Oscillations of romantic irony: Percy B. Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" and Friedrich Schlegel's model of understanding

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OSCILLATIONS OF ROMANTIC IRONY:
PERCY B. SHELLEY’S DEFENCE OF POETRY AND FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL’S MODEL OF UNDERSTANDING

by

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OSCILLATIONS OF ROMANTIC IRONY:
PERCY B. SHELLEY’S *DEFENCE OF POETRY* AND FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL’S
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Abstract

Based on a close study of Percy B. Shelley’s treatise *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) and Friedrich Schlegel’s essay “On Incomprehensibility,” several fragments, and his “Dialogue on Poetry,” I argue that the Romantic irony at work in their structure leads to a new reading and understanding of these texts. Starting from what I call Shelley’s “unsuccessful” metaphors, I establish that their essence is oscillation between likeness and difference, not any content. These metaphors operate like Romantic irony and call for a process of reading unique to Romantic texts. In chapter 2 I set various fragments by Schlegel in dialogue with each other and trace the system or model of understanding and reading emerging from this “dialogue.”

I then discuss Schlegel’s essay “On Incomprehensibility” focusing on Romantic irony as Schlegel’s way of working with the shortcomings and incommensurability of language. Romantic irony, as I argue in chapter 4, is Schlegel’s productive use of the “indissoluble antagonism” between “the necessity of complete communication” and its impossibility. Through Romantic irony Schlegel provides space for the readers’ active contribution. Through Romantic irony we can understand what Schlegel means by the relationship of “sympoetry or symphilosophy” to be established between writer and reader.

I then examine more closely in chapter 5 Schlegel’s view of writing as superior to spoken communication – not for its permanence but for its openness. With the analysis of the dialogue between these texts I argue for a uniquely Schlegelian or Romantic model of writing, one that contradicts the stereotype of Romantic literature as impassioned self-expression. Instead, Schlegelian writing is decentered, driven not by the writer’s passions
or stake in a subject matter but by the desire for a co-creative relationship with readers. As “writing from the end,” Schlegelian writing starts from agreement between reader and writer, one that is independent of the subject. This detachment from the subject matter ensures for writer and reader the freedom to meet as equals. This meeting begins in the writer’s mind and gives the writing a distinctive quality. As with Shelley’s “unsuccessful” metaphors, the oscillations between opposite poles create the space for new discoveries.
Acknowledgments

Undertaking the journey to the doctorate is a long and arduous process, doing so in middle age makes the journey an especially challenging adventure and the satisfactions of studying, reading, learning, and writing even sweeter. Completing this dissertation while dealing with the usual pressures of life and running a business has put my resolve and determination to the test repeatedly – and heightened my enjoyment and of reading and learning in depth about a subject and authors close to my heart. I will always be grateful to the Department of English for the opportunity to return to graduate school and pursue my studies.

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**Introduction**

Alles was etwas wert ist, muß zugleich dies sein und das Entgegengesetzte.
Friedrich Schlegel, fragment #633, *KSA*, vol. 18

The most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet.
Percy B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*

. . . weil jedes vortreffliche Werk, von welcher Art es auch sei, mehr weiß als es sagt, und mehr will als es weiß.
Friedrich Schlegel, “Über Goethes Meister”

This dissertation grew out of my astonishment and curiosity upon noticing striking similarities between Percy B. Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* and Schlegel’s essay “On Incomprehensibility”; indeed, in the critical literature on these works I came upon nearly identical phrases, in German and English. Passages dealing with Shelley’s essay, especially his metaphors, could have been translated and applied nearly equally to Schlegel’s essay, especially his irony. That is, some of the studies of Shelley looked as though they were English translations of passages from studies of Schlegel, and vice versa, though of course the authors of these studies had not read each other’s work, much as Schlegel and Shelley had not read each other either. It seemed to me then that the two essays were linked by more than similar surface features but rather had a deeper, underlying affinity that was worth exploring.
Chapter 1 begins this process with a close study of Shelley’s view of metaphor and the way they operate in his treatise, and I focus especially on those metaphors that, albeit memorable and unique, defy Shelley’s own definition.

Moreover, Friedrich Schlegel’s texts, the above-mentioned essay as well as his fragments and even his “Dialogue on Poetry,” are notoriously resistant to efforts at understanding. They are difficult to nearly impossible to paraphrase, much less analyze and interpret in the linear prose traditionally used for literary studies. Just as some of Shelley’s metaphors in his Defence seemed to elude the grasp of understanding and be at odds with his own definition of metaphor in that essay, so Schlegel’s work seemed to withhold the logical connections and coherence the mind searches in reading and tease readers with conundrums. In other words, works by the two authors evoke and at the same time persistently frustrate a very similar search for a definitive answer on their subject matter.

Convinced that the “incomprehensibility” here was not accidental but the motivating force of these texts, I study Schlegel’s fragments and how they ask to be read and understood in more detail in chapter 2. Essentially, in chapters 2 and 3 I work out what Schlegel expressed so concisely in his Athenaeum fragment #53: “Es ist gleich tödlich für den Geist, ein System zu haben, und keins zu haben. Er wird sich also wohl entschließen müssen, beides zu verbinden.” [“It’s equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two.”]. That is, the lack of a system in Schlegel’s writings was rather obvious, and he has often been criticized for it and generally been underestimated as a thinker because of this. However, as I argue in these two chapters, based on my reading of several Schlegel texts, the lack
of a system is accompanied at the same time by the presence of one, namely, a particular model or process of reading and understanding that readers (and thus critics) are meant to engage in. By tracing the steps of this model as they unfold in various fragments, I develop and highlight the connections between them, thus putting them in conversation with each other. That is, essentially in chapters 2 and 3, I perform a Schlegelian reading of Schlegel’s texts, showing that he does indeed both have and not have a system. More important, as my argument develops in chapter 3, I locate the affinity between the texts under discussion in their incomprehensibility; their very refusal to be read for content makes possible and maintains the oscillations first described in chapter 1 in the discussion of Shelley’s metaphors.

At this point, with chapter 4, I shift my argument to the question that has gradually emerged from the preceding discussion, namely, that of a peculiarly Romantic kind of writing. That is, chapters 1 through 3 have laid the groundwork on the basis of which I then argue that Schlegelian writing indeed takes a different approach from traditional expository or rhetorical writing and overcomes the problems that beset writing, perhaps in our time more than ever before. It does so not by eliminating or preventing misunderstandings or incomprehension and not by giving writers ways to make their views more convincing and firm. On the contrary, as I argue in chapter 4, the hallmark of Schlegelian writing is freedom. Based on my study of the privileged position both writing and dialogue occupy in Schlegel’s thinking, I contend that Schlegelian writing allows for the widest dialogue possible to take place, not by overcoming the inevitable distance between writer and reader, but by introducing the additional detachment between writer and subject matter.
As I explain and illustrate in the detailed study of Schlegel’s “Dialogue on Poetry” in chapter 5, Schlegelian writing has its center in detachment. The detachment, difference, or “gap” between the writer’s various inner voices constitutes their “sympoetry”; because the writer is to be detached from the subject matter and any definite views or enthusiasm about it, the reader can be “constructed” (‘deduced,’ as Schlegel says) as a participant in this sympoetry. In chapter 5 I also take up the affinity between Shelley’s treatise and the Schlegel text that I asserted in chapter 1 and the revisioning of genre definitions and boundaries that was part of all previous chapters. To clarify that argument, I use part of chapter 5 to place the two texts under discussion so far in dialogue with each other as well as with other texts more distant in time and space.

In line with many other transvaluations I have analyzed in Schlegel’s work in the preceding chapters, in chapter 5 I thus make an argument for the primacy of Schlegelian writing over spoken communication for precisely the reasons that are usually considered drawbacks of writing: the absence of writer and reader from each other, the openness of texts to countless and various interpretations, the (alleged) fixedness and definitiveness of texts, for example.

In chapter 5 I return to several of the earlier core themes and consider them in the broader context, not just of their timelessness (in Schlegel’s sense) and thus relevance for our time, but specifically regarding the implications for a different, enlivened writing practice. That is, ultimately, my question in this project is whether Schlegel’s concept of written communication (detailed in his three laws for it, Lyceum fragment #98) and his model of understanding have relevant implications for making communication and understanding possible in a time when more than ever before the “public” sphere has
become fragmented, splintered, and cultural as well as linguistic differences seem nearly insurmountable.

As this dissertation is intended to show, most explicitly in chapter 5 and the conclusion, unlike traditional expository and rhetorical writing, which generally asserts and often solidifies a power differential between readers and writers, Schlegelian writing is based on the freedom of both writer and reader with regard to each other and the subject matter – and even the language in which they meet. On the level of language this freedom is made possible by the ongoing oscillations of Romantic irony, the constant movement between alternatives, opposite poles, where things are “this” and also at the same time “not this,” as the Schlegelian epigraph to this introduction has it.

In the concluding chapter, I briefly summarize the argument built up in the course of the earlier chapters and then outline how a different model of writing, both as approach to written communication and as a way to teach writing, could be developed – that is, a process of Schlegelian writing or “writing from the end,” as I call it in the conclusion.
Chapter 1

Metaphor as Oscillation

There are no unsuccessful metaphors, just as there are no unfunny jokes.
Donald Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean”

Whatever we could say about unfunny jokes, Davidson’s statement seems to say that it’s all a matter of definition: if a joke is defined as funny, then, of course, anything not funny is not a joke.² This may be a useful approach to jokes and their classification, but it’s not so clear that it applies equally to metaphors. Further on in the essay from which the above quotation is taken, Davidson explains that a “metaphor makes us attend to some likeness, often a novel or surprising likeness, between two or more things” (247). It seems to me that this “trite and true observation,” as Davidson calls it, offers a starting point for judging the success of metaphors, or at least gauging the extent to which particular metaphors succeed at bringing the likeness between the items involved into focus.

As I will argue here, not all metaphors are equally successful in fulfilling this task of highlighting likeness. Moreover, it is above all the metaphors that fall short – I will call them unsuccessful metaphors – that can elucidate the workings of all metaphors in general. Metaphors deserve a closer look since they are at the core of much (if not all) of our thinking and learning.³ Indeed, examining how metaphors succeed or fail will offer insights into aspects of the translation process that are often neglected and point out how the limitations of language may be overcome by means of language itself. That is, as a closer study of Shelley’s A Defence of Poetry in connection with Friedrich Schlegel’s fragments and essays will show, metaphors – in particular, the unsuccessful ones – are closely linked to Romantic irony.
For several reasons, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s essay *A Defence of Poetry* is an ideal starting point for this discussion of metaphors. First, the essay offers a large number of metaphors, especially several unsuccessful ones that are among Shelley’s most memorable ones. Second, Shelley defines the function of metaphors in the beginning of his essay and connects them in interesting ways with the origin and development of language. And, third, Shelley also maps out the trajectory of metaphors’ origin and deterioration based on the decay of their power over the course of their lifespan, thus giving metaphors a central role in the revitalization and creative adaptability of language. Interestingly, this trajectory does not entirely apply to Shelley’s most intriguing metaphors, namely, the ones that do not fully conform to his own definition of their function. Moreover, Shelley’s distinctive style, namely, his rapid movement from metaphor to metaphor without fully alighting on any one not only calls attention to the tropes in his texts but also enacts aspects of how metaphors work as a process – a process much like that of Romantic irony.

To begin with, a closer look at Shelley’s definition of what metaphors do will show how to gauge their success and why some do not succeed but have a different, and as I will argue, more important and far-reaching effect. Shelley defends poetry against the (mock) attack mounted by his friend Thomas Love Peacock in *The Four Ages of Poetry* by giving it a central role as instrument and expression of the imagination, which he elevates above reason and analytical thinking. For Shelley, it is the imagination that shapes and is ultimately responsible for innovations and for human civilization. It exerts this vital role largely by means of language, specifically poetical language, which Shelley describes as “vitally metaphorical.” By virtue of its metaphors poetical language serves
as a heuristic device for discovering new knowledge and keeping language alive and adaptable for new uses. As Shelley says: “[The poets’] language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.” By making visible the “before unapprehended relations” – that is, the similarities and connections between things – metaphors also make “familiar objects be as if they were not familiar”; serving as agents of defamiliarization, metaphors keep language fresh and adaptable and allow new meanings to be expressed. At the same time, they are also the instrument of the contraction and “hardening” of language; just as they revitalize language so they also play a role in its deterioration into the formulaic. That is, through repeated use metaphors over time degenerate into stock phrases and clichés whose original metaphorical power comes to be taken for granted and then finally is not even noticed or experienced anymore. The metaphors become, in Shelley’s terms, “signs for portions or classes of thoughts.” Thus, for the most part, ordinary language for the communication of ideas and conveying information is an assemblage of familiar, worn-out expressions and ready-made phrases – that is, dead metaphors. While this familiarity may make them easily and widely understood, it also constricts their power to mean, one reason why what we say is so often only a poor reflection of what we mean. Only through the renewed defamiliarization introduced by new metaphors does language remain adaptable to new content – that is, new “before unapprehended relations.”
In addition to rendering visible new connections between things, metaphors also extend the range of meaning of the individual words or phrases of which they are composed. That is, as terms belonging to the context of one of the elements (vehicle) are “carried over” to that of the other (tenor), each of the terms used – and arguably all terms and expressions associated with either element of the comparison – gains additional meaning as the range of contexts in which it can be applied is extended, however slightly. As a result of this extension or expansion of applicability of terms and phrases, not only familiar objects but also familiar elements of language come to appear as “if they were not familiar,” and we can see and understand them afresh, perhaps even with a sense of astonishment. On the level of language metaphors thus can establish connections between previously unrelated semantic and syntactic elements; these connections are then available for building upon and further expansion. With each new metaphor poets lay down the initial “links” between the sets of linguistic elements associated with the items compared in the metaphor, extending the range of meaningful use of these elements. Further use and widespread adoption of those metaphors will allow additional extensions. As a result, language is enriched.

In the process metaphors similarly enrich our perception and understanding by bringing to the foreground “before unapprehended relations” – “likeness,” as Davidson put it. For Shelley, metaphors in particular and all poetic language in general serve this vital function by giving expression to the mind’s ongoing synthesis of previously disparate perceptions. In marking or accentuating the “before unapprehended relations of things” metaphors let those things appear in a new light, in relationships and connections that change our perception and understanding of them, even if only subtly. We get to see
them afresh, and in particular as having similarities not previously apparent. It is by emphasizing likeness amidst the obvious difference between the two poles of the comparison that metaphors add to our knowledge; by amalgamating previously separate perceptions, metaphors provide “a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” to the mind (282). In the process, as we see the likeness – ideally, an unexpected and instructive one – highlighted against the background of difference, our understanding of one of the metaphor’s compared items, the one already known, informs our comprehension of the other; we perceive each in the light of the other and thus come to understand each better – according to Shelley, this is how poetry by way of metaphor “awakens and enlarges the mind itself” (282). Metaphors thus also impart a certain degree of order to the world we perceive by linking, even subsuming, what had seemed irreconcilably different in an integrated, unified pattern.

