and his heart is borne back to the monastery. While these aspects of Denys’s life all recall incidents in the various myths of Dionysus, they also emphasize how far from power this latter-day god has slipped.⁶⁶ The deep schism between Denys and the town is a far cry from the alleged cosmic harmony of ancient Greece.

The glimpses the narrative offers into Denys’s mind suggest that his interior life is less than godlike as well. He is often confused and afraid, and when a sense of madness begins to come over the town, Denys isn’t entirely certain of his own sanity: “Ah! if Denys also had not felt himself mad! But when the guilt of a murder, committed with a great vine-axe far out among the vineyards, was attributed vaguely to him, he could but wonder whether it had been indeed thus, and the shadow of a fancied crime abode with him” (75–76). When the people

⁶⁶ While the townspeople’s frenzied mutilation of Denys might first bring to mind the fate of Orpheus at the hands of the Thracian women, Harrison suggests that it parallels an episode where Dionysus is attacked and hacked to bits by the Titans, and his head and heart carried back to Zeus (Harrison 669).

begin to turn against him, instead of venting his wrath on them in the manner we might expect of an ancient god, his only thoughts are bewildered and fearful: “At first he thought of departing secretly to some other place. Alas! his wits were too far gone for certainty of success in the attempt. He feared to be brought back a prisoner” (76). When the people attempt to kill him, he runs in fright, and “He could hardly tell how he escaped” (77). Such confusion, fear, and self-doubt do not seem characteristic of a god, Greek pagan or otherwise.

The pattern I have attempted to trace thus far is that the further we move into the concentric layers of framing in the story of “Denys,” the more power art objects have to evoke presence in the manner that Krieger’s model of *ekphrasis* would predict. However, this power remains incomplete, and the story stops short of conveying (or purporting to convey) full, unmediated presence. Even the existence of Denys himself is tempered by the fact that he is a fictional character created by the narrator’s fancy, and by the fact that although present in the context of the inner story, he remains disconnected from the totality so often associated with ancient Greece. The closest we get to this mythical cosmic harmony is a strange tale of a Greek god inexplicably reincarnated in the body of a persecuted medieval misfit. The structure of the story also both evokes and revokes totality by its use of multiple narrative levels that reflect each other but remain discrete. In this sense, tracing the role of *ekphrasis* in this story reveals a dynamic more akin to that of irony as described by Lukács and de Man than Krieger’s *ekphrasis*. Further underscoring this alignment is the fact that Pater offers this portrait of irony without any apparent nostalgia for the perceived harmonious classical existence allegedly expressed in the symbol and in *ekphrasis*. This point is overtly made by the omniscient narrator in the opening paragraph of “Denys,” who questions the desirability of a return to the golden age:

Almost every people, as we know, has had its legend of a “golden age” and of its return—legends which will hardly be forgotten, however prosaic the world may become, while man himself remains the aspiring, never quite contented being he is. And yet in truth, since we are no longer children, we might well question the advantage of the return to us of a condition of life in which, by the nature of the case, the values of things would, so to speak, lie wholly on their surfaces, unless we could regain also the childish consciousness, or rather unconsciousness, in ourselves, to take all that adroitly and with the appropriate lightness of earth. (51)

If art objects in “Denys l’Auxerrois” do not bear out the precise ontological pattern described in Krieger’s model of *ekphrasis*, however, they nevertheless possess some kind of evocative power that the notion of *enargeia* can help to illuminate. Although the mere presence of art objects in Pater’s story would be enough to merit the classification of *ekphrasis* in the sense it is usually used today (“the verbal representation of visual art”), Pater’s lack of extensive description of the objects would not qualify it as such in the classical sense of “vivid description.” The fragment, the tapestry, the flask, and the coffin play an important role in the story, but Pater does not describe them elaborately or at length. What he does present in vivid detail, however, is the narrator’s *response* to art. Unlike the story’s art objects, which are distanced from the reader as something encountered by other people in a distant place and/or time, the narrator’s aesthetic experience is presented to the reader with no such mediation. We accompany the first-person narrator on his sleuthing expedition, and we come face to face with his imaginative recreation of Denys. In fact, the story of “Denys” is so engaging that readers are likely to feel some degree of surprise at encountering the abrupt shift back to the first-person in the story’s final paragraph: “So the figure in the stained glass explained itself. To me, Denys

seemed to have been a real resident at Auxerre. On days of a certain atmosphere, when the trace of the Middle Age comes out, like old marks in the stones in rainy weather, I seemed actually to have seen the tortured figure there—to have met Denys l'Auxerrois in the streets" (88). With this, story ends on the note upon which it began, by reminding us that it is all a concoction of the narrator's "fancy."

