Back and Forth

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The Grotesque in the Play of Romantic Irony

By

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For

Shyamal Kumar Bose

(1950-2008)

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INTRODUCTION

> It is not I whom I depict. I am the canvass, a hidden hand colours somebody on me.[1]
> —Fernando Pessoa, from *Stations of the Cross*, XI (1914-16)

> The great fault of a modern school of poetry is, that it is an experiment to reduce poetry to a mere effusion of natural sensibility; or what is worse, to divest it both of imaginary splendour and human passion, to surround the meanest objects with morbid feelings and devouring egotism of the writers' own minds.[2]
> —William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818)

I—Grotesque Symptoms: Poetics of the Self in Romantic Theory

The above quotations, one from a major modernist poet known for his cultivation of myriad poetic personae, the other from a primary essayist of English Romanticism, encapsulate a recurring theme in Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetics that this book will examine: the essentially *dramatic* tension between selfhood and the dissolution of self in the act of making a poem. In Pessoa's case, the disjunction between author and persona comes to the forefront, a trope that appears in the work of a range of Romantic and late-Romantic writers including Keats, Byron, and Baudelaire. In contrast, Hazlitt bemoans the "devouring egotism" of his contemporary nineteenth-century poets, a position that he expands upon in his review of Wordsworth's *The Excursion*:

> An intense intellectual egotism swallows up every thing…But the evident scope and tendency of Mr. Wordsworth's mind is the reverse of the dramatic. It resists all change of character, all variety of scenery, all the bustle, machinery, and pantomime of the stage, or of real life…The power of his mind preys upon itself. It is as if there were nothing but himself and the universe.[3]

Hazlitt's words repeatedly reference the performative aspects in poetry as oppositions to Wordsworth's obsession with the self. He sets up the dialectic of dramatic poetry, which depends on the fragmentation of the

individual self into many minds and personae, and the poetics of an intensely aware personal subjectivity that he sees in Wordsworth, the primary poet of English Romanticism. Hazlitt is obviously sceptical about the scope and effects of a poetry that smacks of solipsism. As we shall see, his Shakespearean hermeneutics celebrate the multiple visions that characterise drama. In this book, I will interrogate the oscillation between the poles of such extreme egotism and its rejection by some major poets and theorists of the post-Romantic condition. What were the specific effects of this tension on nineteenth-century aesthetics? What roles do Friedrich Schlegel's Romantic irony and the theories of the modern grotesque as envisioned by Schlegel, Hugo, and Baudelaire play in this alternation between self and insubstantiality? What are the dramatic implications of the grotesque in Romantic theory, and how does it reflect on this unstable interaction between self and plurality?

In one of the *Athenäeum Fragments*, a founding and highly influential text of Jena Romanticism, August Wilhelm Schlegel, brother to Friedrich, distils the difference between the dramatic and lyric voice in poetry in a fashion similar to Hazlitt: "It seems to be a characteristic of the dramatic poet to lose himself with lavish generosity in other people, and of the lyric poet to attract everything toward himself with loving egoism."[4] Hazlitt was familiar with the elder Schlegel's work, going so far as to celebrate and review the Shakespearean hermeneutics in *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1809). A unique international cross-pollination of ideas becomes *de rigueur*. Shakespearean dramaturgy, from the Schlegel brothers to Hazlitt and the French Romantics, becomes the focal point for this cosmopolitan celebration of the dramatic vision in Romantic aesthetics. Consequently, I will claim that the emergence of the Romantic grotesque is inextricably linked to the Romantic re-creation of Shakespeare. In utilising the theorisation of the Shakespearean grotesque in the work of the continental Romantics, this study will use theories of drama to revitalise a radically English aesthetic. This, in turn, will help us tap the more subversively democratic moments in the critical theory of European Romanticism.

If Romanticism inaugurated the modern and contemporary cult of the individual, a poetics of personal sensibility, and the Wordsworthian ego that made the self the terrain of speculative exploration, it simultaneously brought about a competing desire for embracing a *no-self*, or the *paradoxical plurality of selves* based on the denial of singular identity, best characterised in an English context by John Keats's ideal of "negative capability." In a letter to his brothers George and Tom, the poet famously defines "negative capability" as the condition "when man is capable of

being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."[5] Later to Richard Woodhouse, this most aesthetic of English Romantics provides the most detailed account of this poetic ideal:

> As to the poetical Character itself…it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosop[h]er delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body—the Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none; no identity... (Rollins I, 1958: 387, ellipses mine)