Thus, Shelley situates metaphor at the center of both perception and knowledge; it plays a critical role in both. As John Wright emphasizes in his study *Shelley’s Myth of Metaphor*, “In terms of Shelley’s philosophic position the chief, and as far as I can tell, the most novel, idea in the *Defence* is the view expressed here that metaphor is a direct agent of human knowledge which picks out and perpetuates the apprehension of things or relations of things otherwise invisible to or overlooked by the human mind at any point in its individual or cultural history.” Of course, just as with a metaphor’s driving role in the renewal of language, its function as “agent” of knowledge deteriorates over time through repeated use, and the new and “surprising” order it originally imparted to our apprehension degenerates to the point of dulling or even blocking our perception of difference as well as of likeness. That is, when metaphors are still new, they can strip
“the veil of familiarity from the world,” but over time through repeated use they take on layers of familiarity of their own and spread an even denser or thicker veil over their components, diminishing in the process our powers of apprehension as well as the richness of the world we perceive. Metaphors, the drivers of perpetual renewal of both language and apprehension, can serve that function only for a limited time before becoming drained of their power and significance through repeated use. Time thus plays an essential role in the function of metaphors and, as will become clear in chapter xx, also in Romantic irony and Romantic fragments, where the dialogue between writers and readers is potentially extended to infinity. Metaphors must constantly be renewed themselves, and that, according to Shelley, is the poets’ task. In addition to their vital role in the development of language, poets continue to renew language by creating new metaphors out of the detritus of the old ones, keeping language, at least in their use of it, vitally metaphorical.

An example of a metaphor as, in John Wright’s words, “organized language and thought in the sense that the reason for or unifying principle of the relations it discovers is immediately evident in the unified verbal formula or other form of expression” is the one linking poems and plants, especially flowers or trees. Shelley’s most famous phrasing of this “before unapprehended relation” in the Defence is the one describing the “vanity of translation”: “it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower” (280). This and similar uses of the plant metaphor – plant and other organicist imagery became a common and eventually typical trope of the Romantic era – generally
make the likeness between plants and poems immediately perceptible: the shape of both is determined (or supposed to be determined) by their intrinsic function, their own inner laws of form and function; both can serve a pragmatic or social purpose as well as be aesthetic objects in their own right; the parts or components of each are organically or inherently necessary and thus in each case the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and so on. Tracing the permutations and implications of the linking of poems and plants would reveal the extent to which this trope has enriched critical apprehension of poetry as well as language itself; still, by now this metaphor has become a cliché. To restore its metaphoric power, it has to be troped further; that is, the metaphor can no longer be used without reference to or at least acknowledgement of its history, its previous uses, felicitous or otherwise. This metaphor thus has become readily available for irony and satire in the process of losing its power to illuminate new “before unapprehended relations.” The likeness between plants and poems having been thoroughly established, the links have by now become ruts; what poems and plants have in common is no longer a surprise, and indeed will soon be hardly noticed anymore at all and merge into the background of the familiar and expected. The trope has almost become a hollow phrase without “integral unity” both in terms of the linguistic elements it has joined and also regarding the “relations of things” the perception of which it has made possible.7

That is, the plant metaphor for poetry is (or was) successful, in Davidson’s terms: the metaphor succeeded in making visible a likeness that might not have been obvious previously, and it established the similarities so convincingly that it was widely adopted and repeated frequently. This metaphor exemplifies both the power of these tropes to highlight likeness to the point of making differences recede into the background and the
path by which a metaphor’s success also seals its fate, fixing its course toward the inevitable destination of cliché and stock phrase and, ultimately, loss of its status as metaphor. While this metaphor may still be pleasing, it can no longer function as a heuristic device, surprising us into new apprehension or understanding.

Yet, while the dead metaphors littering our language seem to prove the inevitability of every metaphor’s fate, as Shelley described it, there are exceptions: the metaphors I have called unsuccessful. My argument here is that precisely by not succeeding in firmly establishing the “relations” or likeness between their elements, these metaphors, more than the successful ones, drive the perpetual renewal of language, give rise to new perceptions of “before unapprehended relations,” and, indeed, to new thoughts. As I will show, studying these metaphors offers insights into metaphorical processes in general as well as into language; it is here that language, meaning, and translation intersect. Several examples of such exceptions can be found in Shelley’s Defence; for instance, the enigmatic metaphor of poetry’s power and grandeur, “Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it,” does not establish only similarity and order. The relations of likeness it leads readers to apprehend between a “sword of lightning” and poetry are not stable but light up in a flash – as in a stroke of lightning – and then vanish. In part this is due to the fact that “sword of lightning” is a metaphor in itself. Thus, the relationship being established is not between an intangible “tenor” – poetry – and a concrete “vehicle” – the sword of lightning – so that our knowledge of the latter could inform our understanding of the former; instead, the vehicle is a metaphor itself. In a sense, knowledge and order, or insight into the nature of poetry, are deferred.
Moreover, Shelley shows us this sword in the act of consuming, burning up, the scabbard that is to sheathe it. The scabbard is there in the metaphorical image and then immediately disappears, is consumed. As in a magic trick, we see the scabbard in one moment and then it is “consumed” right before our inner eyes. And the sword itself likewise does not have a stable presence; after all, lightning by definition flashes: it appears for a moment and then vanishes. In a sense, its essence is precisely in its rapid disappearance; its absence is as much part of what defines it as its presence.

Thus, this metaphor fits into a web of related metaphors and images that highlight the ephemeral, intangible, fleeting nature of poetry, for example: “[poetry’s] footsteps are like those of a wind over the sea, which the coming calm erases, and whose traces remain only, as on the wrinkled sand which paves it.” Here, poetry seems to be more “present” after it has departed, been erased, than before, as though its “traces” are more important than the poetry itself – much as the perception of lightning is fully realized only after the lightning bolt has disappeared. That is, poetry (like the sword of lightning) is present only fleetingly, flashing up for a moment, like a subatomic particle, whose presence is evidenced only in the effects it has on other particles around it (there are numerous images of flashing, momentary lighting up in Shelley’s essay).

Interestingly, as I will show below, this alternation between “presence” and “absence” – of a definitive meaning, understanding, and authorial voice – is also constitutive of Romantic irony, where the opposing views also alternate, just as writer and reader alternate, in a sense, between having a shaping “presence” in the text and being absent from it. The same alternation shapes the Romantic fragment, which is both a whole and a part, a complete presence as well as the completion of a presence, always
leaving open a space for a future presence. That is, like poetry (in Shelley’s sense here), Romantic fragments, as components of a dialogue (see chapter 3 below), are shaped in the present by the anticipation of a future response. Unlike fragments in the ordinary sense, Romantic fragments are not concerned with reconstructing a past but with creating space for future developments and growth. Regarding poetry, Shelley expresses that orientation toward the future in the conclusion of his *Defence*:

> Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. (297)

Yet, as is clear from both Shelley’s discussion and use of metaphors, poetry not only reflects the shadow cast by the future on the present but is indeed shaped in the present by the anticipated, still absent, future.

Thus emphasizing poetry’s “timeless” nature – as something out of and beyond historical time – Shelley’s images playing with the alternation between momentary presence and absence emphasize the transcendent, almost otherworldly power of poetry. This strand of imagery culminates in the famous passage “when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet,” which places poetry beyond what can be defined and delineated. The play of presence/absence in these images echoes and enhances the alternation between likeness and difference that characterizes most of the metaphors in this thematic thread.
Ultimately, this play includes the poet/writer as well, with the authorial, centering “I” being present only for moments and not consistently.

Just as the sword of lightning, by virtue of what lightning is, appears and then disappears again almost immediately, so we catch a glimpse of how poetry is like that sword and then return to seeing how the two are not alike and to becoming aware again of the differences. For example, poetry can stand the test of time; it lasts beyond the moment while lightning does not. Poetry can be preserved (in books, for example) to be read and experienced at any time but lightning cannot. We may have pictures of a bolt of lightning from the past, but we cannot keep and experience at will that lightning flash itself. Unlike lightning, which is either experienced in the moment it occurs or not at all, poetry can be shared with others at any time. In other words, this particular metaphor does not entirely conform to Shelley’s own definition of marking and perpetuating “before unapprehended relations,” and it also has not yet deteriorated into cliché – perhaps because it does not fulfill the expectations of the definition.

Before examining in more detail how this and similar metaphors deal with likeness and difference and how their freshness and vitality has been preserved, I want to place them into larger context of Shelley’s handling of metaphors and other tropes. In particular, Shelley’s distinctive movement from one trope to another, often an unrelated or even contradictory one, seems to indicate that this movement in itself is more important than the metaphors on which we alight only briefly. For example, poetry both “strips the veil of familiarity from the world” (295) and is itself wrapped in veils: “veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed” (291). At the same time, poetry is also “as the first acorn, which contained all oaks
potentially” (291) and “a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it” (294) and “a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted” (281). But poetry is not only something static; it is also, and at the same time, an alchemical process that “transmutes all that it touches” and “turns into potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life” (295). According to Shelley, then, poetry cannot be encapsulated in a definition, having essentially already vanished at the moment we try to grasp it; more important, it is a process rather than a product, and in this respect Shelley’s view of poetry agrees with Friedrich Schlegel’s definition of Romantic poetry in his famous Athenaeum fragment #116.

By relentlessly moving us along from one trope to the next without ever allowing us to come to rest on any one of them, Shelley seems to engage in a flight or pursuit of poetry rather than in its defense. After all, it would seem that “defending” poetry – even if only against Peacock’s mock-attack in The Four Ages of Poetry – would logically require a definition of poetry, with clear boundaries setting it off from everything that is not poetry. Whether “defence” is understood as the countermove to an attack or as “apology” in the tradition of Philip Sidney, in either case a definition of poetry, that is, clarity on what exactly this essay is a defense of, would seem to be the logical starting point. However, Shelley’s style in his treatment of poetry in this essay suggests that the essence of poetry lies in the impossibility of fixing it, indeed, in the traces it leaves behind; the movement from one image or thought to another is thus intrinsic to the nature of poetry. Shelley’s deployment of tropes here enacts his view that despite our best efforts to “pin down” poetry, it will always already have slipped out of our grasp, just as
a Romantic fragment most clearly shows its dual nature as part and whole in the moment when it is being integrated into a larger whole.

The striking sense of speed and motion of the Defence is thus integral to the subject matter and particularly to the discussion of poetical, metaphorical language. The rapid movement from trope to trope and thought to thought that distinguishes Shelley’s style – not only in this essay but also his other works, including his poetry – is part of what has kept his writing fascinating and “fresh” up to our time, and not surprisingly it serves as the starting point for Jerrold Hogle’s study Shelley’s Process: Radical Transference and the Development of his Major Works. Hogle here links this motion and the sense of speed to Shelley’s understanding of perception and thinking. In the Defence Shelley uses the analogy of the Aeolian lyre to explain his view of the process of perception, which he condenses later in the essay in the well-known sentence, “All things exist as they are perceived; at least in relation to the percipient” (295).

In other words, perception for Shelley always already includes interpretation; it is the result of a processing, however quickly, never a “raw” sensory impression. For Shelley perception is not just passive, and impressions do not simply strike our senses as the wind does the strings of the Aeolian lyre. Rather, “there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited” (277). What meets our perceptual apparatus from the outside comes to our awareness only once it has been categorized and interpreted – integrated into a more or less orderly pattern – and thus exists for us only as a result of that process. Whether we are aware of it or not, such a process logically must involve
memory of previous perceptions; that is, the present moment of perception consists essentially of a looping back to prior perceptions and forward again to the current one as well as, perhaps, anticipation of perceptions yet to come in the future. Essentially, then, perception consists in comparison; it is metaphorical in its very process.

If interpretation is a central part of perception and, in fact, inseparable from it – that is, if indeed “nothing exists but as it is perceived” – then metaphors and all poetic or imaginative use of language plays, to some extent at least, a constitutive role in what we call reality. By showing us “before unapprehended relations,” metaphors, as explained above, integrate our perceptions in a new way and serve thus as instruments in building our world. If perception and experience are essentially transformation, then metaphor as the instrument par excellence of transformation has a central role in generating our experience of the world. And for Shelley transformation or motion clearly is at the core of that experience. As Hogle summarizes Shelley’s position,

There is no definite reception or projection of anything in [Shelley’s] eyes unless there is first a preconscious dislocation from one instant of awareness into a different one. To say that “nothing exists but as it is perceived” is to say that any distinguishable perception or memory of it has already been reflected upon, interpreted from an alien perspective, in a way that determines what the perception is by transposing it into another configuration.⁹

Arguably, then, dislocation or movement – comparison – is the essential part of the perceptual process rather than either the “instant of awareness” prior to the dislocation or the one following it. Shelley’s understanding of the process of perception is
significant because, first, it establishes the mind’s active and constitutive role in what we perceive, and, second, because it institutes movement or motion as intrinsic to the mind’s workings. For Shelley the creative and active part of the mind involved in perception is primarily the imagination rather than reason, and the understanding of mental processes as motion rather than static imprints on our perceptual apparatus means that “every instant of mental life is a passing from moments only partially remembered to others that redefine their predecessors from a later angle only to be redefined themselves at other moments far ahead” (ibid.).

The particular affinity between Shelley’s style, especially his use of metaphors and other tropes, and his understanding of what is involved in thinking, perceiving, and comprehending stands out clearly here. Just as dislocation is at the core of our mental processes, so a similar but different dislocation informs Shelley’s poetic language: after all, in metaphors the terms belonging to one context or semantic field are “relocated” into a different one.

As Hogle explains, “There is no ‘undifferentiated unity’ from which Shelleyan thinking or writing develops. The self-altering and perpetual crossing of intervals, since it is prior to particular thoughts and yet the mode of their operation, is for Shelley, without much question, the ‘motion’ that ‘produces mind’” (ibid.). And as Hogle and others have rightly pointed out,¹⁰ Shelley’s style mirrors and expresses this motion, the constant movement of thinking. However, a closer analysis of the most enigmatic and most lively features of Shelley’s style shows that there is more going on in his language than movement in one plane, the constant transition or transposing where thought is basically a “drive toward a counterpart rising ahead of it and a harking back to a different one
receding in its wake” (ibid.). In particular, in what I call Shelley’s unsuccessful metaphors an oscillating movement between likeness and difference is added to the basic motion of thought.

The metaphor of the sword of lightning, discussed above, serves as a particularly instructive example of this oscillating movement. The surprising vision of likeness between that sword of lightning and poetry, like the scabbard, is momentarily “there” and then gone; the similarities are visible for a fleeting moment and then dissolve into the underlying difference again, much like a bolt of lightning is there one moment and gone the next. In other words, this particular metaphor has not yet taken the path toward deterioration into “signs for portions or classes of thoughts”; the “before unapprehended relations” this metaphor reveals have not yet become familiar. What has preserved its freshness and vitality, I argue, is that in this metaphor there is more going on than simply the usual highlighting of a surprising likeness. Specifically, what keeps this metaphor (and several others in the Defence) alive is a complex, inconclusive interplay of likeness and difference.