The story's pattern of deferring totality, combined with this emphasis on the movement of the narrator's mind, suggests that Pater is more interested in the process of aesthetic experience than in the specifics of either the art objects or the sensations they elicit. While art has a powerfully evocative effect in all the frames of the story, the specificity of this effect is destabilized by the story's ironic structure. In the part of the story that I have been calling "*enargeia*," the aspect that pulls us into the narrator's vision, we are invited to experience art's effects on the psyche along with the narrator. But though this experience is vividly portrayed, it nevertheless remains indeterminate. The narrator's concluding remarks remind us that the whole story is a product of his fancy, and suggest that this vision is only one possible response to the art objects. If anyone else had found these relics, or indeed if the narrator himself had found them in a different frame of mind or at a different time, a completely different story might have emerged.

This attention to the form, rather than the content, of aesthetic experience fits in with Pater's well-known emphasis on sensation and sensibility to beauty, expressed most famously in the conclusion to *The Renaissance*. It also gains an ethical significance when read in conjunction with some of Pater's other works such as "The Child in the House" (1878) and *Plato and Platonism*, which draw a close connection between the aesthetic and the moral. In the next section, I will argue that the combination of *enargeia* and irony in "Deny l'Auxerrois" provides a mode of indirect expression for Pater's formal ethical model. I will suggest that precedence for

the need of indirect expression in formal models of ethics can be found in Kant and Kierkegaard, and that Pater's story of Denys suggests a writing practice that allows compatibility between irony and ethics.

4.4 PATER'S MORAL AESTHETIC

Pater often figures the psyche, soul, or character as a structure or work of art that can be built and shaped by sensory stimulation. The society of Sparta as discussed in *Plato and Platonism*, for example, is completely dedicated to making its citizens into works of art, as Pater conveys in an imaginary dialogue with an ancient Spartan. When asked why the youth of Sparta should endure the rigid discipline and control imposed on them by the state, "An intelligent young Spartan might have replied: 'To the end that I myself may be a perfect work of art, issuing thus into the eyes of all Greece'" (232). The notion that the psyche is an entity susceptible to construction by its surroundings manifests itself in architectural imagery in "The Child in the House." Here, the boundary between the protagonist's "soul" and the house in which he grew up has become blurred. Not only has the childhood home "seemed actually to have become part of the texture of his mind" (176), but the house itself is imbued with the "soul-stuff" of the child who grew up there, to the point that house and soul are made of the same material:

In that half-spiritualised house he could watch the better, over again, the gradual expansion of the soul which had come to be there—of which indeed, through the law which makes the material objects about them so large an element in children's lives it had actually become a part; inward and outward being woven through and through each other into one inextricable texture—half, tint and trace

and accident of homely colour and form, from the wood and the bricks; half, mere soul-stuff, floated thither from who knows how far. (173)

By emphasizing the fluid connection between the materiality of the house and the ethereal nature of the soul, Pater suggests that interiority is somehow shaped by sensory interaction with material objects. This interaction gains a moral significance in a later passage, where aesthetic sensibility develops in tandem with an aversion to the sight of suffering:

From this point he could trace two predominant processes of mental change in him—the growth of an almost diseased sensibility to the spectacle of suffering, and, parallel with this, the rapid growth of a certain capacity of fascination by bright colour and choice form So these two elementary apprehensions of the tenderness and of the colour in things grew apace in him, and were seen by him afterwards to send their roots back into the beginnings of life (181–82).

Here, the protagonist's sensitivity to color and form give rise to, or perhaps are equivalent to, a sensitivity to suffering as an aesthetic dissonance. Suffering, this passage seems to suggest, is repugnant because it is ugly.