Keats here has sketched the groundwork for the philosophy of the Romantic ironist. The ideal poetic self for Keats paradoxically suggests and signifies the annihilation of self, the search not for embodiment, but disembodiment, and the subsequent loss of individuation. Keats had been attending Hazlitt's lectures on Shakespeare (and Milton) around this time and references to the dramatist abound in the above passage.[6] Shakespeare becomes the ultimate embodiment of the lack of body, of fixed attributes, of singularity of perspective. He annihilates himself (to use Hazlitt's term) through the dramatic multiplication of the self. The mind of the dramatic poet, like that of the actor, dwells in perpetual potentiality, not in itself, but in its ability to transform into other characters. It must be able to free itself from itself, at least in moments of apprehending objects in the outside world. This condition leads to the important irony addressed in Keats's letter—the poet should be "unpoetical" in order to be a poet. This strange creature should not possess a single, "unchangeable attribute." This philosophically offensive hybridity, which states that poetic identity emerges through the annihilation of the self and the correlated process of perpetual transformation in form and identity, creates a symptom particular to what I shall refer to as the Romantic grotesque. By implication, the poet should celebrate change and transformation. Fixity of philosophic perspective is shunned. Negative capability constructs a poetic persona that is empty in itself. It allows the systematic progression towards insubstantiality. In attempting to fill some other body through the process of losing individual subjectivity, Keats's ideal poet becomes the object of contemplation. Subjectivity flows outwards, and loses itself in the object instead of "swallowing up" all things that it perceives. A type of inverse

solipsism is born. The circularity of this movement towards achieving poetic voice is crucial. The connection to Shakespeare becomes reflective of a larger Romantic phenomenon.

This Keatsian passage echoes a remarkable understanding of the dramatic personality by Friedrich Schlegel. For Schlegel, the dramatic mind "contains within itself simultaneously a plurality of minds and a whole system of persons." (Firchow 1971: 177) Schlegel is making a philosophical point regarding the mind that dwells in the dramatic potential for plurality, while Keats propounds a poetic ideal. However, in the varied Romanticisms, the boundaries between philosophy and poetry slowly become null and void. In one of the *Critical Fragments* from the *Athenäeum* journal, Schlegel announces the ambition of his Romantic project, attesting to this desire to dissolve boundaries of knowledge: "The whole history of modern poetry is a running commentary on the following brief philosophical text: all art should become science and all science art; poetry and philosophy should be made one." (ibid. 157) Characteristically, the fragment plays with a self-reflexive imperative. Schlegel's "poetry of poetry" enacts a philosophical dictum, which negates the strict separation of the divisionary principle in knowledge. By exemplifying the need to merge poetry and philosophy, Schlegel establishes the ideal of unification that comes to characterise Jena Romanticism. Ironically, this ideal rests on the concept of multiplicity, on the ceaseless questioning and subversion of rigid divisions of perspectives. I claim that this subversion, located in the aesthetics of irony, defines the fluid and shape-shifting patterns of the Romantic grotesque. Multiplicity of viewpoint becomes the catchword of the new Romantic theories. Art is theorised, while philosophy explores its aesthetic ambitions. The similarities between Keats and Schlegel illustrate the extent to which the dramatic proliferation of plurality, and its relationship to the self, becomes a recurrent Romantic theme. In its becoming, the plural and hybrid ways of seeing corroborate the aesthetic ontology of the grotesque.

II—The Self as Dramatic Act: Multiplying Identity

Keats and Schlegel are obviously not alone in addressing the problem of selfhood in the process of poetic composition. As numerous scholars have pointed out, this issue is bequeathed to Romantic poetics by Kantian philosophy that dislocated the mind from its privileged position at the centre of the universe.[7] If Hume had stated that the mind could not be known as an object, Kant limited the mind's capacity to know metaphysical concepts through his dualist separation of the world into

phenomena and noumena: the world of appearance and the unknowable realm of things-in-themselves beyond the dictates of spatio-temporality. Fichte would react with his brand of solipsism or total self-consciousness that appealed to the Jena Romantics. The noumenal is done away with. The I creates itself by positing a not-I that exists solely for the self to understand self-consciousness. In *The Self as Mind* (1986), Charles J. Rzepka studies this struggle for embodiment through the identification of mind with self, culminating in what he calls "visionary solipsism" in the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats. The very characteristics of this poetry revolve around "bodily disidentification, the experience of a waking-dream state, a feeling of oneness with a transcendent mind or consciousness, trust in an imaginative, introspective empathy with other minds."[8] Liminality, uncertainty, and the mixing of ontological states coexist with transcendence through self-consciousness. In my view, this leads to a profound paradox—the poetic mind constructs the universe around itself, only to realise that through this process of construction, the very stability of this mind is brought into question.

In this context, Mark Kipperman's Fichtean understanding of self-consciousness in Romanticism "as an *act*" is also illuminating.[9] The Fichtean idea of the self as *creation-through-action* bears ethical and performative implications. As we shall see during the course of this investigation, the ethico-political and the aestheical-performative are not necessarily disjunctive. Romantic irony's endeavoured merging of the aesthetic and the political is vital. Similarly, I propose that the dramatic resonances of the grotesque—the theoretical construct of theatrical performance—herald an unstable and fluid socio-political cohesion. The self in Romanticism—in a manner that precedes Deleuze and Derrida— is often re-imagined in plurality through the act of performance. I would claim that the Schlegel brothers, by exploding the absolute self in Fichte, envision identity through the *momentary existence of multiple selves* that are always in motion and metamorphoses. This ontology is primarily dramatic, mirroring the plays of theatrical performance. In the case of Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime," the self encounters the world and through that encounter falls back upon and realises its own subjective state. The object is pulled into the subject. The object functions as a state of mind. The poet does not see nature in itself but only the individual, subjective mind and its responses to and through nature. Conversely, in "negative capability," the self wants to prolong the contact with the "not-I," to hold the tension of not being or defining itself. This back and forth movement from total consciousness of self to its dissolution in objects exterior to it becomes a recurrent Romantic *leitmotif*. If Wordsworth saw