First, Shelley’s durable metaphors (the ones here called unsuccessful) stand out from the ordinary run of metaphors by falling short of establishing likeness to such an extent that it overcomes the prior and underlying difference. Instead, they set up the above-described interplay between difference and similarity. The effect is much like what Paul Ricoeur described as seeing “the previous incompatibility through the new compatibility. . . . To see the like is to see the same in spite of, and through, the different.”11 For Ricoeur, then, the difference or incompatibility between the items linked metaphorically serves as the stable background to the similarities or compatibility the
metaphor places in the foreground. In this way, the metaphor gains depth and, in a sense, credibility, precisely through the difference or disconnection that precedes it and continues to underlie it. It is against this background of the prior incompatibility that a metaphor can highlight and enhance the compatibility it asserts. As Ricoeur formulates this relationship: “This tension between sameness and difference characterizes the logical structure of likeness. Imagination, accordingly, is this ability to produce new kinds by assimilation and to produce them not above the differences, as in the concept, but in spite of and through the differences.”12 In other words, the similarities highlighted by the metaphor are accentuated and can be appreciated largely because we see them standing out against the familiar background of difference.

In addition, following Roman Jakobson’s work on metaphor and poetic language, Ricoeur adopts the notion of “split reference,” namely, the ambiguity inherent in the referential dimension of metaphor. That is, like ordinary language, metaphors (and poetic language in general) refer to an extralinguistic reality, but they do so, as Ricoeur explains, “by the means of a complex strategy which implies, as an essential component, a suspension and seemingly an abolition of the ordinary reference attached to descriptive language,” a suspension that allows the metaphor’s “second-order reference” to emerge (151). Clearly, locating this “second-order reference” is problematic where Shelley’s unsuccessful metaphors under discussion here are concerned. Since one of the elements of the sword of lightning metaphor is itself a metaphor, reference seems deferred indefinitely if not indeed radically called into question.

What strikes me as problematic with the above understanding of metaphor is that metaphor here is conceived as a static figure and as having a more or less definable and
lasting end result. In this view of metaphor as accentuating similarities against a stable background of difference the emphasis is really on metaphor’s result, on the similarities or relations it establishes. As I will argue here, what I have called Shelley’s unsuccessful metaphors suggest a different model for the functioning of metaphors: rather than placing likeness or relation into the foreground and letting those stand out against the unchanging background of difference, metaphors in a complex and dynamic process cause us to switch our focus between likeness and difference. Thus, on this argument, the salient feature of these metaphors is the process they set in motion rather than the specific similarities or “before unapprehended relations” they highlight at any particular moment.

As I will show, considering metaphors as performing ongoing oscillations between likeness and difference captures more accurately how certain of Shelley’s metaphors function and how they have kept their appeal. The understanding of metaphors as essentially dynamic processes that can be developed out of a study of these particular metaphors can then be applied to other aspects of language and, specifically, to writing and translation. By virtue of making us see something in a new light, metaphors have often been likened to ambiguous drawings, such as the one that is either a picture of a rabbit or of a duck, since the new way of seeing a metaphor introduces has often been taken to be what a metaphor is about, as its meaning. Of course, if metaphors are only or primarily about getting us to see one item (or semantic domain) in terms of another – that is, if metaphors can essentially be reduced to their function of making us see $A$ as $B$ – the metaphors from Shelley’s essay discussed so far must ultimately be judged as failures, and not only for the reasons already set forth. In addition, they fail by Shelley’s own definition because they do not “mark and perpetuate,” but only temporarily highlight,
“before unapprehended relations.” And as a result, they do not seem to contribute to the
discovery of new knowledge. The “sword of lightning” metaphor is a prime example of a
metaphor not leading us to “necessarily understand $A$ any better than before” – and not $B$
either.  

As Donald Davidson expresses the difficulty of pinpointing what exactly a
metaphor tells us:

It’s not only that we can’t provide an exhaustive catalogue of what has been
attended to when we are led to see something in a new light; the difficulty is more
fundamental. What we notice or see is not, in general, propositional in character. .
. . But if I show you Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit, and I say, ‘It’s a duck,’ then with
luck you see it as a duck; if I say, ‘It’s a rabbit,’ you see it as a rabbit. But no
proposition expresses what I have led you to see. . . . Seeing as is not seeing that.
(263)

While the analogy to ambiguous drawings seems to hold for most metaphors, it
does not do justice to what I have called unsuccessful metaphors, such as Shelley’s sword
of lightning metaphor. That is, most metaphors – the successful ones – will make us see
the duck as a rabbit or vice versa, but ultimately we still see the picture as one or the
other, ideally in the way we did not see initially. Moreover, after the initial phase of
seeing the picture “alternate,” we generally see the picture consistently as either duck or
rabbit. That is, the alternation comes to a stop. In terms of metaphors, the likeness or
relations highlighted by the metaphor are either seen and accepted – and thus perpetuated
– or not, and in that latter case we simply return to the starting perspective of being more aware of differences between the items or semantic domains involved.

However, the metaphors I have called unsuccessful are best understood in analogy to a Necker cube, a drawing that inevitably is perceived as a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional object. Essentially, the drawing consists of lines forming squares but without depth cues. As a result of the absence of depth cues, the mind (or its perceptual system) is forced to provide them; that is, it must decide which way the cube is oriented. Two mutually exclusive interpretations (orientations) are possible, and looking at the cube for any length of time will cause a perceptual switch between these orientations.

![Figure 1. Necker cube.](image)

Specifically, the mind in perception, knowing that a cube is a three-dimensional object, “decides” which side of the cube is the front, thus adding the depth dimension to the drawing. There are two choices for this, depending on which side of the cube is the front (upper right or lower left). Since no guidelines are given, our perception switches back and forth between the two choices; we see both orientations of the cube sequentially and alternating more or less rapidly. The switching is involuntary, as is the mind’s depth
perception. That is, we cannot choose to see only one version of the cube (much less which one of them) and, beyond the first moment of glancing at the picture, we cannot choose to see the cube as not three-dimensional, as merely lines without depth. (This is likely due at least as much to our experience with interpreting drawings on a page as to our experience of cubes in the world off the page.)

The “rivalry” between the two interpretations of the drawing cannot be settled by the drawing itself (there are no elements or indications in the drawing for preference of one cube orientation over the other) nor by deciding to “see” only one of the two versions of the cube; instead, the switching continues indefinitely. The drawing is an interesting example of two equally valid interpretations or ways of seeing that are generated from an unchanging stimulus. And in this case, seeing that and seeing as overlap: seeing the figure in the drawing means seeing it as a cube, at least for anyone experienced in “reading” drawings on a page. After perhaps an initial moment of bringing our perception to focus on the drawing, our perceptual system cannot stop the switching nor suppress one version of the cube in favor of the other.

The Necker cube serves as a useful analogy to understand Shelley’s unsuccessful metaphors for several reasons. For example, just as the cube is not actually “there” – that is, the drawing on the page as such is not a cube, only our perception makes it so – so also the sword of lightning is seen only when no longer there, as lightning is fully “seen” only when it has disappeared again. And similarly, the scabbard in that metaphor is there before our inner eye and then is consumed by the lightning of the sword and is gone again. Moreover, the likeness between the evanescence of poetry and the sword of lightning is established for a moment, only to disappear again and be replaced by the
seemingly irreconcilable incompatibility of poetry and sword, each belonging to alien
domains. These alternations between presence and absence, between likeness and
difference, dramatize Shelley’s view of poetry: in the process of defining – i.e., defining
– poetry, Shelley refuses a definition. Like a magician, he presents a definition only to
take it back again, make it vanish before our eyes.

Shelley’s predominant strategy in the \textit{Defence} is not definition by establishing
clear boundaries and excluding what does not belong, but rather definition by extension
and inclusion. Therefore, as he seems to be about to set up boundaries delimiting what
poetry is and is not, he immediately dissolves the boundary before it has a chance to get
fully and securely established. Accordingly, the seemingly unsuccessful metaphors that
function analogously to a Necker cube are ideally suited to Shelley’s project of
demonstrating poetry’s superiority over reason and analytical thinking. Unlike reason,
poetry is so vast and powerful and transcendent that it cannot be contained by any
definition, i.e., analysis. Clearly, the usual or successful kind of metaphors also cannot
capture what poetry is. As an open rather than closed system, poetry calls for an open-
ended type of metaphor, namely, the type that I have called unsuccessful and that is
exemplified by the metaphor of poetry as a sword of lightning.

This open-ended quality is due to the metaphor’s “back-and-forth” oscillations
between likeness and difference, with each iteration of the oscillating movement
highlighting and reinforcing both poles alternately and in the process “generating” further
similarities and differences. I want to argue here for a reconceptualization of metaphors
as dynamic oscillations of two counterforces, one establishing likeness and the other
maintaining difference, around a center or balance point. To be successful, a metaphor’s
net pull toward sameness must be stronger than that of difference. Yet there is a range around the midpoint where the counterforces are near equilibrium, and there even a tiny change can establish dominance of one side over the other – that is, in this range both likeness and difference are at play and nearly equal; each dominates only briefly before being overcome, temporarily, then reestablishing momentary dominance, and so on, in a constant oscillation. In most (successful) metaphors the connections established between their components move quickly out of this range about the midpoint to the pole of likeness; these are the metaphors that successfully show “before unapprehended relations” and perpetuate their apprehension. What we remember of them is the similarity or compatibility they have established and highlighted against the background of difference. Over time though, as Shelley predicts, such metaphors end up as “signs for portions or classes of thoughts.”

However, metaphors that stay in that field of tension around the midpoint between likeness and difference are constantly renewed through that very tension. As in the trope of the sword of lightning discussed above, similarity does not predominate to the point of overshadowing any difference. Instead, both sameness and difference are present equally, each following the other in rapid succession, much as the different perceptions of a Necker cube alternate fairly rapidly. Thus, Shelley here shows in one sweep both how poetry is like a sword of lightning and how it is different from it.

Indeed, the oscillation itself is more central to this metaphor – as it is to what I have called unsuccessful metaphors in general – than any likeness (or difference) it may highlight. Like the drawing of a Necker cube, the metaphor’s oscillations set in motion ongoing shifts in perspective in readers. Much as we are compelled to adjust our
perception of the Necker cube drawing so as to see it as a three-dimensional object (that is, we “must” look for spatial depth), so Shelley’s metaphor urges us on a search for both likeness and difference; if we find either one predominating, we can resolve the metaphor’s inherent tension (it is then successful in establishing either convincing similarities or clear differences) and the oscillations would come to a stop. It is characteristic of the most lively and memorable metaphors that they do not offer any such resolution; instead, their oscillation continues indefinitely. This process allows us to see ever more similarities as well as ever more differences between the elements making up the metaphor. In a sense, this process is instrumental in the generation of new thoughts and is thus a creative process, both for the writer as creator of the metaphor and for the reader in retracing the metaphor’s oscillations.

It is this persistence of these oscillations that keeps metaphors of this kind vital and fresh – that is, they retain their power to make “familiar objects be as if they were not familiar.” Because the familiarization through firmly established likeness between the items linked in the metaphor is disrupted when difference reasserts itself, these metaphors are successful as “generators” of defamiliarization (and thus renewal), precisely in being unsuccessful in “marking and perpetuating” likeness.

Of course, conceptualizing metaphors as essentially oscillations that initiate corresponding back-and-forth shifts in readers – a search for likeness/difference that is part of the readers’ activity Schlegel called “entgegenwirkend” (see chapters 2, 3, and 4) – means that our understanding of the meaning of metaphors must be reconsidered as well. If metaphor’s motion is paramount, what does that tell us about its meaning, about
what a metaphor says? And what implications would that have for the distinction between literal and figurative meaning?

To start developing a revised understanding of the relationship between metaphors and meaning, I will take a closer look at how a metaphor’s oscillations may produce what could be called the metaphor’s meaning. Interestingly, Shelley’s own and often underestimated metaphor for the process involved here can shed light on the productivity of metaphors. In the critical literature on Shelley’s *Defence* this puzzling yet revealing metaphor has generally not received the attention it deserves, perhaps because it does not conform to the poet’s own definition of metaphor (and in this it is like the sword of lightning metaphor, which also did not fit neatly into that definition). It also seems to resist being subsumed under the usual notion of metaphor as comparison and designed to establish likeness. We find this instructive metaphor in a crucial passage on the relationship between imagination and morality. Here, Shelley situates the mainspring of moral development not in reason or logic but in the imagination: “The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause” (283). Our imaginative faculty is essential for morality because it enables us to understand others by putting ourselves “in the place of another,” of seeing the world, at least to some extent, from another’s perspective, of assuming, at least for a time, a standpoint not our own. As Shelley puts it: “The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own.”
While this seems a reasonable enough and widely accepted explanation of how we can overcome the narrow bounds of self-interest and self-centeredness, Shelley goes beyond that and assigns poetry a central role in the process. Poetry acts “upon the cause of moral good” – i.e., the imagination: “Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts and which form new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food” (283). That is, the imagination, and thus ultimately poetry, is what makes human society and civilization possible in the first place. This means that for Shelley language, specifically poetic language and thus metaphorical language, is central to morality, to human civilization. Clearly, this is a brilliant “defense” against Peacock’s attack on poetry as merely decorous and largely irrelevant. Poetry fulfills its crucial role by enhancing the imagination and does this not by adding new insights to it here and there but by expanding it from the inside. The imagination is enlarged much as a balloon grows larger when it is being inflated; it “grows” all around, from the inside out, not in this or that specific spot.

Specifically, the “thoughts of ever new delight” that drive the imagination’s growth arise from the “before unapprehended relations” that metaphorical language reveals to us. As those relations emerge, they reorganize all our related thoughts and perceptions in the process described above; because each shift, be it ever so subtle, in our perception and understanding of any part of a semantic domain or field reverberates throughout and affects our understanding of the whole field and all its other parts, even the ones that were not “in” the metaphor that initiated the perceptual shift. As a result of
this shift, the semantic field as a whole is to some extent reorganized, its parts integrated in a new way into new patterns. Depending on the strength of its impetus, the perceptual shift triggered by a metaphor can reverberate even to other, related semantic fields beyond the ones to which the metaphor’s components belong.

Clearly, this process can result in shifting boundaries between semantic fields; the lines separating fields – that is, our conceptualizations – can be dissolved and redrawn. Shelley describes this as “thoughts of ever new delight” (i.e., interpreted perceptions of “before unapprehended relations”) “attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts.” These thoughts, perhaps because of their defamiliarizing effect, are so powerful that they reshape our previous thought patterns. As Shelley’s spatial metaphor for these mental processes suggests, such a reorganization and reintegration into new patterns creates free spaces available for new perceptions and thoughts, for the apprehension of new and more “before unapprehended relations.”

These spaces, which Shelley calls “intervals and interstices,” like a vacuum, then draw new thoughts, “fresh food,” into themselves. These new thoughts are more “before unapprehended relations”; that is, the metaphorical language of poetry both creates the voids (through the reorganization resulting from a perceptual shift) and also fills them – in the process creating new and ever more “intervals and interstices” that in turn crave fresh food and must be filled, and so on.