The connection between the aesthetic and the moral indicated in "The Child in the House" receives more direct articulation in *Plato and Platonism*, where Pater argues that this link has a historical precedent in Plato:

Now such a piece of traditional Platonism we find in the hypothesis of some close connexion between what may be called the aesthetic qualities of the world about us and the formation of moral character, between aesthetics and ethics. Wherever people have been inclined to lay stress on the colouring, for instance, cheerful or otherwise, of the walls of the room where children learn to read, as though that

had something to do with the colouring of their minds; on the possible moral effect of the beautiful ancient buildings of some of our own schools and colleges; on the building of character, in any way, through the eye and ear; there the spirit of Plato has been understood to be, and rightly, even by those who have perhaps never read Plato's *Republic*, in which however we do find the connexion between moral character and matters of poetry and art strongly asserted. (269)

While this passage states more directly the aesthetic-moral connection that was suggested in "The Child in the House," it nevertheless leaves open the question of how, exactly, this connection takes place. How can a building, ancient, beautiful, or otherwise, have a moral effect on its beholder? What does it mean, exactly, to color the mind by coloring the walls around it? A subsequent passage seems poised to offer an explanation:

It is not so much the matter of a work of art, what is conveyed in and by colour and form and sound, that tells upon us educationally—the subject, for instance, developed by the words and scenery of a play—as the form, and its qualities, concision, simplicity, rhythm, or, contrariwise, abundance, variety, discord. Such 'aesthetic' qualities, by what we might call in logical phrase *metabasis eis allo genos*, a derivation into another kind of matter, transform themselves, in the temper of the patient, the hearer, or spectator, into terms of ethics, into the sphere of the desires and the will, of the moral taste, engendering, nursing there, strictly moral effects. (270–72)

For the reader searching for an explanation of the mechanism by which the aesthetic becomes the moral, the phrase *metabasis eis allo genos* may seem promising at first. However, the literal meaning of this phrase, which is something like "crossing from another kind," is no more

determinate than Pater's English explanation of "derivation into another kind of matter." This passage merely says that aesthetic qualities "transform themselves" into moral qualities by passing from one genus to another. So, it still does not explain how, exactly, this transference occurs, how the color of a wall can morally influence the color of a mind. Even more problematic is this term's history in the field of logic. It occurs most famously in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, where it refers to the practice of going outside the terms of one domain, such as geometry, to prove something in another domain, such as arithmetic. Aristotle strongly cautions that such a move is inadmissible in logical proof: "Thus you cannot prove anything by crossing from another kind—e.g. something geometrical by arithmetic" (12, 7). So not only does Pater's use of this phrase provide little more than a translation of what he says in English, it also savors of a logical fallacy.

Just as the movement of "Denys l'Auxerrois" gestures toward totality without ever capturing it fully, so the movement of Pater's explanation stops short of articulating the transference of the aesthetic into the moral. Frustrating though it may be for the reader looking for absolutes, such indeterminacy is not a shortcoming on Pater's part but rather an integral part of a moral theory based on form rather than content. For a conception of the moral that emphasizes the construction of a moral state of being, rather than specific moral actions, a direct articulation of the transference would fundamentally contradict the theory by imposing content onto the form: if content and form were brought together, the theory would no longer be formal. Like Eliot's use of allegory to convey Romola's inner transformation, Pater's use of the phrase "*metabasis eis allo genos*" highlights this point. In the above passage, he asserts that the transference of the aesthetic into the moral is *like* a concept in the field of logic, which itself expresses the act going outside of one field to prove a point in another. Support for this strategy

of indirect expression can be found in the formal ethical theories of Kant and Kierkegaard. As a way of providing philosophical context for both Pater's moral-aesthetic theory, and his incomplete articulation of its mechanism, I would like to examine the work of these two continental predecessors in formal ethics in relation to the aesthetic. I will focus particularly on Kant's use of the term "hypotyposis" in *Critique of Judgement*, and Kierkegaard's emphasis on the need of indirect expression in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846).