nature as a means with which to understand himself, Keats's "negative capability," Victor Hugo's theorisation of the grotesque in *Préface de Cromwell* (*Preface to Cromwell*) (1827), and Friedrich Schlegel's engendering of Romantic irony are examples of the negation of singularity, and the simultaneous privileging of plural and diverse ways of seeing. The mind occupies mutating opinions, genres, and personae, through poetics that are vitally dramatic. Shakespeare, in his ability to mix genres, negates the distinction between "tragedy" and "comedy" so dear to Voltaire and French neoclassicism. His famous characters—"an Iago or an Imogen"—are complex, conflicting, and vital. From Hazlitt's perspective, the bard's creation of a seemingly inexhaustible spectrum of dramatic characters renders him the ideal chameleon poet. Shakespeare is not just the "objective" poet (according to Browning, Shelley being the "subjective" counterpoint) but the creator of *multiple subjectivities*. Shakespeare's most famous character, Hamlet, is a poet in himself, struggling to reconcile his performed personae with the longing for unchanging attributes. In the new, Romantic era heralded by the chaos and shifting power structures of the French Revolution, the stability of the self as an ontological condition has been destroyed. What Shakespeare perceived as a theatrical conceit and necessity—the creation of conflicting self-consciousness(es) in characters like Hamlet—has become an historical condition.[10] In Kant, the self exists as an accidental necessity, as an aggregation of sensations and concepts that are organised by the categories of mind: space, time, quality, relation etc. For the poets, this "transcendental apperception of unity" allows for the creation of multiple personae.

Erich Heller's succinct treatment of the dramatic poet, indicative of the (post)Romantic mind which has been "disinherited," is also instructive. The dramatic poet occupies plurality, being unable to have strict singular opinions. According to Heller, the dramatic poet must harbour "divided minds" and "conflicting beliefs."[11] These contradictions within a single personality would have shocked Keats's virtuous philosopher as they would have also questioned the neoclassical stress on decorum and order. By extension, the notions of *bienséance* ("tact") and *vraisemblance* ("versimilitude") are also questioned. Similarly, in one of his letters, Keats states that the "only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing—to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts." (Rollins, II, 1958: 213) Not knowing one's opinions and permitting the mind to be a poetically productive cauldron of change is beneficial. Metamorphoses, sudden shifts in perspective, simultaneous assertion and negation (to echo Friedrich Schlegel) render themselves the

province of the dramatic poet. Drama thrives on such continual conflict, on the coexistence of opposite emotions, on transgression, and the dramatic poet must show these tensions and antinomies by being multifarious. Drama and theatricality do not allow the comfort zone of having a single, all-encompassing opinion or world view. Performance erects a system only to dismantle it step by step with a smug cruelty. Aristophanes's chorus of clouds represents this eternal chaos, where these clouds can adopt many shapes, illustrating their dramatically dynamic characteristic. Coincidentally, Kierkegaard launches his attack on Schlegel's Romantic irony with measured references to *The Clouds* where Socrates becomes the ultimate ironist whose contribution to sophistry is the "nothing" of having shifting opinions.[12] Historically, the irony deepens when we realise that it was none other than Socrates who launched a scathing attack on the sophists of his time. It is drama then that can ironise irony, philosophy, and drama itself. Its battle with virtuous philosophers, from the time of Plato's *Republic* to the closing down of theatres in an England gripped by civil war and regicide in the seventeenth century, testifies to its perceived threat on morals and civic life which need some stability of opinion.

Drama rejects such stability. It is fluid, and escapes every attempt to hold it in check. Given this quality, it is Proteus and not just Dionysus who, in his state of becoming, emphasises theatrical conflict. Proteus's endless metamorphoses set the symbolic pattern for this art form. Born of water, Proteus adopts mutability. He changes shapes. He bears the gift of prophecy, but will tell tales only when he is captured. He wears masks, takes on guises, and occupies the form of other objects. This ceaseless transformation renders drama "as one of the most perfect art forms" while also being "a world of appearance and illusion."[13] Being the most obviously mimetic of all art forms, it brings forth some of the most troubling questions about art itself. If the plastic arts attempt to portray a moment of stasis in lived or imagined experience—an artificial eternity that implies movement and the existence of time—theatre is the most palpably kinetic of art forms, revelling in the actual embodiment of action, and the visual enactment of causality. It is based on reaction and change. It *is* reaction and change. It flaunts contradiction, multiplicity, transformation. It is the great Shakespearean metaphor for life, while also, *at the same time*, being the "most unreal" of art forms. It does not aim to present static Platonic ideals but by its very nature occupies the realms of seeming, dreams, and trance. Christopher Janaway, reviewing Plato's distrust of art, sets up the alternative perspective grounded in philosophy's historical problem with poetry and theatre:

> Philosophy is thinking, probing, questioning, with a firm scientific method, and for it fine words are never enough. A poet or a writer of speeches is someone who is stuck at the level of words, and will not let them go, because beyond them there is no knowledge and no method that will ever attain it.[14]

Since Book X of *The Republic*, aesthetics in the Western world has dealt with this bifurcation of philosophy and poetry/theatre, a wound that the Jena Romantics wished to heal by uniting poetry, philosophy, criticism, science and mythology. Through a Nietzschean lens, theatrical activity in Plato's world revolved around the festivals of Dionysus, the god of fertility, theatre and wine, where Apollonian clarity and distinctions were dissolved. The theatre inhabited a world of wild emotion, comprising an assault on the rational methodology of dialectical debate. In effect, every attempt to intellectually define drama falls back on itself, as by its very nature, it resists pat definitions. In this, I claim that it is closest to Friedrich Schlegel's chaos of irony. Drama represents irony doing irony.