Shelley here endows poetry with a force of renewal that goes beyond the relatively superficial fact, acknowledged elsewhere in the Defence, that poetry’s meaning is inexhaustible and cannot be captured in any one interpretation:
All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed. A great poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight. (291)

Being infinite and inexhaustible in principle, poetry always lends itself to new readings and always allows new “before unapprehended relations” to emerge. Poetry thus both creates and feeds the voids “craving fresh food.” The supply of new relations, new perceptions, and meanings to feed those voids never runs out. Creating and “consuming” poetry – writing it as well as reading it – both provide the mind with an inexhaustible supply of new thoughts. Indeed, Shelley insists on the close connection between poetry and the new throughout the Defence, for example, by including innovators and inventors among the poets. For Shelley, novelty is practically a prerequisite of poetry: “every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors” (280). Moreover, as explained above, and as Shelley establishes early on in the Defence, metaphors drive the constant renewal and rejuvenation of language.

In terms of the conventional understanding of metaphor as a comparison focused on likeness, and even regarding Shelley’s own definition of metaphors as marking and perpetuating “before unapprehended relations,” this metaphor presents even more challenges than that of the “sword of lightning” discussed above. That is, here too the
imagination and poetry as abstract, general terms are related to something not much more concrete and specific: intervals, interstices, voids – all of them characterized by emptiness. The indirect comparison between the imagination and a circular web remains tenuous; since the imagination is described as having a circumference, it is conceived of as circular in shape. The thoughts attracting and assimilating others can be envisioned as strands or threads in a web-like structure, a woven fabric perhaps, consisting of threads and the spaces between them. Alternatively, those thoughts could be pictured as metal filings that attract other metal pieces and arrange them in new patterns because of their magnetic force.

In either case, the likeness is not firmly established but rather only suggested by the metaphor. As in the metaphor discussed above, the likeness appears briefly only to disappear again. Moreover, the two poles of the comparison set up by the metaphor are not clearly defined, and this lends additional impetus to the search for both likeness and difference the metaphor compels. Like the metaphor of the “sword of lightning,” this one also incorporates constant movement on several levels: the voids craving fresh food appear before our inner eye and then are filled, sated, and thus presumably closed. They have turned into new “thoughts of ever new delight” or new “before unapprehended relations.” This alternation between creation of the intervals or voids and the fulfillment of their craving for the new is driven by poetry, with the fresh food being transformed, “digested,” as we reconstruct the image, into integral components of the new thoughts that attract other thoughts and so create more voids.

This metaphor thus also escapes the “semantic entropy” discussed above; it has not degenerated into a cliché and is not likely to because at its core is a continuous
movement, specifically one comprised of two oscillations. First, our perception shifts or oscillates continuously between the voids appearing, then being filled and disappearing while new ones form. Second, Shelley here establishes a connection or likeness between thoughts and strands or threads in a web that is never firmly established but remains in constant tension with the difference between the two poles of the comparison. That is, this “unsuccessful” metaphor also functions much like the Necker cube: pairs of mutually exclusive but equally supported perspectives alternate indefinitely.

As with the Necker cube, where the switching between orientations is more important than either of the “versions” of the cube – that is, the drawing is about the perceptual rivalry and shifts it causes, not about the cube as such – so what I have called Shelley’s unsuccessful metaphors are primarily “about” their oscillations rather than the likeness and difference between which the oscillations occur. It is the movement – essentially, the readers’ entgegenwirken, in Schlegel’s terminology – that allows new perceptions (of, for the reader, “before unapprehended relations,” for example) and new thoughts to arise. Thus, as I argue here, it is above all because of their nature as oscillations that the metaphors discussed here renew and revitalize our language and thinking and less because of any particular likeness they succeed in highlighting. And it is thanks to the ongoing oscillations that these metaphors have retained their vitality and have avoided the deterioration into stock phrase and clichés that other metaphors – the successful ones – eventually undergo.

Moreover, beyond these powerful effects the metaphor discussed here also call into question the conventional distinction between figurative and literal meaning. For example, Donald Davidson in “What Metaphors Mean” claims that “metaphors mean
what the words, in their most literal interpretation mean and nothing more.”¹⁵ That is, for Davidson metaphorical meaning is not different from literal meaning though metaphors may be used in different way, for a different purpose, than the literal expression when it is meant in this purely literal sense. As Davidson puts it: “What I deny is that metaphor does its work by having a special meaning, a specific cognitive content” (262). Yet applying Davidson’s claims to Shelley’s metaphors poses a problem even before the truth value of Shelley’s sentences can be evaluated. After all, there is no literal “sword of lightning” just as the “interstices” or voids craving fresh food do not exist objectively, as things that can be meaningfully talked about in strictly literal sentences. As I would claim then, studying metaphors primarily for their “cognitive content” and referential meaning is essentially to miss what makes them the effective and powerful instruments of expression and discovery, namely, the above-described oscillations. As I will argue throughout, the conceptualization of metaphors as oscillations – that is, taking what I have so far called unsuccessful metaphors as the defining standard and the successful ones as special cases – will resituate the distinction between figurative and literal meaning. Through a close study of Schlegel’s fragments and essays, I will contend that meaning in Davidson’s sense is not the ultimate goal of Romantic writing, in particular – and perhaps of written communication (Mitteilung, as Schlegel calls it) in general.

Nevertheless, metaphors undeniably have cognitive significance, and Davidson’s statement quoted above can serve as an example, especially because it falls into the category of sentences analyzed by Michael Reddy in his well-known essay “The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in our Language about Language.”¹⁶ Reddy traces how unquestioned use of the conduit metaphor applied to language both misleads and
blinds us regarding the way language works. In other words, metaphors may lead us to see “before unapprehended relations,” but not necessarily true or correct ones. At the same time, they may obscure other relations and thus obstruct our view. As Reddy and others have shown, metaphors (and related tropes, such as metonymy) structure our thinking and perception on a very basic yet largely unconscious level. For example, the conduit metaphor leads us to conceive of words as “containing” meaning, having a content that is housed inside them and then “taken out” again. However, as Reddy demonstrates in his essay, meaning does not reside in the words or sentences. That is, linguistic signs, in the terms of Rudi Keller, are “not containers used for the transport of ideas from one person’s head to another. Signs are hints of a more or less distinct nature, inviting the other to make certain inferences and enabling that other to reach them.” That is, a major function of those signs is to set in motion the reader’s search for understanding, for completion of thought patterns – that is, the activity of entgegenwirken (Schlegel’s term, see chapter 2). Though Keller does not go so far as to undo the distinction between literal and figurative language, in my view his definition of linguistic signs renders that distinction nearly meaningless and suggests doing away with it altogether. For Keller signs are “clues with which the speaker ‘furnishes’ the addressees, enabling and leading them to infer the way in which the speaker intends to influence them” (ibid., emphasis in original), where “influence” is understood broadly to cover anything from getting the addressees to think of a particular subject to inciting them to action.

Interestingly, in terms of its etymology, “infer” itself shares some of the transportation or “carrying over” connotations with “metaphor,” and both inference and
metaphor essentially send us on a search, compelling us to go from what we know to the as yet unknown, namely, the speaker’s or writer’s meaning (or, more accurately, our interpretation of the linguistic signs used by the speaker). In any case, the notion of the linguistic signs as an “inference instruction” – or invitation to inference, in Keller’s terms – suggests that successful metaphors speed up that process, drawing us on a more direct route to the inference or interpretation that fits most closely, given what we know about the situation, the signs involved, the speaker, and the constraints upon them. However, the metaphors I have called unsuccessful can be said to intensify the motion and prolonging it. That is, their oscillations keep the inference process going, possibly indefinitely. In other words, the question of what these metaphors mean as well as the distinction between figurative and literal meaning are not germane to them; these metaphors “work” not by virtue of any meaning, figurative or literal, we may assign to them but primarily because of their ongoing oscillations between likeness and difference.

In this regard they function analogously to a Necker cube; after all, as mentioned above, the drawing’s “significance” is not the cube as such but the perpetual switch between orientations it sets off. Likewise, the metaphors I have called unsuccessful – because they conform neither to Shelley’s nor the conventional definition of metaphors – prove productive of new thoughts, new perceptions, new understanding in their failure to securely establish likeness or “before unapprehended relations.” On the other hand, metaphors that succeed by the criteria of the conventional definition resemble the completed inference process described above: their oscillation of counterforces comes to a stop. As in the inference process when it has reached its “destination” – that is, when we have arrived at a “good enough” interpretation – our search for new thoughts stops
(no more interstices or voids craving fresh food are created), and indeed, over time the metaphor itself loses its power and will degenerate into a commonplace.

Giving rise to new thoughts and new understandings and thus maintaining a consistent orientation (an opening) toward the future, Shelley’s “unsuccessful” metaphors have a striking affinity with Romantic fragments and also Romantic irony, as these are defined by Friedrich Schlegel. This affinity is worth exploring both for its own sake, as it has largely been disregarded, and for the possible insights it might yield for developing models of writing and translation that can preserve their vital cultural role even as they are being transformed by new technologies.
Chapter 2

Schlegelian Understanding: The Process of Romantic Reading

Friedrich Schlegel’s essay “On Incomprehensibility” is an enigmatic and complex presentation – one could even call it a performance – of incomprehensibility. The questions of what it means to understand a text and how such understanding is achieved are central to Schlegel’s views of Romantic poetry and Romantic irony and therefore worth examining in more detail. To plumb the depths of Schlegel’s concept of incomprehensibility, it is helpful to start with his view of understanding, which is as innovative as his classification of the new, namely Romantic, poetry. While Schlegel’s definition of Romantic poetry in his famous *Atheneaum* fragment #116 is well known and provides a relatively succinct and clear summary of views Schlegel also expressed elsewhere – for example, in other fragments and the conversation on poetry – but not with same clarity and completeness, none of his writings on his concept of understanding have the same status as fragment #116 in regard to the definition of poetry. Instead, the concept unfolds through several fragments, comments in reviews, the essay on incomprehensibility, and the conversation on poetry. As I will show, Schlegel’s concept of understanding complements Romantic poetry, as he defines it; it is the corollary of the characterization of poetry we find in fragment #116 in that understanding, like Romantic poetry, is a process rather than a product, ongoing and never finished. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Schlegel’s concept of understanding emerges from a series of texts, most of them fragments, rather than being encapsulated in a straightforward statement. After all, as will become clear, for Schlegel understanding is a matter of ongoing, open-ended conversation rather than a definitive pronouncement or conclusion.
The following fragment (#237) presents an inviting starting point for examining Schlegel’s view of understanding; written by his friend Novalis, the fragment was chosen by Schlegel for inclusion in the fragment collection published in the journal *Atheneaum* in 1798. He did not alter this fragment though he made changes to others, presumably because it accords with his own views (indeed, it is echoed in several of Schlegel’s own writings), and it was part of a larger exchange: Schlegel contributed several fragments to a collection credited to Novalis. Moreover, its origin in a collaboration makes the fragment a very apt example of the new understanding of authorship, creativity, and text Schlegel and his friends in the Jena circle introduced, as will become clear in the later part of this discussion.


[Only then do I show that I have understood an author when I can act in his sense, when I can translate him and transform him in diverse ways, without diminishing his individuality.] 19

On first glance, the fragment seems to make a plausible and succinct statement: namely, that translating requires understanding, that we must understand what we translate. Thus, translation can serve as a test of understanding. According to Novalis, inability to translate indicates a lack of understanding.

On closer examination, however, the fragment raises more questions than it answers. What is perhaps most striking about this fragment ostensibly defining what it
means to understand is the absence of any mention of text or writing. This already indicates that the understanding meant here is not a matter of comprehending what an author says in this or that text. Rather, the central goal is to understand the author. Granted, this can likely be achieved only by means of the author’s writing, but the texts themselves are “understood,” taken for granted, their importance implied rather than stated. That is, the implied text or texts are means to an end and not an end in themselves. Primarily, the texts serve as a window or gateway revealing to us the Geist of the author – essentially, the author’s way of thinking, feeling, and being in the world. Clearly, this is a long way from the conventional definition of understanding, which is focused on what a text says and the reader’s ability to reproduce or paraphrase this content completely and accurately. For Schlegel/Novalis, understanding is a matter of acting, or at least being able to act if we so choose, out of the Geist – the way of thinking and feeling, the principles and values – of the author. Already only loosely and by implication connected to texts, understanding is here moved beyond the world of words to an intangible realm. This realm includes words, historical context and all the other elements usually connected with understanding, but they are not the goal of the process. The goal is to comprehend the author’s Geist and make it our own, integrate it into ourselves to such an extent that we can act out of that Geist.

This offers an interesting perspective on the notion of translating, mentioned in the fragment as a further proof of understanding. In a sense, understanding as being able to act in accordance with the Geist of an author “translates” that author into a different time: after all, our ability to act is always in the present or future, not in the past even though it is a result of understanding and thus comes after it. We can in any case act only
in what is from the author’s perspective the future. In this sense, both the work(s) and understanding are ongoing processes, continuously moving toward the future and never coming to rest.

Yet, even on the level of translation as a test or proof of understanding, the fragment reveals more puzzles when it places translation in disturbing proximity to transforming (verändern). Conventionally defined as saying the “same thing” in other words (whether of the same or another language) and thus giving us in different words more or less exactly what the author said – i.e., content – translation here is much more interactive and makes quite different demands on the translator. According to the fragment under discussion, translation is valuable not because it preserves content (“what the author said”) as unchanged as possible but precisely because it introduces change, transformation. Rather than merely restating what the author already said, translation here is a process of interaction between the individuality of the author, which is not to be diminished, and the translator (or reader). It is the translator’s understanding of and respect for the author’s individuality that keeps the translation process from deteriorating into an exercise of unchecked subjectivity, with the translator practically extinguishing the author’s voice. At the same time, this understanding of translation requires much more than lining up matching words in a dictionary. The translation is then not just a product of understanding what the author said and restating it, but of comprehending something more intangible: the author’s individuality.

Both understanding and translation then demand active involvement, engagement with the text and through it with the individuality and Geist of the author. The transformation comes about in the interaction between reader/translator and the author’s
individuality. Such an interaction is essentially a dialogue or conversation; understanding (and translation) is the continuation of the process of the author’s work. It is the other side of the infinite, continuously becoming Romantic poetry Schlegel characterized in fragment #116.

In defining understanding by its outcome – i.e., action or translation/transformation – Schlegel and Novalis are in line with the view of language that emerged with Romanticism and deviate from the usual definition of the communication process that prevailed both before and after the brief Romantic era. According to this conventional view, the writer “sends” a message that the reader receives and decodes correctly – or not. Usually depicted as a linear process with the sender and receiver connected by a line along which the message travels, this view reduces the reader’s involvement to mere decoding of a message. At most, readers may have to reconstruct and restore the message if it was blurred or damaged “in transport,” but they have otherwise no creative, constitutive role in the process and certainly not a transformative one. This model focuses almost exclusively on the message and how it moves from sender to receiver. Understanding the author’s Geist may be part of the process, but it is only implied, not a priority and certainly not the goal of the undertaking.