Indirect presentation plays a key role in Kant's moral theory. In *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), he outlines his attempt to find a universal, a priori law that governs moral action. This results in what he calls the "categorical imperative," which states that morality is governed by the following principle: "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (31). This law is considered purely formal for two main reasons. First, it has to do with *how* we make moral decisions, not *what* those decisions are. Second, it is by definition an a priori principle, and therefore exists prior to any experience; its reality cannot be "given in experience" (30). Kant's insistence that the moral law is purely formal raises a problem, however. Because it is universal, it cannot be fully connected to any particular experience, so how can we apply this law to our everyday lives? How can we connect the universal with the particular?

In order to understand how Kant proposes to resolve this problem, it is necessary to review his theory of cognition. At the heart of the Kantian model is the joining of intuitions (mental representations of specific sensory experiences) and concepts (general categories of the understanding). Cognition occurs when intuitions are joined to concepts, and in order for this joining to take place concepts must undergo presentation [*Darstellung*], a process that makes them available to the senses. The joining of intuitions to concepts takes place in the faculty of

the imagination, and is performed by the power of judgment. When an intuition is apprehended for which there is an available concept, the presentation of the concept to the intuition is called a “determinative judgment.” Sometimes, however, the judgment apprehends an intuition, or a manifold of intuitions, for which the understanding can provide no available concept. When this happens, the mind makes what Kant calls a “reflective judgment.” In a reflective judgment the imagination calls upon the understanding to present, not a specific concept, but the idea of concepts in general. In other words, the understanding presents the *form* of its power to gather a manifold of intuitions into a unified whole, even though in this case it has no specific whole under which to subsume them. Because this kind of judgment involves the senses, and is triggered by the mind’s encounter with beautiful objects, Kant calls the resulting presentation an “aesthetic idea.” Aesthetic ideas are presentations of the mind’s ability to achieve totality, though because they lack concepts, they remain indeterminate.

The power of judgment works in the other direction too. That is, it seeks intuitions that are adequate to concepts. When an intuition is available that is adequate to a concept, the judgment joins them directly, in what Kant calls a “schematic presentation.” However, some concepts, such as pure concepts of the understanding and of reason, exist *a priori*, meaning that they exist outside of the realm of experience. These concepts can never be completely presented to an intuition, because by their very definition they always exceed the limits of experience. Such concepts can only be presented indirectly to an intuition, in what is called a “symbolical presentation.” In a symbolical presentation, the judgment substitutes a concept that *can* be presented directly to an intuition, and reflects the form of that relationship to the understanding— saying, in effect, that the unpresentable concept is analogous to the substituted one.

The gulf between the moral law and the realm of experience needs to be understood in this context. Like pure concepts of reason, the moral law cannot be joined directly to any particular intuition. However, Kant argues that it can be *indirectly* presented, via symbolic presentation. In the case of moral judgments, as Kant explains in a famous passage in *Critique of Judgement*, the process that is symbolically substituted is the process of making judgments of beauty (198). In a judgment of beauty, the understanding provides the mere form of the joining process, and a judgment of morality analogically substitutes this process for its own. In other words, a moral judgment functions by presenting the form of presentation, just as in judgments of beauty, and in this way it can undergo presentation without incurring any particular content.

There is a lot at stake in Kant's discussion of symbolic presentation. It connects the moral sphere with the beautiful, and in doing so, the reason with the sensibility. It also shows a connection between pure reason (the realm of natural laws), and practical reason (the realm of moral laws and freedom). Finally, it brings all the faculties into harmonic play with each other, showing that the mind, although divided into different faculties, powers, and processes, is nevertheless a unified whole. It is perhaps due to the crucial importance of this mental fitness for unity that in the section describing how beauty is a symbol of morality, Kant begins to use the Greek word "hypotyposis" as a synonym for the process he has been calling "presentation" up to this point. Kant suggests that this word is merely a synonym: "All *hypotyposis* (presentation, *subjectio sub adspectum*),⁶⁷ or sensible illustration is twofold" (197). In the next paragraph he adds another synonym: "Both are hypotyposis, i.e. presentations (*exhibitiones*)" (197). However, Rodolphe Gasché has argued the history of the word "hypotyposis" in the field of rhetoric

⁶⁷ "Subjectio sub adspectum" translates literally to "throwing under the eyes" (Gasché 206).