In fragment 123 of the *Athenäeum* fragments, Schlegel asks with a clarity and confidence slightly at odds with his more typically paradoxical claims: "Isn't poetry the noblest and worthiest of the arts for this, among other reasons: that in it alone drama becomes possible?" (Firchow 1971: 177) Typically, this "assertion" undercuts itself by being framed as a question—the reader, in a Barthesian sense, must complete the claim. In my reading, Schlegel sees all poetry as dramatic, as he would see all poems as being Romantic to a greater or lesser degree. However, each reader, keeping the paradigm of drama and irony in mind, will have her own opinion and answer to this troubling question. Is all poetry drama, in the sense that it presents conflicting opinions at loggerheads with themselves? If so, the Romantic nostalgia for Schiller's naïve poet—one who sings a lyric without the curse of self-consciousness, who is in an intimate, perhaps anti-intellectual contact with nature—is an illusion of nostalgia, since each poem is in reflective conflict with itself. Rather than the poetry of "morbid feelings and devouring egotism," Schlegel desires poetics that are complex, mixed, and dramatic, as if anticipating the Victorian dramatic monologue. Motion in its varied guises—aesthetic, political, and historical—and not stasis, is the call of the day.

III—The Grotesque as Hybridity and Mourning

In an age that saw Schiller's naïve poet as a remembrance of things past, the proliferation of dramatic personae shows the mind a way through which it can deal with, or even compensate for, the curse of self-

consciousness. The mind needs a way out of continually reflecting upon itself. Hyper self-consciousness produces the need for persona, where one does not need to fix opinions, but instead can allow the splitting of the mind to become a series of experimental selves and characters. Geoffrey Hartman's intriguingly titled essay, "Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness," outlines the link between persona and consciousness in European Romanticism, and I quote at length:

> One of the themes which best expresses this perilous nature of consciousness, and which has haunted literature since the Romantic period is that of the Solitary, or Wandering Jew. He may appear as Cain, Ahasuerus, Ancient Mariner, and even Faust. He also resembles the later (and more static) figures of Tithonus, Gerontion, and the poète maudit. These solitaries are separated from life in the midst of life, yet cannot die. They are doomed to live a middle or purgatorial existence which is neither life nor death, and as their knowledge increases so does their solitude. It is consciousness, ultimately, which alienates them from life and imposes the burden of a self which religion or death or a return to the state of nature might dissolve…The very confusion in modern literary theory concerning the fictive "I," whether it represents the writer as person or as persona, may reflect a dialectic inherent in poetry between the relatively self-conscious self, and that self within the self which resembles Blake's "emanation" and Shelley's "epipsyche."[15]

Hartmann references the poetics of the solitary as a transnational issue in modern European poetry. These alienated, bohemian figures occupy the space of paradox—they "are separated from life in the midst of life, yet cannot die," effectively representing the living dead and vice versa. This paradoxical state signifies another grotesque symptom. The voice given to the selves "within the self" is the reward for this alienation from life and stable individuality. The poet has actually ceased to be an individual and has become a modern mythic archetype, an actor playing parts. These solitary suffering archetypes of the post-Romantic poet feel the split between self and nature, self and consciousness, more acutely than the average human being of the mass culture that the likes of Gautier, Baudelaire, and T. S. Eliot so abhorred. This was the myth they made for themselves and for the writers following them, a myth growing from the inability of multiple subjectivity to come together in a longed-for sense of wholeness. The mourning that this results in for writers inherently dizzy on the precipice that overlooks perpetual chaos and change forms one of the significant moments in the birth of an emerging and radical modernity in Romantic theory.

In a book on melancholy in nineteenth-century poetics, *Allegories of One's Own Mind* (2005), David Riede contends that this splitting of the mind from itself (and from the world around it) led to an inchoate melancholy that commenced with Byron and continued through the major Victorian poets. Using the Freudian model in "Mourning and Melancholia," he argues that this condition of the mind turning on itself—and in my view, reflecting on an endless series of its own reflections—produces a Hamlet-like melancholy similar to "depression" in our postmodern world.[16] I will take my cue from Riede and the emerging obsession with the personae of Hamlet, whether it is explicitly voiced in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* or implicitly internalised in Baudelaire's adoption of Hamletian morbidity in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) (1857/61), or championed through the cult of *Hamlétisme* in *fin de siècle* Paris. Like Shakespeare, Hamlet the persona, hovers over this book. In this perpetually self-reflecting character, melancholy (which the Renaissance writer Robert Burton associated with madness) prevents action, and in this sense he is the hyper-sensitive poet-philosopher and precursor to the melancholic poetics of modernity. Too much thinking, not enough doing. For Hamlet, suicide itself is rationalised out of existence:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sickled o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pith and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry
> And lose the name of action.[17]