While this linear model with its rather narrow focus on message or content has proven useful, for example, in analyzing how the medium or channel affects the message conveyed, it ignores important aspects of communication and presents a misleading and oversimplified picture of the communication process. Based on the assumption that the conveyance of the message is the purpose and goal of the process, the model reduces communication to a matter of either/or: the message is either understood or not,
communication has either succeeded or failed. Here, as in Schlegel’s view, translation can serve as a test of understanding: if the receiver decodes and then encodes the message in his/her own words (whether in the same or a different language from the original message), then understanding has occurred. Action also may be a proof of understanding; for example, if the message contained instructions, then the receiver has understood the message if he/she carries out the instructions correctly. In this paradigm, what matters regarding both translation and action is accuracy, or, congruence with the message sent. Thus, translation and action can be correct or not and either prove understanding or the failure of it. Ultimately, as I will show below, this model is based on an idealized view of language and of what happens when we understand others – or fail to understand them.

Compared to this linear model whose emphasis on content can be traced back to the earliest writings on rhetoric, Schlegel’s model of understanding is complex and revolutionary in that it upends the traditional priorities and assumptions. For Schlegel, message or content conveyed is no longer of central significance; in his discussion of understanding “what the author says” is hardly mentioned at all. If “getting” what the author said is not the central objective of the process of understanding and readers are no longer mere passive recipients, both the goal of understanding and the activities of the reader require closer examination.

In the fragment quoted above Schlegel names the ability to transform the author in various ways – while keeping the author’s individuality intact – as the goal and proof of understanding. Obviously, to avoid diminishing the author’s individuality readers must know it fairly well, and admittedly readers can know an author usually only through his/her texts, through words on a page. But to attain this knowledge, readers must read
the texts for more than just “what the author says,” that is, reading must be more than just “getting” the content. The latter is certainly also part of the process of understanding but not the most important part. Reading is to lead to understanding, which is to lead to transformation(s) of the author, but these must be in keeping with the author’s individuality and not “foreign” to him or her. Instead, the transformations Schlegel has in mind here are akin to an integration of the author’s individuality with the reader’s and the reader’s response to the former – essentially, a “potentized” continuation of the creative process. This is an organic process of unfolding and development, not one of mechanical combination or addition. In fragment #5 in the collection entitled *Ideas* Schlegel described the process using the following analogy:

> Der Sinn versteht etwas nur dadurch, daß er es als Keim in sich aufnimmt, es nährt und wachsen läßt bis zur Blüte und Frucht. Also heiligen Samen streuet in den Boden des Geistes, ohne Künstelei und müßige Ausfüllungen.

*[The mind understands something only insofar as it absorbs it like a seed into itself, nurtures it, and lets it grow into blossom and fruit. Therefore scatter holy seed into the soil of the spirit [Geist, here also: mind], without any affectation and any added superfluities [idle embellishments]].*²⁰

That is, understanding in Schlegel’s sense calls upon the reader to unfold and further develop the tendencies and potential not yet fully expressed by the author in the existing works. The reader thus helps to bring the work to fruition, adding another stage in the ongoing process. Essentially, the line separating writers and readers becomes porous and
finally dissolves as a result of the process of understanding – if readers take up the “call” and write thus transforming and/or translating the author.

Reading and understanding as Schlegel sees them are thus akin to Romantic poetry as he defines it in the well-known *Atheneaum* fragment #116: not finished but always “in the state of becoming.” Indeed, Schlegelian reading – as opposed to reading for content – is crucial to making Romantic poetry possible: the reading and understanding leading to further writing, to the kind of “Charakteristik” and “Kritik” that Schlegel included as part of Romantic poetry and designated as the only kind of critique capable of understanding that poetry and doing it justice. Like Romantic poetic writing, Schlegelian or Romantic reading ensures the open-endedness of the work as a process, of literary productivity. Just as the author’s work is not “finished” in any absolute sense when the reader begins reading it, but is “only” part of a process encompassing this and a possibly infinite number of other works growing out of undeveloped and unrealized tendencies and potential in an author’s works as well as out of responses or critiques of those works, and so on, ad infinitum. At the same time, different readers will perceive different potentials in an author’s texts and thus also have a (slightly) different understanding of the author’s individuality. As a result, both texts and the author’s individuality are not completely understood, exhausted, interpreted definitively once and for all by any one reader. And accordingly the literature that invites this way of reading – namely, Romantic poetry – is never “perfected,” always becoming, and not “exhausted” by any “theory” in part by virtue of the kind of reading it calls for.

In addition, the process of bringing to expression the idea or inspiration that gave rise to the work also continues and is never fully finished not only because the author
cannot fully encompass it but also because language itself is not commensurate with it.
The vagaries of language and their role in Schlegel’s model of understanding and writing will be discussed in more detail below. But first I want to examine here more closely what Schlegel’s open-ended reading process entails specifically. To this end, the following two fragments are instructive and worth reading closely: the first dates back to Schlegel’s early philosophical studies, especially of Kant, in the years 1796-1798, and the second was published in the *Athenaeum* in 1798 (fragment #401).

Um jemanden zu verstehen, muß man erstlich klüger sein als er, dann ebenso klug und dann auch ebenso dumm. Es ist nicht genug, daß man den eigentlichen Sinn eines konfusen Werkes besser versteht als der Autor es verstanden hat. Man muß auch die Konfusion selbst bis auf die Prinzipien kennen, charakterisieren und konstruieren können.

[To understand someone, one must first of all be smarter than that person, then just as smart and then also just as stupid. It is not enough to understand the true meaning of a confused work better than the author understood it. One must also know the confusion itself down to its underlying principles and be able to characterize and construct it.]\(^{21}\)

The second fragment (#401) under discussion instructs readers even more succinctly:

Um jemand zu verstehen, der sich selbst nur halb versteht, muß man ihn erst ganz und besser als er selbst, dann aber auch nur halb und grade so gut wie er selbst verstehn.
[In order to understand someone who only partially understands himself, you first have to understand him completely and better than he himself does, but then only partially and precisely as much as he does himself.]^{22}

Schlegel here gives the process of understanding, at least in the conventional sense, a surprising twist: “understanding better,” which is usually thought to be the goal of the whole process is clearly less important for Schlegel than the understanding equal to that of the author. “Understanding better,” in most cases the result of painstaking study and research, is here gotten out of the way quickly, as though taken for granted. Schlegel lists this understanding first as though it were an easy and sure thing to achieve. For Schlegel, this “better understanding” is indeed easier to attain than the next step of understanding just as well and just as badly as the author. Contrary to prevailing opinion and practice, for Schlegel the process of understanding does not end once “understanding better” is achieved. This “better understanding” may give readers a certain feeling of superiority for seeing connections and potential and meanings that the author was not aware of, and perhaps could not have been aware of. Yet, despite the enriched meanings this better understanding can reveal and despite the labor and effort required to attain this understanding, Schlegel does not privilege it. Rather, “understanding better” is revaluated as just one part in a larger process – and not the most important part.

That is, Schlegel topples readers from the “superior” position of knowing more and thus understanding better – the benefit of hindsight, perhaps – and also subtly redefines what understanding means. As is most obvious in the case of authors from the past and now dead, understanding their work(s) generally means understanding them
better than the authors did themselves. In other words, the term “understanding” not merely implies but includes by definition, whether explicitly stated or not, the qualification “better.” To say that we understand an author – Shakespeare, for example – is usually to say that we understand him/her better than the author did or even could understand himself/herself and also better than his/her contemporaries and all our other predecessors since. In part this extended understanding is a result of increased knowledge, both historical and biographical, having a larger context in which to place the authors and works in question, and perhaps greater sophistication due to greater exposure to literature of all kinds. We also realize that at least part of the author’s motivation in writing, choosing particular stylistic elements, selecting this or that expression or plot element, was unconscious and not under the author’s control. This is one reason why Schlegel could claim that “jedes vortreffliche Werk, von welcher Art es auch sei, mehr weiß als es sagt, und mehr will als es weiß,”23 a claim also based on the dimension of language that is outside our control – words accrue meanings and associations over time that neither writers nor readers can control or predict or even know. Thus, the reverberations of any work go far beyond what its author could have foreseen or even intended.

Still, aside from language’s own role in facilitating or thwarting our efforts at understanding, the goal of the process of understanding, one generally supposed to be within our reach, is “better understanding.” For example, scholarly readers of Shakespeare in our century in many ways understand Shakespeare better and more deeply than he likely did or could have understood himself.
For Schlegel, however, this “better understanding,” though necessary, is only the starting point of the process of understanding, not the definitive and more or less final answer to the question of what an author said/meant, what a work (an author) is about. Rather than take the “better understanding” and the conclusions it offers as the end the labor of understanding, Schlegel considers it the beginning, the raw material, for the next steps in the ongoing work of understanding. Accordingly, Schlegel does not discuss how this “understanding better” is to be achieved in any of his fragments on understanding and reading but elaborates only on the more difficult part of the process of understanding: namely, understanding an author just as well and also just as badly as the author understood himself/herself.

In this surprising revaluation of understanding Schlegel prizes an author’s confusion over the readers’ resolution of them. After all, the “understanding better” we usually strive for as the objective of the process of understanding consists in large part in resolving and clearing up what the author was confused or uncertain or mistaken about. However, for Schlegel the step prior to this resolving of confusions is more important: namely, to know and be able to characterize – that is describe and determine – the confusion down to its roots. In the conventional model of understanding (applied to texts) this thorough understanding of the author’s confusion – what it consists in, how it arose, and what its ramifications are – is an essential step leading to “understanding better” and the clarification or elimination of the confusion. In contrast, Schlegel values the knowledge and understanding of the author’s confusion as necessary for the important step of constructing that very same confusion for ourselves, not for its resolution or elimination. Essentially, then, the knowledge accumulated in the step of “understanding
“better” is to serve as basis and material to build up the author’s confusion in the readers’ mind. Instead of resolving the author’s confusion, readers are to make it their own.

This is tantamount to asking readers to give up their better understanding, to see clearly where the author was confused, and to adopt the author’s perspective. Instead of enjoying a sense of superiority due to “understanding better” than the author, readers are to see the work – and the world – through the author’s eyes, as far as that is possible.

Clearly, in Schlegel’s model it is not “understanding better” that is difficult and perhaps unattainable but rather understanding just as the author did. This understanding would also ensure that the author’s individuality is understood and thus can be kept undiminished in further transformations, but it also seems nearly impossible to attain. Here, it is not so much “understanding better” that remains unfinished, ever open to further improvement, but understanding in the same way as the author. After all, the author’s understanding and confusion, like his/her individuality, are shaped by the author’s characteristic interaction with his/her circumstances and historical situation.

Compared to the task of understanding this better than the author, a task helped by the knowledge of hindsight, taking on the author’s perspective seems much more difficult.

The identification with the author that Schlegel here calls for goes beyond imaginatively identifying with characters in a work; readers are to identify with the author in a similar imaginative process, specifically with the author wrestling with confusion and uncertainties and puzzled by questions. In a sense then, Schlegel wants readers to join – albeit after the fact – the author in the process of creating the work.

Understanding in Schlegel’s model thus goes beyond merely comprehending “what the
author said” and also beyond understanding the author better and in ways than he/she did not or could not.

This work of understanding culminates in what Schlegel called a “Charakteristik,” that is, a critique of the author and his/her works that includes not only appreciation and perhaps evaluation (which Schlegel considered of lesser importance) but is primarily a further unfolding of what was present as potential in the work as the author created it. At this point, Schlegel’s model of understanding opens out toward his definition of Romantic poetry; indeed, the reading process as Schlegel outlines it is indispensable to Romantic poetry, both making it possible and ensuring its nature as ongoing, continuously becoming and developing. Romantic poetry, according to Schlegel, can

- hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer, free of all real and ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it [as though] in an endless succession of mirrors.24

It is here that the open-endedness and inclusiveness of Romantic poetry meets, by way of Schlegel’s model of understanding, with the demand in fragment #287, namely, that readers must be able to translate and transform an author in many ways without diminishing the author’s individuality. The process of reading and understanding in Schlegel’s view should turn readers into critics, specifically into Schlegelian critics who do not stop with analyzing a work, researching obscure expressions, or pronouncing a value judgment on the work or author – though they are certainly also free, if not
expected, to do all this as well. Rather, the understanding of an author accumulated in the reading process is to give rise to a “Charakteristik” or critique that carries on, so to speak, from where the author left off.

In this model of understanding, the creative process gives rise to a specific work and also perpetuates itself, generating new understandings and new works – much like Shelley’s “unsuccessful” metaphors do in their ongoing oscillations. Both processes expand but do not have a goal or endpoint at which to come to rest. Whatever impulse or inspiration may have moved the author to write and thus initiate an open-ended creative process, in Schlegel’s model readers continue this process as a result of their work of understanding. The creative momentum that gave rise is passed on, transferred, so to speak, to readers as they work their way through Schlegelian understanding. That is, as readers work in the way Schlegel outlined to understand the author’s spirit their work stimulates an urge to action (“wenn ich in seinem Geiste handeln kann”) or expression. This is not so much a question of inspiring readers to create their own work – write poems, for example – but rather of inviting them to join a conversation, a Gespräch. After all, as Schlegel explains, it is less a matter of the reader’s self-expression but rather one of integrating the writer’s Geist in a transformative way – or transforming it in an integrative way. What readers write, if they choose to follow the urge to expression, is a transformation or translation of the author’s Geist in their own way but “without diminishing” the author’s individuality. That is, the result of the work of understanding is an integration of sorts of the reader’s individuality or Geist with that of the author – a conversation that may start in the reader’s mind but is carried on through writing.
This conversation, not unlike Romantic poetry, is never finished because the reader’s transformations of the author’s *Geist* do not end the conversation but are contributions to its continuation. For example, readers’ “transformations” of an author’s *Geist* may differ, and in any case, they may give rise to further transformations by other readers. Like a conversation, the ongoing process of creative production (specifically, the production of writing) as Schlegel envisions it is based on the preservation of each party’s freedom and individuality. Thus, in his definition of understanding Schlegel significantly speaks of readers having to be able to (“*kann*”) act in the spirit of an author and be able to transform the author in many ways. The crucial point then is the ability to act and transform; this alone proves understanding, and readers may still choose not to act or transform/translate. After all, a conversation that does not leave participation up to each party is not really a conversation but an interrogation or a lecture.

In fact, the conversation between author and reader is a part of the larger conversation that is Romantic poetry. As Schlegel explains in his famous fragment #116, “It [Romantic poetry] tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical.”25 That is, Romantic poetry is not defined by its contrast to prose or criticism; as Schlegel sees it, it is a genre not determined by its particular written form but rather by its continued process, and accordingly the critiques or “*Charakteristiken*” produced by readers – their transformations and translations of the author’s *Geist* – as a result of their work of understanding are also part of this ongoing process that Schlegel calls Romantic poetry. Of course, read this way, Schlegel’s definition creates a certain tension to the well-known figure of the Romantic genius or
divinely inspired poet. Here, the inspiration is passed on, almost like a contagion, to
readers who also join the process of creative production with contributions seemingly
equal in value and significance to the works of the inspired poet. I will revisit this point
of tension in chapter 5, but as is already clear here, Romantic poetry as Schlegel defines it
can turn readers from passive recipients into active contributors to cultural production.
Schlegel’s Romantic poets thus fulfill a cultural and educational mission: they school
readers by way of the process of understanding into becoming culturally responsible
citizens.