involves other associations that may help explain why Kant chose to use it at this point in his critique. Gasché points out that Kant's parenthetical definition, "*subjectio sub adspectum*," emphasizes that the essence of hypotyposis is to make something present to the senses, especially the eye. Citing Cicero and Quintilian, as well as twentieth-century scholars of rhetoric, Gasché explains that hypotyposis carries with it a sense of turning a narrative or group of events or objects, into a single "tableau." In other words, it implies the function of creating unity, or totality (Gasché 206–7). Furthermore, the prevalence of the word "vivid" to describe the tableau that hypotyposis presents suggests that what emerges in this trope is somehow living, or organic. Hypotyposis is thus a useful term for Kant in this portion of his analysis because it suggests not just a presentation of a priori concepts, but a presentation that the senses interpret as complete and animate. As Gasché concludes:

Hypotyposis, a figure characterized by the force of its illustrations, its synoptic qualities, its sublime connotations, offers precisely the resources required to thematize the function in question. Hypotyposis, indeed, is a mode of presentation that pictures things so vividly that they appear to present themselves. Hypotyposis also presents in entirety, and the moral grandeur or aesthetic spectacle that it provides is constitutive of a subjective reflection. Hence, what is presented in hypotyposis is endowed with reality, it is alive and self-conscious.

(209)

From Gasché's perspective, the term "hypotyposis" indicates that even if a priori concepts can only be presented indirectly, they are still present in full force. This allows Kant to make a case for the unity of the beautiful and the moral, and for the harmony of the faculties and spheres of reason.

At this point, some interesting parallels begin to emerge between Kant's and Pater's treatments of morality. Both embrace a formal ethics that focuses more on the process of developing morality than on specific actions or decisions. Both argue for a strong connection between the beautiful and the moral, but indicate that this connection is indirect. Perhaps most intriguing is the fact that "hypotyposis," along with *evidentia* and *illustratio*, is a synonym for *enargeia* in classical rhetoric.⁶⁸ These terms all describe a trope whose primary function is to make its represented object fully and vividly present to the readers' senses. Kant capitalizes on this term's associations with presence in order to emphasize that even though the relationship between the moral and the beautiful is indirect, it is still manifestly *there*. While Pater may not use these particular rhetorical terms, his portrayal of the connection between the moral and the beautiful suggests a relationship that, like Kant's, is indirect but nevertheless extant and powerful. Furthermore, his use of the phrase *metabasis eis allo genos*, while not from the field of rhetoric, suggests that like Kant, he views the relationship between the beautiful and the moral as one of analogy. A passage in *Critique of Judgement* emphasizes this connection by resembling to a striking degree some of Pater's observations in *Plato and Platonism*:

we often describe beautiful objects of nature or art by names that seem to put a moral appreciation at their basis. We call buildings or trees majestic and magnificent, landscapes laughing and gay; even colors are called innocent, modest, tender, because they excite sensations which may have something

⁶⁸ Brigham Young University's online glossary of Greek rhetorical terms, "Silva Rhetoricae," lists *enargeia* as a synonym for *hypotyposis* (Burton). Gerard Paul Sharpling notes this connection as well: "In Renaissance poetics, *enargeia*, also known as *evidentia*, *hypotyposis*, or *illustratio*, remains a central means by which rhetoricians and writers seek to transfer things seen into words" (173).

analogous to the consciousness of the state of mind brought about by moral judgments. (200)

Pater's practice of indirect expression in a world where meaning no longer lies on the surface of things is closely tied to his emphasis on the subjective, a connection that finds support in the work of Kierkegaard, particularly in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Pater's call for would-be art critics to develop their sensitivity to art and nature, his focus on the development of character "through the eye and ear," and his suggestion that the essence of morality lies in the construction of the individual interior all point toward a disinterest in what Kierkegaard would call the "objective" realm. Perhaps the most impassioned example of Pater's fixation on the potential of the subjective is in his early essay "Diaphaneité" (1864) in which he describes a type of character too fine to fit into the world's preexisting categories. This character type, he asserts, is so breathtakingly pure, so acutely sensitive, so utterly close to a transcendence between inner life and outer expression, that "A majority of such would be the regeneration of the world" (158).