Laurence Olivier in his film version of the play famously introduced a prologue that stated that Hamlet's tragedy was of a man unable to act. For an actor, the part of Hamlet is a nightmare of possibilities and reflections. An actor at rehearsal is often told to make a clear choice in a scene: what is your objective/goal? What is the obstacle to this objective/goal? Make your choice and stick with it, says the director. Do not waver in your intentions. In Hamlet, the obstacles confronting the actor are almost always within Hamlet himself. In other words, the actor must make clear choices in *showing* how a complex character cannot make choices. This conundrum, paradox, or irony is similar to Keats's contention that the poet is the most unpoetical being. It is an irony that the theatre can contain. Hamlet's detailed and endless soliloquies philosophically anticipate the Fichtean call to inner action, of "thinking oneself," of an almost Schlegelian alternation between assertion and negation, self and non-self. Hamlet performs an endless series of roles and we cannot answer the age-

old question of whether his madness is real or feigned. All we know is that Hamlet is melancholy and he mourns, for himself and the loss of objects around him.

This fragmentation of self-consciousness, the alternation between egotistical sublime and negative capability, and the mourning this results for writers in the nineteenth century are vital themes in my study. This book will examine ruptures in (post)Romantic philosophy and practice when the conflict between self-consciousness and no-self becomes acute. This very conflict schematises the grotesque—in form, through the mixing of genres, and in content, through the adoption of multiple subjects of study, often characterised by obscenity and violence. In Germany, Friedrich Schlegel's notions of irony—a mode that resists containment—prove highly influential in the course of post-Kantian philosophy as Hegel and Kierkegaard after him fight with the phantoms of ironic awareness, endless self-reference, and what they perceive as a certain insincerity in the legacy of Romantic irony. In contrast, for Schlegel, irony is a means of celebrating the dramatic chaos of the world: "Irony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos." (Firchow 1971: 247) Irony signifies the drama of life. In *Préface de Cromwell*, Victor Hugo defines the grotesque as an idiom that reflects the post-Revolutionary world where things are "deformed." Crucially, Hugo associates the grotesque with drama and Shakespeare, and calls for an art that represents reality in an accurate fashion. This new, vitally dramatic art for a post-Revolutionary epoch should indulge in the mixing of modes: tragedy and comedy, ugly and beautiful, horror and buffoonery. It should willingly destabilise aesthetic categories. Hugo's classifications of human history into primitive, ancient, and modern, each with its own characteristic form of poetry (lyric, epic, dramatic) and his understanding of Shakespeare as the creator of grotesque laughter and horror owe much to A. W. Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1809).[18] In turn, these influential lectures by a monumental translator and interpreter of Shakespeare (which effectively commenced "bardolatry" in Europe) were reviewed and praised effusively by none other than William Hazlitt in England (1816) as accompaniments to his own lectures on Shakespeare that so influenced Keats. Consequently, in this cauldron of cosmopolitanism, we seem to have come full circle and the evidence of international *correspondances* between the leading Romantic thinkers and artists of the day will be the glue that binds this book. The importance of Shakespeare as a plenipotentiary of the modern grotesque is the recurrent motif in these transnational dialogues.

Furthermore, keeping in mind the Schlegelian imperative of uniting poetry and philosophy, this investigation underscores another quintessential (post)Romantic phenomenon: writers theorising their art, and thus productively refocusing theory from an aesthetic perspective. From Keatsian "negative capability" and the Schlegel brothers, to Stendhal's *Racine et Shakespeare* (*Racine and Shakespeare*) (1823/25) and Hugo's *Préface*, culminating with Baudelaire's *De L'Essence du Rire* (*On the Essence of Laughter*) (1855), this *double lens* that negotiates and blurs aesthetic and critical faculties is itself a grotesque feature. Alternatively, the Schlegel brothers choose to aestheticise their philosophical perspectives. In keeping with the imperative of plurality inherent to this study, we can say that the grotesque characteristics that emerge through Romantic upheaval sanction multiplicity of perspective. Philosophy and art begin to operate simultaneously.

IV—Defining the Grotesque

So what then is the grotesque, and how does it relate to Romantic irony? How can the grotesque in its Romantic incarnation help us understand this play of irony that negotiates the back and forth movement between identity and the dramatic engendering of plurality in nineteenth-century aesthetics? In a recent book on the relationship of the grotesque to theories of performativity, Ralph E. Remshardt punctuates the inherently amorphous characteristic of the grotesque as a critical term:

> The grotesque will frustrate our desire to hold and name it; it will reside in persistent regression and dispersal from our cognitive faculties, in constant deferral. Coming to it with terms is not yet coming to terms with it. A potent stimulus to critical desire, the grotesque is also the concept that got away.[19]

The grotesque resists capture and control. Every attempt to systematise it leads to epistemological failure. The grotesque exceeds the limits imposed by our critical knowing. By implication, the very act of writing about the grotesque (and the fragmentation endemic to Romantic irony) is self-defeating. The drama of fragmentary exposition mocks extended theoretical intervention. The dramatic paradigm that helps address the grotesque—drama and theatrical activity imply perpetual motion and change—accentuates its open-endedness. This book will explore the Romantic problem with the self as negation and apotheosis through the prism of dramatic alternation. The grotesque is also "historically indifferent and historically particular" (ibid. 45) and it is this *simultaneous*

quality of being within and beyond socio-historical location that is relevant. Friedrich Schlegel's Romantic irony, which serves as the theoretical framework for the aesthetic corollary of the grotesque, operates on this axis of simultaneity. Thus, the alternation of creation and destruction in Schlegel or the simultaneous reaching after transcendence and animality in Baudelaire are syndromes of the grotesque ontology that reaches a tipping point in nineteenth-century theory. The grotesque is a symptom of the modernity that articulates itself through the cataclysms of Romanticism.