Interestingly, in Schlegel’s model readers can become critics not primarily on the
basis of understanding the author better than he/she could have done but out of “not
better understanding,” that is, out of stepping back from the better understanding to join
the author’s more “limited” perspective. Thus, in Schlegelian understanding the
“understanding better” is attained only to be set aside or relinquished in a second step,
which is clearly the more important and pivotal one for Schlegel. The moment of setting
aside the superior understanding is the pivotal moment of the reader identifying with an
author and seeing the world through his/her eyes, so to speak. This decisive step of
entering into the author’s perspective is what makes the conversation described above
possible; without this step there would be the equivalent of a lecture or interrogation. It is
important to keep in mind that Schlegel does not expect agreement, utter harmony, or
accord between reader and writer. On the contrary, the reader is expected to transform the
author (or the author’s Geist); instead of harmony or agreement something even more
difficult is called for: to keep the author’s individuality intact in all the transformations,
which is only possible if readers attain through their reading and imaginative identification an intimate, inside knowledge of that individuality.

This second step in the process of understanding, namely, the step away from “better understanding,” also leads to Schlegel’s concept of incomprehensibility as an essentially positive quality. That is, for Schlegel, incomprehensibility is not negative, not a lack of comprehension. This link, which is vital to understanding Romantic irony, will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, which will look again, from a different angle, at Schlegel’s seemingly paradoxical notion of making a “not understanding better” the goal of the work of understanding.

Schlegel asks more of readers though. The task he expects readers to take on is still more difficult and carries greater responsibility; in his philosophical fragment #1229 Schlegel succinctly describes the reader’s role: “Buchstabe ist fixierter Geist. Lesen heißt, gebundenen Geist frei machen, also eine magische Handlung.” As a magical act setting free the author’s spirit that is bound in the letter, reading is much more than understanding what the author/texts says, from “getting the message.” Like the other fragments quoted earlier, this one also underscores that for Schlegel reading aims at something intangible. While understanding must proceed by way of the text, its primary concern is actually not with the text but with the author, or the author’s Geist, respectively. That is, the process of understanding/reading in Schlegel’s sense moves from the tangible, physical fact of the text, the words and letters on the page, to an intangible goal – ultimately, a relationship. Reminiscent of alchemy’s efforts at transformation – not least because of its grand ambition and small chance of realization – reading here also seems to be the reverse of the writer’s process. Like the two sides of a
coin, the two processes here seem to become two phases of one process, namely of the encompassing, history-spanning, creative conversation that Schlegel calls Romantic poetry.

Significantly, for Schlegel Geist is bound not in words but in letters – in the smallest unit of written or printed language, not of spoken language. The allusion to the letter-spirit dichotomy is a well-known figure in rhetoric and in discussions of laws and religious scriptures, and it has no equivalent referring to spoken language. In line with the tradition of this figure of speech, Schlegel implies that Geist would not be as fixed and bound in spoken language, where the speaker through his/her presence both confines his/her spirit and sets it free again. It is in writing, respectively its smallest unit that the author’s is fixed and bound in time and requires liberation through another, not the author. Seen in this context, the role of readers is far more complex than merely receiving and decoding a message or content; instead, they have a vital mission to fulfill in continuing, in a manner of speaking, the author’s work. Given such an essential role in the process of artistic production, readers and reading are worth a closer look.

In his Lyceum fragment #112 Schlegel describes readers and the relationship between author and reader.

Der analytische Schriftsteller beobachtet den Leser, wie er ist; danach macht er seinen Kalkül, legt seine Maschinen an, um den gehörigen Effekt auf ihn zu machen. Der synthetische Schriftsteller konstruiert und schafft sich einen Leser, wie er sein soll; er denkt sich denselben nicht ruhend und tot, sondern lebendig und entgegenwirkend. Er läßt das, was er erfunden hat, vor seinen Augen stufenweise werden, oder er lockt ihn es selbst zu erfinden. Er will keine
bestimmte Wirkung auf ihn machen, sondern er tritt mit ihm in das heilige Verhältnis der innigsten Symphilosophie oder Sympoesie.

[The analytic writer observes the reader as he is; and accordingly he makes his calculations and sets up his machines in order to make the proper impression on him. The synthetic writer constructs and creates a reader as he should be; he doesn’t imagine him calm and dead, but alive and critical. He allows whatever he has created to take shape gradually before the reader’s eyes, or else he tempts him to discover it himself. He doesn’t try to make any particular impression on him, but enters with him into the sacred relationship of deepest symphilosophy or sympoetry.]

Of the two types of writers described here, the method of the analytical ones can most easily be represented in the conventional linear diagram of the communication process: they move from desired effect in a straight line to its realization, using the resources available, namely, the readers and author as they are. In the case of analytical writers, readers clearly do not have to do much at all; in fact, they are studied and treated as passive recipients. The author alone is responsible for shaping the writing so that the desired impression or effect is achieved. Thus, analytical writers actually bear more of the burden of understanding than their readers because these writers must adapt their writing to the nature of their readers so as to ensure the latter understand enough to allow the desired impression to be achieved. Essentially, for analytical writers in Schlegel’s model the task of writing is reduced to a careful study of readers and the manipulation of language – the “machines” mentioned in the fragment – in such a way that the intended
effect is most likely to materialize. Regarding the process of understanding, readers can be said to have understood an analytical writer if the writer makes the intended, desired impression on them. Neither “understanding better” nor understanding equal to the author’s own is necessary. That is, analytical writing, as Schlegel defines it, does not require any work of understanding on the part of readers.

In contrast, the synthetic writer – and this is clearly the kind of writer Schlegel prefers and the class to which he himself belongs – creates or imagines readers as they should be. Interestingly, these imagined readers are not passive recipients who placidly agree with the author’s views; rather, for synthetic writers (as for Schlegel) the ideal reader is alive and “entgegenwirkend,” that is, a contributor to the creative process. Since these writers aim not at an effect to be made on passive readers but at a co-creative relationship with readers, their ideal readers must be – or become as a result of the work of understanding – creative, productive participants in this encompassing process Schlegel calls “symphilosophy or sympoetry.” These terms coined by Schlegel on the pattern of “symphony” designate a relationship of participants and contributions differing in kind but equal in value. In the case of sympoetry, which is also Romantic poetry, the relationship is open-ended and mediated by language, the latter making the relationship possible and also burdening it with inherent problems, as we will see in the next chapter.²⁸

How important the collaborative conversation of sympoetry was to Schlegel is clear from his Lyceum fragment #85: “Jeder rechtliche Autor schreibt für niemand, oder für alle. Wer schreibt, damit ihn diese und jene lesen mögen, verdient, daß er nicht gelesen werde” [“Every honest author writes for nobody or everybody. Whoever writes
for some particular group does not deserve to be read.”].\(^{29}\) Here, Schlegel condemns any pandering to readers and straining after effect even more forcefully than he did in the above-quoted fragment #112. Writing for effect limits the reader’s (and the writer’s) freedom – after all, the reader has no say in the effect to be achieved, and writers are not free in their choices when these are entirely determined by a desired effect. Writing for effect diminishes the individuality of writer and reader, thus rendering the kind of collaborative, creative conversation that Schlegel calls sympoetry impossible. The “nobody or everybody” authors should write for in Schlegel’s model is the ideal reader, the reader each writer constructs and creates, not a real person but rather an ideal as an invitation real readers are free to take up and pursue. To take up this invitation and step into the role of the ideal reader, actual readers need both to have a better understanding of the author than the latter had and also to have the same understanding – including lack of understanding – the author had. To achieve such understanding and its outcome, namely, the transformation of the author’s Geist, readers must be “entgegenwirkend”; at the same time, their understanding (and the resulting transformations) enable them to continue this activity of “entgegenwirken.”

The reader’s “entgegenwirken,” then, is what ultimately produces the critique or Charakteristik, the expression in writing of the transformations resulting from the Schlegelian process of understanding. Thus, it is the reader’s “entgegenwirken” that allows a work to outlive its author and have significance, through the above-mentioned transformations, in the future. And in this context “work” refers not so much to a specific text but to a larger process of which a text forms a part, a process that has come
temporarily to rest, crystallized, so to speak, in a particular textual configuration, but does not end there.

What specifically does this important activity of “entgegenwirken” that turns the reader into the author’s counterpart, a partner in their dialog encompass? Interestingly, Firchow translates “entgegenwirken” as “critical” – the imagined and created reader “as he should be” is “alive and critical.” Though the German term has its own complexity, the translation here is even more problematical. Generally, we understand “critical” to refer to a judgment or evaluation, and usually not a positive one. Readers who are critical are discerning as well as judging. Based on the earlier discussion of “understanding better” and understanding “only partially and precisely as much as” the author did, “critical” seems to me to be just as problematical as the term “understanding” in the non-Schlegelian sense: both imply that readers, coming after the author, know or understand better, can resolve confusions where the author could not, in short, have a superior perspective or appraisal of the work/author. However, since for Schlegel understanding requires both “better understanding” and the same understanding and the readers’ critique grows out of this more complex notion of understanding, the term “critical” fits here only if it is used in this Schlegelian sense. In Schlegel’s sense “critical” involves a more profound activity on the reader’s part than just understanding better and thus is not simply a matter of approval or disapproval.

The activity of “entgegenwirken” usually designated in English as “counteract,” “countervail,” “thwart,” or “resist” – and these terms with their implication of action, doing, seem to me the more fitting translation here. To understand the nature and significance of “entgegenwirken” it may help to conceive of it in analogy to a force and
the counterforce equaling it. As the author exerts force, energy, or effort, readers are expected to counter this with their own equal force. Just as we can walk thanks to this principle – the force we press against the earth under our feet is returned in equal measure, and this resistance thus moves us – so the productive process of Romantic poetry depends on the interplay of the author’s and the readers’ force or effort. Accordingly, the reader’s “entgegenwirken” cannot simply be disagreement with the author but rather is the force (or expression of the force) of the reader’s own creative impulse or urge to expression. This impulse is both created and shaped by the interaction with the author’s work and the author’s Geist confined in its letters. Logically, then, “entgegenwirken” both makes Schlegelian understanding possible and arises from it. In particular, the ideal reader’s “entgegenwirken” offers the author the necessary resistance, giving the author’s creative process a kind of “traction” to help ground and guide it. The “entgegenwirken” is the reader’s contribution to the process, to the conversation between writer and reader; it is the reader setting free the spirit confined in the letter. Initially, writers must imagine and create an ideal reader to fill this role, a feat that is also an imaginative projection into the future because the ideal reader serves after all as temporary stand-in for the actual readers later taking on the task of “entgegenwirken”. Clearly, Schlegel here again blurs the distinction between writers and readers; as indicated above, Schlegelian reading and understanding lead, at least potentially, to writing. Readers, even ideal readers, are thus nascent writers; in participating in the creative process and dialog they become writers themselves.30

Although my discussion so far has focused on the contribution of two individualities to the creative process – what Schlegel described as Romantic poetry – it
is important to keep in mind that for Schlegel the relationship between author and reader does not exist for the sake of the participants nor yet for its own sake. Its value lies in making symphony (or symphilosophy) possible, that is, the continued co-creation of Romantic poetry, the perpetuation of the process of Romantic poetry. Here, readers and writers are equals in a co-creative process to which each makes a different but equally necessary and valuable contribution.

From the preceding discussion a more comprehensive picture of Romantic poetry emerges. In addition to the characteristics Schlegel described in the famous fragment #116, the defining criterion of Romantic poetry appears to be the particular relationship between writers and readers that both makes Romantic poetry possible and also arises from it. Thus, the underlying distinguishing characteristic that sets Romantic poetry apart from other kinds of writing is the writer’s attitude or relationship to the reader. At the same time, Romantic poetry calls for a particular kind of reader willing and able to engage actively in the work of understanding as outlined by Schlegel. In fragment #116 Schlegel already makes clear that Romantic poetry is not a formal genre in the conventional sense; rather, it mixes and combines the traditional genres, most particularly prose and poetry, poetry and philosophy. Just as Romantic poetry dissolves the boundaries separating the traditional genres, so it also blurs the distinction between writers and readers, ultimately turning readers into writers (if they so choose and have followed the Schlegelian process of understanding). In the process, even the relationship of the writer to his/her own writing and work is altered because the boundary between creation of the work and the work as product has been abolished as have other borderlines also – so that ultimately the reader, albeit an ideal reader, already plays a role.
in the writing process from its very beginning. Moreover, Romantic poetry also
transcends another boundary often not considered in discussions of fragment #116,
from the very beginning. Moreover, Romantic poetry also
transcends another boundary often not considered in discussions of fragment #116,
that between spoken and written language. As I will show in more detail in
chapter 5, sympoetry (or Romantic poetry) is modeled on conversation, *Gespräch*. In its
ideal form the process as Schlegel describes it in the above-quoted fragments on
understanding essentially becomes an open-ended conversation carried on in writing over
an extended period (potentially infinite) by varying participants.

Yet, according to Schlegel, Romantic poetry is also a form, namely, the form best
suited “for expressing the entire spirit of an author.” Clearly, this is a long way from
what “analytical writers,” as Schlegel described them, are doing. They also take their
readers into account in their writing but only so as to manipulate them more easily and
achieve their desired effect more surely. Interestingly, where the translation by Firchow
talks about expressing an author’s “entire spirit,” Schlegel speaks of “den Geist des
Autors vollständig auszudrücken.” The difference seems subtle; yet, as is clear from the
texts by Schlegel quoted earlier, the *Geist* or spirit of the author for him is an indivisible
whole, only one. Accordingly, the writers expressing their spirit in this way are not
analytical but synthetic. And therefore conversation is an appropriate model for Romantic
poetry or sympoetry because what emerges in a conversation is a whole that is more than
the sum of its parts, the individual contributions made to it.

To what extent Schlegel’s ideal of sympoetry can be realized, if at all, is
questionable, and perhaps this question cannot be answered yet. Nevertheless, his own
writing and the collaboration with his friends during the heyday of the Jena circle clearly
call for the approach to reading and understanding Schlegel outlined in the fragments
quoted above. As much as it calls for a new kind of writer, Romantic poetry demands a new kind of reading. Indeed, Schlegel’s view of reading/understanding is revolutionary in that it subverts and overturns the usual categories. Rather than aiming at understanding how the author thought in order to arrive at a “better understanding” than the author ever had, as Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics tries to do, Schlegel aims at understanding as well and as badly as the author did based on the insights gained through the “better understanding.” This understanding “just as well and just as badly” is thus the more complex and complicated objective and more difficult to achieve – in many or most cases perhaps impossible to attain.