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous narrator, Johannes Climacus, argues vehemently that because the individual subject cannot transcend his own consciousness, objective approaches to knowledge are inadequate and false. "If an existing individual were really able to transcend himself, the truth would be for him something final and complete; but where is the point at which he is outside himself? The I-am-I is a mathematical point which does not exist. . . . Modern philosophy has tried anything and everything in the effort to help the individual to transcend himself objectively, which is a wholly impossible feat" (176). Climacus argues that forms of study that claim to be objective, such as mathematics and history, provide a false sense of certainty because they ignore the role of the knowing subject: "The positiveness of historical knowledge is illusory, since it is approximation-knowledge; the

speculative result is a delusion. For all this positive knowledge fails to express the situation of the knowing subject in existence” (75). Whereas objective knowledge claims access to a constant and stable truth, according to Climacus, the truth of subjectivity cannot be pinned down because the existing individual is always in a process of becoming. Therefore, any definitive statement about the subjective might be true for an instant but no longer. For this reason, Climacus argues that subjective knowledge requires a different mode of communication than objective knowledge. Subjective knowledge cannot be represented in a discursive mode that deals in facts, definitions, or other forms that profess total correspondence between language and referent. “For inwardness is false,” Climacus asserts, “precisely in the degree that the outward expression in mien and visage, in words and assurances, is at once ready to hand; not precisely because the expression itself is untrue, but the falsity consists in the fact that the inwardness is merely a phase” (211). Similarly, he argues: “Ordinary communication, like objective thinking in general, has no secrets; only a doubly reflected subjective thinking has them. That is to say, the entire essential content of subjective thought is essentially secret, because it cannot be directly communicated (73). The person who would try to communicate subjective truth, therefore, must eschew direct, objective forms of representation and turn to a more indirect mode, which for Climacus lies in the realm of the aesthetic: “Wherever the subjective is of importance in knowledge, and where appropriation thus constitutes the crux of the matter, the process of communication is a work of art, and doubly reflected” (73). Later, Climacus elaborates on this point: “*The objective accent falls on WHAT is said, the subjective accent on HOW it is said.* This distinction holds even in the aesthetic realm, and receives definite expression in the principle that what is in itself true may in the mouth of such and such a person become untrue” (181, italics original). For Climacus, the necessity for aesthetic means to

communicate the subjective corresponds to his view that existence is a work of art in progress: “The subjective thinker is not a man of science, but an artist. Existing is an art” (314).

One does not have to dig far into Pater’s writings to note similarities with Kierkegaard’s Climacus. In the famous introduction, and even more famous conclusion, to *The Renaissance*, Pater expresses a similar emphasis on the subjective: “‘To see the object as in itself it really is,’ has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly” (xxix). The most important task for the aesthetic critic, according to Pater, is not to study abstract definitions of beauty, but to get to know his own impressions, to ask “What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*?” (xxx). Furthermore, he urges the critic to develop his sensibilities to art, to create within himself “a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects” (xxx). Like Climacus, Pater characterizes existence as an aesthetic matter to be crafted. And Pater’s characterization of the “inward world of thought and feeling” resembles Climacus’ assertions regarding both the subjective as a world of becoming rather than being, and the impossibility of transcending the boundary between the subjective and objective:

And if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality

through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. (151)

Finally, when Climacus declares that the only way to transcend the existential flux in a unity of infinite and finite, is “in the moment of passion” (176), it almost seems that Pater answers him: “Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness” (153). This comparison not only suggests the importance that Pater and Kierkegaard’s Climacus place on the subjective, it also emphasizes the degree to which both view the internal realm as characterized by flux and change, and the resulting need for indirect expression.

The story of “Denys L’Auxerrois” can thus be viewed as a model of Pater’s impressionistic aesthetic theory, communicated indirectly in the form of a fictional story. Instead of *ekphrasis* of artworks, we have *ekphrasis* of a subjective response to artworks. This complicates critical assumptions about the role of art objects in literature as an attempt for language to escape the instability of time and of its own representational boundaries by borrowing from the visual arts. This story actually gives us an *ekphrasis* of interiority, an imaginary portrait of time, not space.