So should we even endeavour to define the grotesque? What are the origins of this word? Etymologically, the grotesque harks back to notions of shape-shifting, transformation and metamorphoses. Its origins are found in the fantastical hybrid images that were unearthed in the baths of Titus and Nero outside Rome towards the end of the fifteenth century. These images were located underground, in rooms that had become caves, grottoes. Mikhail Bakhtin, the primary theoretician of the grotesque in the twentieth century, describes these *grottesca* as the "extremely fanciful, free and playful treatment of plant, animal and human forms. These forms seemed to be interwoven as if giving birth to each other. The borderlines that divide the kingdoms of nature in the usual picture of the world were boldly infringed."[20] This merging of normally disparate biological forms, dwelling in the infringement of boundaries, sets up the model for grotesque play. Fundamentally, the *grottesca* function as a counterpoint to neoclassical aesthetics. In addition, the hybridity of these grotesque figures italicise the negation of boundaries and forms that would appeal to the Romantic ironists. It is not coincidental that Bakhtin refers to Friedrich Schlegel as one of the principal theorists of "the *new grotesque* in the next period of world literature." (Bakhtin 1984: 38, italics mine) This book will analyse the effects of this "new grotesque" where the medieval carnival of the grotesque body was "cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm. It ceased to be a joyful, triumphant hilarity. Its positive regenerating power was reduced to a minimum." (ibid. 38) This minimizing of the joyful element in the grotesque is vital for our purposes, specifically given Baudelaire's aesthetics of Satanic mockery in the period that follows the failed and bloody revolutions of nineteenth-century France. For Hugo and Stendhal, Shakespearean drama—positioned against the Classicism of an outmoded Racine— reflects the blood and gore of the post-Revolutionary world. We must also remember that the framework of "grotesque realism" in Bakhtin, which is characteristic of the new grotesque, revolves around the paradoxical celebration of "degradation," a seeping into the grottoes of the flesh, the baser instincts, the animal in the human, "the lowering of all that

is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity." (ibid. 19-20) So whether it is the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*, or Hamlet brooding over Yorick's skull, or the attempted aestheticisation of a rotting carcass in Baudelaire's "Une Charogne" ("A Carcass")—three specifically grotesque instances to which we shall repeatedly return in this study—this "grotesque realism" creates images that repudiate the perfection in form represented by the classical body.[21] Furthermore, as we move towards a theory of the grotesque in relation to Shakespearean theatricality, we must remember that Bakhtin intriguingly affirms "the mask" as "the essence of the grotesque." (ibid. 40) In my view, the mask heralds dissimulation, change, and transformation. It literally and figuratively constitutes the theatre, from Hellenic tragedy to contemporary performance art. By wearing a mask, one instantly dramatises oneself, assumes a role, much like Baudelaire's *hypocrite lecteur* (*hypokrites* being the ancient Greek for "actor"). The mask functions on multiple, paradoxical levels. It helps to hide individuality while simultaneously creating (another) individuality. It can be used to understand the simultaneous creation and annihilation of Schlegel's "permanent parabasis" which defines Romantic irony.[22] In theorising dramatic action, the mask metaphorically represents the totality of theatrical representation. The mask conveys to us the pleasure of reincarnation and metamorphosis, while its "merry negation of uniformity" and "conformity to oneself" gets to the heart of the continual self-parody of Schlegelian discourse. The celebration of "the playful element in life" questions all sanctimonious attempts at systematic system building. The world of "parodies, caricatures, grimaces, eccentric postures, and comic gestures," often the province of the Shakespearean Fool for example, signifies the dramatic becoming of the grotesque (ibid. 40).

Bakhtin's acknowledgement that the "new grotesque" in the play of Schlegel's irony highlights a movement away from carnival towards a dark irony takes us to Wolfgang Kayser's influential interpretation of the grotesque in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1981). As opposed to Bakhtin, Kayser sees the grotesque as resulting from the human subject's acute estrangement from the world, creating a certain sinister element in its becoming. The Munchian scream is its emblem. Kayser regards the origins of the *grottesca* differently. The grotesque grows from estrangement towards the picturesque shades of dream, the *sogni dei pittori*, where boundaries are blurred, genres mixed, perspectives muddled through perennial play and motion.[23] Vitally, Kayser considers Shakespeare to be "the master of the grotesque," (Kayser 1981: 41) and he makes numerous references to Schlegel. For Kayser, Schlegel's treatment

of the grotesque in the *Athenäeum* fragments "is constituted by a clashing contrast between form and content, the unstable mixture of heterogeneous elements, the explosive force of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying." (ibid. 53) This violent clash of disparate parts, "the unstable mixture" of opposites, and the resultant creation of the comic situated within the confines of terror, becomes the defining characteristic of the modern, Romantic grotesque. This book will often focus on the darker aspects of the grotesque in the nineteenth century, from the revisioning of the Shakespearean grotesque to Baudelaire's rotting carcass in *Les Fleurs du Mal,* but will recall the shadows of the carnivalistic ecstasy familiarised by Bakhtin. Aesthetic interplay governs the condition of the grotesque. The terror of the modern, post-Revolutionary world legitimises it.