Here, too, the underlying model of a conversation shines through. In a conversation, too, it may be fairly easy for us to understand better what the other person is saying that he/she understands himself/herself thanks to our more objective perspective, knowledge of the other person, etc. The more difficult task is to not take that better understanding as definitive and conclusive and proceed on its basis to respond to what the other person said. The more difficult task is to join the interlocutor’s perspective, including any confusion, uncertainty, or misunderstanding and thus come to understand the other person’s individuality – that is, what is called for in a conversation (sympoetry) is to give up the outsider’s advantage, the superior understanding or insight bestowed by distance. Rather than aiming at clearing up and eliminating all incomprehensibility, Schlegel’s model of understanding sees incomprehensibility as ultimately a positive quality, one readers are to look for and preserve. The goal of Schlegelian understanding is thus not turning all incomprehensibility into comprehension but rather to comprehend (and appreciate) an author’s or work’s incomprehensibility.
Paradoxical though the preceding sentence seems, as I will show in the next chapter, for Romantic poetry incomprehensibility is an essential concomitant of both writing and reading because it is an inevitable consequence of the Romantic view of language. To trace these connections, I will discuss Schlegel’s essay “On Incomprehensibility” and his “Dialogue on Poetry”; the latter provides more detail on Schlegel’s view of Romantic poetry and, significantly, does so in conversation form.
Chapter 3

Schlegelian Incomprehensibility

Was ist herrlicher als Gold? fragte der König, – Das Licht, antwortete die Schlange.
Was ist erquicklicher als Licht? fragte jener. – Das Gespräch, antwortete diese.
Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Märchen von der grünen Schlange

I. Schlegelian Understanding and the Schlegelian Fragment

As discussed in the preceding chapter, Friedrich Schlegel developed his model of understanding, including a redefinition and revaluation of the concept, in so-called fragments, relatively short text passages that appeared primarily in the literary journal Athenaeum and similar collections of fragments and short essays and treatises. Schlegel, who also wrote poems, novels, lectures, treatises, and plays, clearly preferred the fragment as the literary form for much of his thinking on literature, art, philosophy, politics, and philology, a preference that drew much criticism in the two hundred years since their first appearance. In particular, Schlegel’s prolific output of fragments contributed to the misleading yet persistent image of him as an unsystematic and inconsistent thinker and writer, one incapable of sustaining and following through a longer train of thought. Schlegel’s choice of the fragment is one reason why his theories and models of understanding, writing, Romantic irony, and poetry (among others) were long not taken seriously and why he was generally thought to have failed to develop any kind of systematic theory at all. By and large, the literary form of the fragment, as generally understood, seems to impede and indeed work against logical and systematic thinking.

Considering the negative reaction to the fragment form and Schlegel’s persistence in using it, the form and its draw for Schlegel deserve a closer look. Indeed, as I will
show, the fragment as Schlegel understood it was the ideally suited vehicle and
instrument for his purpose. That is, the fragment is the most appropriate form for
Schlegel’s model of understanding because the fragment form, as we will see, embodies
and performs Schlegelian understanding. More than other literary forms, Schlegel’s
fragments call upon readers to follow the process of Schlegelian understanding by
actively engaging with the text. In this way Schlegelian fragments promote the
establishment of the “sacred relationship of deepest symp hilosophy or sympoetry”
between writer and reader. The details of how Schlegel’s fragments work will become
clear in the course of this chapter. Moreover, for Schlegel the fragment is at the core of
dialogue or conversation, key concepts in his model of literary production and
understanding. Schlegel explained this crucial connection – characteristically – in
fragments, particularly in Athenaeum fragment #77:

   Ein Dialog ist eine Kette, oder ein Kranz von Fragmenten. Ein Briefwechsel ist
ein Dialog in vergrößertem Maßstabe, und Memorabilien sind ein System von
Fragmenten.

   [A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a
dialogue on a larger scale, and memoirs constitute a system of fragments.]^{32}

Clearly, Schlegel’s concept of the fragment differs considerably from our usual
understanding of the term. For example, we usually understand the term *fragment* to
designate a part, something incomplete, a piece, or remnant of a whole that once existed
and then somehow was broken. Thus, in general usage, the term *fragment* is freighted
with two essential assumptions or implications: a fragment is understood as what is left
after a whole has been broken or damaged, and the term clearly points at a prior state of wholeness, an unfragmented unity in the past. The term thus generally is oriented toward the past; it looks back to a state of wholeness that is no longer. In other words, fragments as we ordinarily understand the term point to a time when the fragment did not yet exist as such but was still integrated, into a whole. In a sense, fragment in this ordinary use of the word means primarily that the original whole no longer exists. By implication, the word thus also refers to the event, perhaps a violent one, an outside event that broke up or in some way damaged the original whole. Accordingly, at the unspoken, silent core of the concept fragment is the reference to damage or breakage or another event that interfered with the existence of the whole as it originally was. It is in fact that event that first gave rise to the fragment in the usual sense of the term.

Secondarily, and perhaps in only an attenuated way, the term fragment also connotes the implied hope of a future restoration to a state of wholeness. Though usually a fruitless hope, in some cases fragments may be united again, and the whole maybe restored if all the fragments constituting it are to hand. Yet, such a restored whole in this sense would be a re-creation of a whole from the past, not a new creation.

Obviously, Schlegel uses the term in a quite different sense. For Schlegel, fragments as contributions to a dialogue are necessarily already complete and whole. Each fragment is a whole joining with other similar wholes to form a new and larger whole. The fragments making up the “chain or garland” (or wreath) that is the dialogue – like the links of a chain – are complete and whole in themselves whether they are part of such a chain or garland at any given moment or not. For Schlegel, fragments look forward, to the future, not so much in the hope that fragments may be rejoined to
reconstruct some original whole, but rather in the expectation that new fragments yet to be created will join with the existing ones to form a new and larger whole, one that has never before existed.

Thus, in line with Schlegel’s chain/garland analogy in fragment #77 (see above), fragments both constitute and are already a whole; they are whole in the present, whether they are joined with others into a dialogue or not, and they will be new and different wholes in the future as the dialogue into which they are integrated expands. Just as a chain, garland, or wreath is always whole and complete, no matter what its size, but can be expanded and made bigger, so the fragments making up the dialogue-garland are complete in themselves, as is the dialogue at any given moment. In other words, the dialogue is not less of a dialogue before the addition of any particular fragment. As such, then, the dialogue is not incomplete or lacking anything; each fragment expands and extends the dialogue but does not complete it. Consequently, the dialogue can continue and expand but does not have a predetermined end point. Even if it is interrupted, regardless of how long it may be pending, the dialogue can be taken up and expanded again at any time with the contribution of more fragments.

This interrelationship between part and whole is fundamental to Schlegel’s concept of the fragment, as is clear from his *Athenaeum* fragment #206:

Ein Fragment muß gleich einem kleinen Kunstwerke von der umgebenden Welt ganz abgesondert und in sich selbst vollendet sein wie ein Igel. [A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog.]\textsuperscript{33}
That is, a fragment – and by implication any work of art – has an inherent quality of wholeness or completeness. Indeed, fragments in Schlegel’s sense resemble living cells: they are self-contained, complete, and closed off from their surroundings yet at the same time open to join or unite with others to form a larger whole. Their boundaries both enclose cells/fragments and open/connect them to others. Moreover, the boundaries of cells (or organisms) and of artworks, whether small or large, are not accidental or random but deliberately chosen in the case of the artworks and functional in cells. Thus, the Schlegelian fragment “performs” the organicist trope of poetry (or literature in general) as following its inherent organic principles of form and growth. This trope was a commonplace of Romantic era poetry; for example, Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry* likens poetry to “the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially.” For Shelley, then, poetry has the same growth potential as fragments do for Schlegel. Schlegelian fragments, like the poems Shelley has in mind, are complete in themselves, just as acorns are as complete and whole as the trees into which they grow. Shelley saw poems “growing” into the great, infinite, universal poem to which all poets throughout the ages contribute while for Schlegel fragments “grow” into an open-ended dialogue as infinite and universal as Romantic poetry according to Schlegel’s famous fragment #116. In a sense, fragments as Schlegel defines them also meet the criteria he outlines for Romantic poetry, and it is because of Schlegelian understanding that fragments and Romantic poetry can be vehicles for the “sacred relationship of deepest symphilosophy or sympoetry”; that is, their function depends on the reader’s activity, which Schlegel calls “entgegenwirken.”
Of course, insofar as the garland of dialogue can grow and insofar as Romantic poetry is always becoming and never finished, time plays an important role. That is, according to Schlegel’s definition, what sets Romantic poetry apart is not so much subject matter or form; rather, it is largely defined by the work of time on it. Likewise, the dialogue constituted by fragments is created through time. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, time also plays a decisive role in Schlegel’s model of understanding; it is the medium through and in which the magical act of releasing the spirit from its confinement in the letter becomes possible. In fact, the role of time in Schlegel’s concept of understanding and also of Romantic irony has largely been neglected. Yet, particularly in regard to his understanding of fragments Schlegel explicitly gave time a central role, as is clear in his *Athenaeum* fragment #24: “Viele Werke der Alten sind Fragmente geworden. Viele Werke der Neuern sind es gleich bei der Entstehung.” [Many works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written.]

This fragment is instructive and revealing on several levels: it is about fragments and is itself one, and it also enacts the process of Schlegelian understanding. For example, at first glance the first sentence seems to say that many works that have come down to us from antiquity are now fragments and no longer whole. They have been damaged or broken in the course of time, and what we are left with are bits and pieces, remnants. In other words, in our attempts at “better” understanding (i.e., better than the author understood himself), we tend to take this sentence to mean that many ancient works have not been preserved as the complete and whole works they once were but have become damaged, fragmented. Naturally, this seems so banal and obvious as to hardly
need saying, so in the (false, as we will find out) certainty of our “better” understanding, we rush along over this self-evident statement to the next sentence. And with this second sentence at the latest our understanding in the usual sense hits a snag, so to speak, because it seems far from obvious or even comprehensible that modern works created in our own time should be called fragments from the outset, that is, before any damaging event or influence of passing time.

By this point in reading the fragment, it should be clear that the “better” understanding must be abandoned in favor of being “just as smart” as the author, of understanding just as well as the author, including all confusion. However, careful reading of the first sentence already would have indicated as much; for example, the construction “sind Fragmente geworden” is slightly unidiomatic. The expected and idiomatic expression would be “sind zu Fragmenten geworden,” “sind nur noch als Fragmente erhalten” [exist only in fragments anymore], or the like. That is, these phrases capture a process of decay or destruction from the perspective of those who are left with the fragments or bits and pieces. In contrast, Schlegel’s phrasing suggests a process of becoming that culminates in achievement of the status as fragment – that is, the wording points in the opposite direction associated with the term in the usual sense.

In other words, all our apparent “better” understanding notwithstanding, in fragment #24 Schlegel is not referring to the obvious fact that many ancient works have been damaged in the course of history and are now no longer complete. Rather, while we are still “seeing” fragments in our ordinary sense of the term, Schlegel has already shifted the term to mean fragments as he defined them. That is, the fragment is about Schlegelian fragments, not fragments in the usual sense. Rather, in his wordplay with fragment
Schlegel redefines the term in the process of using it. That is, while the fragment is about fragments, it also exemplifies Schlegel’s process of redefinition and revaluation. At the same time, this fragment requires Schlegelian understanding to be understood at all.

The first sentence of the fragment has often been misunderstood as applying to fragments in the ordinary sense (namely, incomplete, damaged works of art), and critics have often taken the second sentence about the modern works being fragments to refer to the necessarily and intrinsically incomplete or fragmentary nature of modern works as opposed to the wholeness and artistic unity usually ascribed to the works of Greek and Roman antiquity. That is, modern works are considered to lack a unified or shared vision of the world, and thus also unity in form and expression. Interestingly, this interpretation of Schlegel’s fragment also ascribes the fragmentary nature of modern as of ancient works to a cause outside the work of art, making the fragmentary nature accidental rather than intrinsic.

It seems to me though that Schlegel’s wordplay and somewhat peculiar phrasing, in which becoming a fragment comes to sound like a positive achievement, should give us pause. Ultimately, Schlegel here plays with the two senses of the word fragment, our usual understanding of the term and his redefinition in line with fragment #77 (“A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. …”), as well as with the concept of a whole. That is, while seemingly talking about fragments in the ordinary sense but actually also bringing into play his own concept of the fragment, Schlegel at the same time destabilizes our usual understanding of what the concept whole means. After all, by comparing dialogues in fragment #77 to garlands or wreaths, Schlegel already redefined that concept also, essentially allowing that nearly any work of the nature of a dialogue, exchange of
letters, or even memoirs are wholes only provisionally; they can be expanded by adding new fragments and thus are in themselves larger fragments in Schlegel’s sense of the term.

It seems to me though that fragment #24 about ancient and modern works is another contribution to the dialogue or conversation in which Schlegel already “spoke” about the major difference between analytical and synthetic writers (see preceding chapter, discussion of fragment #112), and thus fragment #24 should be considered in this context. According to Schlegel’s definition in fragment #112, analytical writers aim for a particular, predetermined effect and are thus not participating in a dialogue. Their works therefore are not fragmentary in Schlegel’s sense of being a contribution to a conversation; rather, such works are more like monologues or lectures. They do not invite readers to join in the conversation, in the process of creative production. As a result, such works cannot establish “the relationship of deepest symphilosophy or sympoetry” between writer and reader. Obviously, just as in Schlegel’s and our own time, some writers even in antiquity were analytical writers as defined by Schlegel; their works would not be fragments in Schlegel’s sense, regardless of how broken or damaged they may have become in the intervening centuries. That is, even when such works meet the criteria of being fragments (i.e., broken, incomplete) in the ordinary sense of the word, they are not on that account also Schlegelian fragments.

On the other hand, by definition, synthetic writers who imagine active, “entgegenwirkende” readers and aim not at creating an effect but at the relationship of sympoetry/symphilosophy with their readers produce fragments in Schlegel’s sense, that is, works that form part of a larger dialogue. In this sense, the works of ancient synthetic
writers became fragments over time – indeed, by necessity had to become fragments, regardless of how completely and pristinely they may have been preserved – once posterity joined in the conversation. That is, the earliest written works perhaps had no written dialogue yet to join and were perhaps the ones that set the dialogue in motion. Modern synthetic writers, in contrast, produce Schlegelian fragments because they can join a conversation already in progress. Their works are contributions to an ongoing dialogue of synthetic works by Schlegel’s definition. Indeed, if they aim at creating sympoetry/symphilosophy with their readers, modern synthetic writers necessarily write fragments in Schlegel’s sense of the term.

Just as when reading the first sentence of fragment #24 our understanding oscillates for a moment between the two senses of the word fragment, so any synthetic work, at least potentially, oscillates between being whole in itself and being part of a larger whole. As with the Necker cube, our perception switches between two opposite but not necessarily mutually exclusive alternatives (see above, chapter 1). In a way, fragments in the ordinary sense of the term are characterized primarily by the absence of the original whole. They bear witness to the discontinuation of its existence. In contrast, as contributions to an ongoing conversation, Schlegelian fragments are always whole in themselves. Their nature as parts of a larger whole into which they are integrated becomes apparent only at that moment of integration. And even after they have become part of this larger whole, they are still recognizable as wholes, just as small works of art would be. After all, contributions to a dialogue also remain recognizable in their individual identity. Accordingly, where Schlegelian fragments are concerned, being whole or complete and being a part or fragment are not mutually exclusive properties.
Both perceptions of a particular text are valid, just as the two views of the Necker cube are equally valid. (Interestingly, they are so because the “subject” of the perception – the depth indication – is not there at all.)