When placed in the context of Kantian and Kierkegaardian philosophy, and of Pater’s own writings on the moral and the aesthetic, the interaction between characters and art objects in “Denys L’Auxerrois” acquires greater resonance. Although art has a powerful effect on the characters in the story, the shifting frames and fictional mode help maintain the indeterminacy of this effect. As Pater suggests in his discussion of Plato, it is not the content of art that “tells upon us educationally” but the form. What we have in the narrator’s vision is a vivid presentation of a mind thrown into activity by its contact with art. Moreover, this presentation, whether we

choose to call it hypotyposis or *enargeia*, is couched in the aesthetic mode of fiction that invites the reader's mind to engage in the same active process, in a manner that recalls Carlyle's emphasis on the visual to convey historical events. In this way, Pater's story both thematizes the aesthetic and the moral, and enacts this connection in its own structure. In "Denys l'Auxerrois" we find a narrative of irony that performs and substantiates the connection between the aesthetic and the moral found in Pater's other writings. By using an ironic structure, the story is able indirectly to express the ethical function of art without compromising the formal and subjective nature of morality as Pater understood it. Furthermore, it demonstrates how this type of ethical model is compatible with irony, in a way that determinate, code-based morality is not.

5.0 CONCLUSION

What gods will rescue us from all these ironies?

—Friedrich Schlegel, “On Incomprehensibility”

In closing this study, I would like to return to the question with which I began: what function did irony play in the works of Victorian writers? It has become apparent, I hope, that for all three authors discussed here, the ironic aspects in the form of their works are connected with larger social and ethical issues. Carlyle spells out this connection most overtly, as he explains at length that changes in society have led to the need for changes in representational practice. That Eliot and Pater do not dwell at length on the relation of their rhetorical form to historical situation is partially attributable to the differences in their goals as writers. However, one might also ascribe this to the fact that the various upheavals Carlyle found so remarkable became more commonplace as the century wore on, so that writers need not do more than nod toward them. Thus, Eliot did not need to explain why a story about searching for grounds of belief and morality might be of particular interest to her contemporaries, and Pater could casually characterize his era as a time when “fundamental belief [is] gone, in almost all of us.” One of the reasons that Carlyle is so important a figure is that he provides a detailed and vivid portrayal of problems that occupied many of his successors in the rest of the century. Eliot, in fact, expressed this view when she wrote: “there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation

that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived. . . . The extent of his influence may be best seen in the fact that ideas which were startling novelties when he first wrote them are now become common-places" ("Thomas Carlyle" 343-44)

Like Kierkegaard, all three Victorian writers I've examined here worked to formulate ethics in an ironic milieu. For Carlyle, who resisted the turn to self-reflection and subjectivism that played such a large role in Kierkegaard's ethics, morality was primarily a matter of social relations. This emphasis on the external helps explain, in part, Carlyle's turn toward the imposition of order from without, in the form of the military hero. Eliot's and Pater's constructions of morality as an internal matters of the construction of the subject, are much closer to Kierkegaard's. For them, the indeterminacies of literary form provided a way to express a version of morality that did not depend on stable, unchanging foundations.

In addition to becoming more subjective, the models of ethics in the authors I've examined became more formal. For Carlyle, the moral failings of the French aristocracy lie in the specifics of their behavior: they are not taking care of their "flock" of impoverished workers. In *Romola*, morality is figured to a large degree as a matter of individual psychological development, as characters become good or bad through the habits formed by repeated actions. Even though the novel rewards Romola and punishes Tito for the specificity of their deeds, these deeds are portrayed as the result of psychological formation. In Pater's works, the moral is figured almost entirely in terms of form, as "character" is developed through aesthetic sense. This emphasis on form is epitomized in the character described in "Diaphaneité" who somehow seems to be without content at all. This increasing emphasis on form in ethics adds an important dimension to the conclusions of David Shaw in *The Lucid Veil: Poetic Truth in the Victorian Age*

(1987). Shaw argues that in Britain between the years of 1860 and 1900, metaphors of language and cognition shifted from a reflective mirror, to a framed picture, to a lucid veil, to a darkening glass, and finally to pure presentation that had no necessary connection to a represented object. By comparing scientific theories with theories of poetics, and poetry to scientific and philosophical works, Shaw casts a wide net as he tries to trace general trends in how writers of this period understood language and cognition. He does not, however, consider ethical models in his study, nor does he engage with the notion of irony. To examine these factors in relation to the trajectory Shaw describes could provide a useful contribution to critical understanding of how language and ethics interacted in this period.