Historically, we may view the French Revolution and the resulting Reign of Terror as the starting points of the age of grotesque transformation. Louis XVI, Danton, and Robespierre have had their heads chopped off. Charlotte Corday has stabbed Marat in his bath. Thousands of others have been decapitated, and the drama of the guillotine has been watched and cheered and jeered by thousands as if at a great amphitheatre of political metamorphoses.[24] There is something simultaneously frightening and comic about this state of affairs, which may be why Friedrich Schlegel famously bracketed the French Revolution with Fichte's philosophy and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* as being the dominating "tendencies of the age." (Firchow 1971: 190) Politics has become similar to German idealist philosophy and the classic *Bildungsroman*. There is something grotesque in this very suggestion itself, symptomatic of the aesthetics of irony that mixes and matches apparent oppositions in the same way that Aristophanes united Socrates with his sophistic enemies. As we shall see in the next chapter, this fragmentary association of apparently disparate concepts, creates the foundation for the grotesque and the aesthetics of irony. The aestheticisation of political activity coincides with the politicisation of art. The chiasmic nature of this relationship is crucial for our exploration of the grotesque.

V—Outlining the Grotesque

The first chapter of this book, "Exposing the Protagonist: The Play of Romantic Irony," will examine Friedrich Schlegel's Romantic irony as the theoretical frame for the grotesque. While commentators have studied Schlegel's irony in relation to the novel as well as the "crisis of reason" in

post-Kantian philosophy, little attention has been paid to the essential drama of Romantic irony. This chapter aims at filling this lacuna, while forming the theoretical and philosophical groundwork for the explorations conducted in this book. Using the insights of twentieth-century and current critical theory—from Walter Benjamin to Andrew Bowie—this chapter studies the theatrical implications of Schlegel's fragments, his reworking of the solipsistic nature of Fichtean philosophy, as well as the effects of self-conscious ironic discourse on Romantic aesthetics. Fundamentally, it looks towards establishing *theatricality as ontology* as a means through which to conduct our exploration into the grotesque in Romantic theory.

The second chapter, "The Antagonist Speaks: Romantic Shakespeare," further investigates the link between Romantic irony and a theory of the grotesque in conjunction with the Romantic theorisation of Shakespearean drama. For Friedrich Schlegel, Shakespeare is at "the center of Romantic art," (Firchow 1971: 197) exemplifying the dramatic process of perpetual becoming and regeneration. One of the claims of this chapter is that the Romantic apperception of the Shakespearean grotesque in Schlegelian theory (positioned against the hegemony of French neoclassicism) is a watershed in Romantic theory. A. W. Schlegel's highly influential readings of the bard in his lectures on drama (1809) transform the English dramatist into the total representation of the Romantic worldview, which delights in shifts in perspective, transformation, and the simultaneous celebration of the spiritual and the bodily, the tragic and the comic, the horrific and the absurd. The effects of these lectures on William Hazlitt's formulations of Shakespeare as a natural genius and the creator of varied and highly developed individual characters further accentuate particular themes that cast shadows over Romantic criticism. Oppositions are examined: Shakespeare the Romantic versus the Shakespeare of Enlightenment thought, Shakespeare as studied by the "home-grown" critic (Hazlitt) versus the one re-created by the "foreign" observer (Schlegel), and the Shakespeare on the page versus the engendering of the Shakespearean grotesque on the stage.

Chapter Three explores the birth of Shakespearean revolution in early French Romanticism, venting the concerns voiced by a "foreign" Shakespeare in Chapter Two. This chapter will first examine a forgotten text in French by A. W. Schlegel, *Comparaison Entre la Phèdre de Racine et Celle d'Euripide* (*Comparison Between Racine's Phèdre and that of Euripides*, 1807), which denigrates Racine in favour of Euripides and Shakespeare. In doing so, I will set up a vital connection between Schlegelian theory and the French interpretation of it. Racine exemplifies a dead Classicism, Shakespeare a vibrant Romanticism. Stendhal recreates

this Schlegelian binary in *Racine et Shakespeare*. For Stendhal, influenced by the Schlegel lectures and Hazlitt, the "Romantic Shakespeare" constitutes the literature for the nineteenth century, whereas the plays of Racine are representative of doctrine, conformity, and a pre-Revolutionary status quo. Victor Hugo's *Préface de Cromwell* extends the implications of Stendhal's polemic: Shakespeare is irrevocably aligned with the modern grotesque. The drama of the grotesque, unlike the lyric and the epic, is particular to the modern world which celebrates the mixing of contraries and opposites, while placing the physically ugly at the centre of modern art. Significantly, the Shakespeare of French Romanticism revolts violently against the rules of neoclassical dogma, the *ancien régime* of Voltaire and Boileau.