Kierkegaard has served as an important reference point in my study, because he has provided what remains one of the best articulations of conflicts between irony and ethics. His examination of repetition demonstrates how ethics can be created in a temporal, rather than spatial mode, and his emphasis on indirect expression shows how this can be done outside the bounds of objective representation. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard was still left with paradoxes that he could only resolve through religious faith. In this, he provides a notable contrast with Carlyle, Eliot, and Pater, who negotiated problems of indeterminacy outside the religious sphere. This speaks to the increasing secularity of nineteenth-century British society, and the attempt to create an ethics in a secular mode is, I would argue, still a pressing question in western societies today.

Looking at the function of romantic irony in these works has revealed that for these Victorian writers, as for those associated with German romanticism, irony is not just the expression of indeterminacy, nor simply the acceptance nor rejection of it. Instead, it is integrally related to a deep concern with the implications of this irony for society and for the individual, and to the development of an ethics compatible with indeterminacy. This

investigation has also revealed the extent to which this irony and its corresponding ethical model point toward an ontology that privileges time over space, and so does not require a stable, unchanging center of reference.

My study has thus suggested the following hypothesis: that romantic irony in the form of Victorian works is integrally tied to the formation of ethics, and that as the century wore on, these ethical models became increasingly subjective and formal. This hypothesis would require further study to substantiate. This would involve a close examination of other works from the period in which romantic irony is visible. Two of the most obvious writers to examine would be Robert Browning, whose works have already been the subject of some excellent studies on romantic irony,⁶⁹ and Oscar Wilde, who is usually considered the most prominent ironist of the period. Less obvious, perhaps, is John Ruskin, whose works are not overtly ironic, but who still argues for a close connection between ethics and form.

Finally, a more complete study of romantic irony in the Victorian period would provide an important supplement, and possibly a corrective, to Alan Wilde's *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (1987). Wilde argues that from the eighteenth century, to the modernism of the early twentieth century, to the postmodernism of the mid to late twentieth century, irony moves from "mediate," to "disjunctive," to "suspensive." In mediate irony, which is the irony of satire prevalent in the eighteenth century, there is a stable center of reference. The ironist has a stable conception of the way the world should be, and uses satire to highlight the ways that reality deviates from this idea. In disjunctive irony, which is the

⁶⁹ For example, see Clyde de L. Ryals's chapter on Browning in *A World of Possibilities* (1990) and his book *Becoming Browning: The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning* (1983); and Patricia Rigg's article "The Reader's Conversion through Romantic Irony in 'Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day'" (1988) and her book *Robert Browning's Romantic Irony in "The Ring and the Book"* (1999).

dominant ironic mode of modernism, according to Wilde, the writer perceives the world to be fragmented, and the writer's impulse is to control this fragmentation through artistic production. In disjunctive irony, there is no stable point of reference, and in this sense, it can be considered antithetical to satire. The view behind disjunctive irony is one of despair and resistance. It remains nostalgic over origins. In the suspensive irony of postmodernist texts, he argues, the world is perceived as being absolutely chaotic and un-orderable, but the response is one of acceptance rather than resistance. According to Wilde, the twentieth century has been moving steadily toward attaining a state of mind that encompasses both the inevitability of indeterminacy and the capacity for acceptance and assent to this state.

Although Wilde's trajectory of irony, like so many others, skips over the Victorian period, he nevertheless provides a useful model for thinking about irony in this, as in other eras. Comparing Carlyle's dire warnings about the fragmentations of the age with Pater's calm depiction of receding immanence seems to support Wilde's notion of an increasing capacity for accepting the loss of totality. Wilde does not, however, address possible reasons for this increase, and it is here that the consideration of ethics could offer a useful explanatory tool. My study suggests that writers who perceive the possibility of an ethics based in temporality, subjectivity, and form may be more likely to assent to existing in the absence of stable, unquestioned foundations.

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