Chapter Four will examine the significance of the grotesque in the poetics of "late-Romanticism" in Baudelaire as a development of the theoretical foundations provided by the treatises of the Schlegel brothers, Stendhal, and Hugo.[25] The chapter will focus specifically on Baudelaire's own study of the grotesque and its relationship to the comic in *De L'Essence du Rire* (1855), juxtaposed with case-studies of specific poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, particularly "Une Charogne" ('A Carcass'). The poetry of Baudelaire—in its constant negotiations between poet-persona and audience/reader, and its aesthetics of radical shock—allow theories of the grotesque to become practical. As a poet and critic, Baudelaire makes the grotesque blur the boundaries between the comic and the tragic, while introducing the element of *mourning* into the carnival of the grotesque. This chapter will also make the claim that Baudelaire's personae in *Les Fleurs du Mal* are reflective of his obsession with Hamlet. Consequently, through the complex and multiple figures of Baudelaire, I will reflect on the resonances of the (post)Romantic grotesque, in its articulation of an emerging poetics of shock and mourning. I will claim that through Baudelaire, the grotesque lurches towards modernism, thereby establishing the foundation for the radical experiments carried out in *The Waste Land*. In doing so, I will claim that the Romantic grotesque helps us relocate the bases of twentieth-century modernism, while its dramatically plural, playful, and open-ended nature points us towards the subversions of postmodern and contemporary theory.

CHAPTER ONE

EXPOSING THE PROTAGONIST: THE THEORY OF ROMANTIC IRONY

…for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.[1]
—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

I—Irony and the Philosophy of Art

In a famous fragment published in the *Athenäeum* journal during the last years of the eighteenth century, Friedrich Schlegel draws the reader into a startling juxtaposition of apparently disparate concepts and events—the French Revolution; Fichte's speculative idealism that tried to bridge the Kantian divide between theoretical and practical reason, sensibility and understanding, the world of phenomena and the troublesome "thing-in-itself;" and Goethe's influential *Bildungsroman*, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795). These events represent political upheavals of a hitherto unimaginable degree, transcendental philosophy, and a novel describing the protagonist's attempted journey to self-discovery as actor and playwright. Historically, Robespierre's Reign of Terror has already taken place. We are on the cusp of the Napoleonic era. Schlegel himself is aware of the seeming arbitrariness of these connections, and it would be worth quoting the fragment in its entirety, a paradoxical proposition that Schlegel would have surely delighted in:

> The French Revolution, Fichte's philosophy, and Goethe's Meister are the greatest tendencies of the age. Whoever is offended by this juxtaposition, whoever cannot take any revolution seriously that isn't noisy and materialistic, hasn't yet achieved a lofty, broad perspective on the history of mankind. Even in our shabby histories of civilization, which usually resemble a collection of variants accompanied by a running commentary for which the original classical text has been lost; even there many a little book, almost unnoticed by the noisy rabble at the time, plays a greater role than anything they did. (Firchow 1971: 190)

We can detect a few important themes here. The intention of the first sentence is to shock. How, the reader asks, are the dominating "tendencies" of the age to be related? What is the common strand that unites politics, idealist philosophy, and the modern novel? How are we to negotiate and interpret the disparate tendencies of this mixing of oppositions that is characteristic of Schlegel's Romantic irony? In this case, the reader is Novalis's extended author. Revolt and insurrection of are common features of each "event." However, what forms of revolt are we referring to here? As these questions display, what is at stake not just in this isolated example but throughout the post-Kantian struggle with aesthetics and its relation to epistemology, ethics, and the ontological "ground" for human experience, is a question of hermeneutics, of the creation and temporary completion of understanding, of the play in the possibilities of meaning. In *Wilhelm Meister*, a minor character Barbara asks a key question of Marianne when she is torn between the man she loves (Wilhelm) and the man who supports her (Norberg): "Why do young people always think in terms of irreconcilable opposites?"[2] Goethe's character seems to question the validity of thinking in terms of either/or, a position that the Jena Romantics would endorse. Aesthetically, Schlegel provides a fitting riposte to Barbara—he was around twenty-five years of age during the high tide of Jena Romanticism—allowing his imagination to momentarily reconcile opposites. All revolutions have become aesthetic happenings.

Ernst Behler, in *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (1990), hones in on the distinguishing feature of Schlegelian associations through a historicising account of Romanticism's reaction to obsolete systems, whether socio-political or aesthetic: "The late eighteenth century thus appears to be marked by at least three revolutions, that is, in politics, in literature, and in philosophy, which in each case overcame an old order, an ancient regime, for a modern state of affairs."[3] Conversely, it would seem here that political and historical metaphors—Behler's obvious reference to the stranglehold on social life by the *ancien régime* of the French first and second estates before 1789 makes this clear—are applied to historically locate comparatively minor cataclysms in philosophy and art. The question as to whether aesthetics has been politicised (and vice versa) remains ambiguous. In a Romantic context, Friedrich Schiller's letters on education reflect on the uncertain nature of the rapport shared by art and politics, and on the role of the aesthetic life in the shaping of a functioning, proto-capitalist polis. This give and take between political and aesthetic domains forms the basis of an inconclusive (post)Romantic argument.