Significantly, Schlegel concerns himself only with written works; since writing can preserve the past, the latter does not need to be restored or in some way kept alive. Thus, writing is free to be oriented and open toward the future in a way the spoken word cannot be. Accordingly, Schlegelian fragments do not look to the past or the restoration of the past but are directed forward, to a potentially infinite future. Moreover, it is only because writing preserves the individual contributions to the ongoing dialogue that Schlegelian fragments can retain their identity as wholes while also being part of a larger whole. They remain identifiable and recognizable as small but complete works of art. Schlegel’s definition of fragments thus applies only to written works and excludes oral works that were never written down (known to us only secondhand, if at all).

The same applies to Schlegel’s model of understanding: it presupposes written texts. The “sacred relationship of deepest symphilosophy or sympoetry” is to be established between readers and writers; that is, this relationship is premised on the absence of the one from the other, on the distance between readers and writers. Though the relationship of sympoetry is an attempt to bridge that distance, sympoetry is not a personal, face-to-face relationship. Rather, this special relationship only exists in and through language, specifically written language. In other words, Schlegel does not aim at the recreation of the kind of relationship that was possible between orator/rhetorician/storyteller and audience in an oral culture when both were present together in time and space. Rather, Schlegel’s sympoetry overcomes the distance between
writer and reader through the very medium that made it possible in the first place, namely, written language. Sympoetry is achieved through the special activity of the reader – namely, the magical activity of releasing the writer’s spirit from its confinement in the letter – and finds its expression, ideally, in the readers’ writing. As we have seen in the preceding chapter’s discussion of Schlegelian understanding, readers are motivated, if not compelled, to engage in this process of understanding an author’s spirit because writers expect and require this active reading, the active “entgegenwirken” of their readers.

Perhaps more than other literary forms, fragments “tempt” readers to engage actively in this way with the text, perhaps even to offer their own contributions to the dialogue. Based on the requirements of the process of Schlegelian understanding, fragments are indeed the best form in which to develop this model because the fragment is also the form most conducive to elicit readers’ active, Schlegelian understanding, which in turn enables them to accomplish the magical act of setting free the author’s spirit that is bound in the letter.

Of course, it is still a question whether fragments can be sufficiently systematic for the development of a theory or model, a question Schlegel was concerned about also, as is clear from the second part of fragment #77, which in its entirety reads as follows:

Ein Dialog ist eine Kette, oder ein Kranz von Fragmenten. Ein Briefwechsel ist ein Dialog in vergrößertem Maßtabe, und Memorabilien sind ein System von Fragmenten. Es gibt noch keins was in Stoff und Form fragmentarisch, zugleich ganz subjektiv und individuell, und ganz objektiv und wie ein notwendiger Teil im System aller Wissenschaften wäre.
[A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a dialogue on a larger scale, and memoirs constitute a system of fragments. But as yet no genre exists that is fragmentary both in form and content, simultaneously completely subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in a system of all the sciences.]³⁷

In other words, while fragments have already established themselves in the field of literature, they have not yet made themselves felt in the sciences, where they would be especially useful precisely because they make it possible to unite the subjective and objective perspective, just as they are both whole and part at the same time.

Interestingly, Schlegel describes fragments as “kleine Kunstwerke,” “small works of art,” a description that is based on a comparison. After all, “small” is not a clearly defined, measurable size but only relative. Fragments thus can be of various sizes and are small only compared to the larger whole they constitute. Indeed, Schlegel’s fragments come in many different sizes, ranging from one sentence to essays, treatises, and even a novel. I think it is safe to extrapolate from the fragments discussed so far that essentially all synthetic works (written by synthetic writers, as defined in Athenaeum fragment #112) are Schlegelian fragments, regardless of genre, length, or date and place of origin.

At the same time, all such synthetic works constitute an ongoing dialogue or conversation, one that is always complete in the sense of not lacking anything and also at the same time always in the process of becoming and thus unfinished. This calls to mind Schlegel’s well-known fragment #116 according to which Romantic poetry is also always in a process of becoming and is “never perfected.” As Schlegel has it, Romantic poetry
can “hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer” – that is, essentially, the ideal fragments are Romantic poems, just as the ideal Romantic poems must be fragments in Schlegel’s sense of the term.

It is clear, then, that for Schlegel what defines Romantic poetry – indeed all synthetic works – is a particular relationship between reader and writer, one that entails a certain relationship of the author to writing and of the reader to reading. That is, for Schlegelian understanding to occur, readers and writers must approach writing, the written text, in a particular way, and this depends, above all, on a certain understanding of language, how it functions and how to use it. These strands that make up Schlegel’s new model of understanding, reading, writing, and ultimately of our relationship to language are interwoven, much like strands in a braid, in Schlegel’s (in)famous essay “On Incomprehensibility.” In fact, the essay is best read as a tour de force performance of that interweaving and thus of Schlegel’s model. I will discuss it in more detail in the next section.

II. Schlegelian Understanding and the Play of Incomprehensibility

Published in 1800 in the last issue of the journal Athenaeum, though based on drafts and concepts dating back to 1798/1799, the essay “On Incomprehensibility” ostensibly addresses the numerous complaints that had been leveled against the journal and its main writers, the brothers Schlegel. In particular, readers and critics had complained that the contributions, mostly fragments, by Friedrich Schlegel were difficult if not impossible to understand. Of course, as discussed in the preceding chapter and the section above, the first question to clarify is what kind of understanding is at issue here. It is clear from the
complaints about Schlegel’s fragments and the critical response to his work that his readers were mostly concerned with understanding in the ordinary sense – that is, grasping the content, the sense of what the authors said – and at most with what Schlegel called “better understanding” – that is, understanding what the author meant based on the reader’s superior knowledge. In other words, by and large Schlegel’s work was not met with Schlegelian understanding on the part of his readers and critics. From the perspective of Schlegel’s model of understanding, the kind of comprehension his readers sought is of inferior value. As far as Schlegel is concerned, readers who complain that understanding in this conventional sense was too difficult or even impossible were pursuing a false understanding – not a misunderstanding but an understanding that misses the mark.

Not surprisingly, when approached with the conventional notion of understanding, “On Incomprehensibility” seems intractable, nearly impenetrable. Insofar as the essay, more or less gently, pushes readers to follow the path of Schlegelian understanding, it performs both incomprehensibility and understanding in Schlegel’s sense. Ultimately, as will become clear in the course of this discussion, the essay becomes “comprehensible” only in a Schlegelian reading. In other words, the essay remains largely inaccessible when read primarily for content (or explanation) but opens itself to engaged, “entgegenwirkend” reading. After all, insofar as Schlegel considered himself a “synthetic writer” (see Lyceum fragment #112 discussed in chapter 2 above), his primary goal in writing was to establish the “sacred relationship of deepest symphilosophy or sympoetry.” The understanding that grows out of this relationship
then enables the reader to “translate” the author and “transform him in diverse ways, without diminishing his individuality.”

Accordingly, Schlegel begins his essay by moving immediately from the individual – namely, the reader who understands or does not understand – to the relationship. As Schlegel puts it, it is through our relationships and interactions with others, through our “gegenseitige Mitteilung” that we form new relationships and concepts to think about. The mutual communication with other people leads to an ever more complex and varied array of “Gegenstände des Nachdenkens.” Having thus established the significance of Mitteilung and having done so in keeping with the conventional notion of understanding and communication, Schlegel at once destabilizes the just established notion of “Mitteilung” by calling its very possibility into question: “Of all things that have to do with communicating ideas, what could be more fascinating than the question of whether such communication is actually possible?” (259).

This “fascinating” question became possible, and perhaps necessary and inevitable, with the new understanding of language that emerged with Romanticism. Prior to the Romantic era, in what Foucault called the Classical Age, this question would not have been asked; indeed, it would have been inconceivable to ask it. For example, in the seventeenth century language was seen as an instrument of knowledge; in Foucault’s words, language in its nature was “knowledge from its very first word. . . . Speaking, enlightening, and knowing are, in the strict sense of the term, of the same order” (89). Of course, language then also served other purposes besides acquisition and dissemination of knowledge, but these were considered insignificant and potentially deleterious. Thus, concerted efforts were underway to purify language of these other uses
and hone it as instrument of accumulating and conveying knowledge. Among other things, rhetorical flourishes, embellishments, and figurative language were strictly distinguished from factual language and classified as inferior and very likely destructive to truth and thus harmful to readers. Factual language alone was able to convey “the bare knowledge of things” as Thomas Sprat phrased it in his *History of the Royal Society* and thus to reveal truth.\(^{43}\)

That is, despite any flaws a particular language might have at any time in history, language in general was seen as a system of designation representing the world “out there.” Though any particular representation might be less than accurate and require improvement, the ultimate purpose of language, namely, representation of nonlinguistic reality, was not called into question by such remediable imperfections. Since the language of fact was given primacy, the task of improving language (through standardization of grammar, spelling, and style, for example) was given to the scientists of the time, natural philosophers, not to poets. As Sprat explains, the members of the Royal Society “have indeavour’d, to separate the knowledge of *Nature*, from the colours of *Rhetorick*, the devices of *Fancy*, or the delightful deceit of *Fables*” (62). Instead, they “have therefore been most rigorous in putting in execution, the only Remedy, that can be found for this *extravagance*: and that has been, a constant Resolution, to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style. . . . They have exacted from all their members, a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can” (113). This proscription against “swellings of style” logically follows from the aim of seventeenth-century natural history (also known as natural philosophy, the term Sprat
used), which Foucault describes as bringing “language as close as possible to the observing gaze, and the things observed as close as possible to words” (132).

Clearly, in Sprat’s time the notion that language could be brought into close, if not actually absolute, congruence with nonlinguistic reality was not in doubt; even if that grand goal had not yet been reached, it was sure to be realized eventually as language was improved and knowledge grew. Moreover, there was no doubt then that language could fully convey that knowledge or truth from one person to another. After all, according to the Classical view of language, in its own structure and nature language would necessarily reveal, represent, that truth or reality “out there.” Even Locke’s 1690 Essay Concerning Human Understanding, a treatise that in many ways paved the way for Romanticism, still insisted on the communication of ideas and thoughts as the main purpose and function of language. Though Locke showed the connection between words and their meanings to be arbitrary, he nevertheless at the beginning of Book III of his treatise defined language as sounds used as “signs of internal conceptions.” According to Locke, words “stand as marks for the Ideas within his [the speaker’s] own Mind, whereby they might be made known to others, and the Thoughts of Men’s Minds be conveyed from one to another” (III.i.1-2).

For Locke, words and their meanings were no longer joined by any necessary or intrinsic link; consequently, language as a whole no longer depicted or represented external reality. Rather, “Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing but the Ideas in Mind of him that uses them” (III.ii.2); that is, words only designate ideas. This shift, important though it was, did not call into question the possibility that ideas, or minds, can “be conveyed from one to another.” Any problems or
errors in this process of conveying ideas were considered due to the wrong use of language or lack of knowledge on the part of the speaker or listener. For example, figurative language by its very nature was considered conducive to error and confusion. Still, even such errors, it was believed, could be mended and ultimately eliminated so that pure and absolute conveying of thoughts from one mind to another would be realized.

As this digression into the history of philosophy of language shows, Schlegel’s seemingly simple question represents a bold destabilization of traditional and long accepted assumptions. Thus, even such a seemingly simple and familiar term as “Mitteilung” requires a closer look to see what Schlegel means here. In fact, a rather surprising “explanation” regarding Mitteilung in writing can be found in his Lyceum fragment #98:

Folgendes sind allgemeingültige Grundgesetze der schriftstellerischen Mitteilung:
1) Man muß etwas haben, was mitgeteilt werden soll; 2) man muß jemand haben, dem man’s mitteilen wollen darf; 3) man muß es wirklich mitteilen, mit ihm teilen können, nicht bloß sich äußern, allein; sonst wäre es treffender, zu schweigen.

[The following are universally valid and fundamental laws of written communication: (1) one should have something to communicate; (2) one should have somebody to whom one wants to communicate it; (3) one should really be able to communicate it and share it with [that person – *emendation mine*], not simply express oneself. Otherwise it would be wiser to keep silent.]\(^{47}\)

The first law is rather obvious; yet, significantly for Schlegel simply having something to say is not sufficient for Mitteilung to occur – as it would have been for Sprat and even for
Locke. The second and third laws are more complex than is apparent at first glance. For example, the central point of the second law, a point that is glossed over and nearly disappears in the translation, is the concept of *darf* (*dürfen*); that is, the writer needs not just any audience or an audience he or she wants to communicate with, but an audience that “permits” the communication. In other words, the audience/readers must be ready and willing to receive the communication (*Mitteilung*). The distinction, in my view, is pivotal because for Schlegel communication and understanding hinge on readers willing to do the work of Schlegelian understanding. That is, readers must be willing to give up their “understanding better” and to enter the writer’s world, so to speak. As discussed in the preceding chapter, readers must be prepared to join the writer on his/her own level of understanding, including any confusion and errors. Clearly, Schlegel is looking for readers who will engage in the process of Schlegelian understanding in the encounter with his texts. By implication, this second fundamental law also indicates that a particular *Mitteilung* may not be addressed to or even be comprehensible to just any reader, namely, to readers who are not open to it. Their sense that a text is incomprehensible may thus be a reflection of their own “failure” to “grant permission” (be open to) for the *Mitteilung* taking place. That is, the incomprehensibility would lie in the readers, not in the writer or the text.

Still, the most important of the three laws is clearly the third one. That is, what matters for Schlegel in communicating ideas is the aspect of sharing. This is one of the clearest expressions of the difference between Schlegel’s model and the conventional model of communication (see discussion in chapter 2) of a sender encoding a message and the recipient simply decoding it but not otherwise participating in the process. For
Schlegel, mere self-expression – that is, merely expressing one’s ideas – is not the purpose of communication. If only self-expression occurs, then silence would be preferable. Rather, what matters is to share ideas; in order for that to be possible, the readers must be adequately prepared and the ideas expressed in such a way as to engage readers, draw them into the work of Schlegelian understanding. Accordingly, the communication is not just with “somebody” but with the person(s) identified in the second law. Those readers are the ones with whom the true sharing of Mitteilung as described by Schlegel is possible; it is those readers who can participate in the creative process. Instead of being merely receivers, they play a role in how the message comes about in the first place; they have a role in what emerges from and in the conversation between writer and reader.

In fact, Schlegel here calls for what seems to be impossible: written communication is to involve the kind of sharing normally associated with face-to-face spoken conversation. The attempt to entertain a dialogue in writing, especially over extended span of space and time, requires that readers engage in the work of Schlegelian understanding and is premised, of course, on the writers being synthetic writers. That is, rather than aiming at self-expression or producing a particular effect in readers, the writing itself must be geared toward making possible “the sacred relationship of deepest symphilosophy or sympoetry.” As discussed above, the Schlegelian fragment is the ideal vehicle to achieve this goal.

Indeed, I would argue that most if not all of Schlegel’s works are understood best when read as a way of carrying on a conversation in writing, that is, when read as fragments, regardless of length or other formal characteristics, and thus as invitations or
calls to the reader to practice Schlegelian understanding. As discussed above, fragments in Schlegel’s sense are wholes; these whole entities form part of a larger whole that encompasses them. This larger whole is a dialogue or conversation that is already underway prior to the addition of the newest fragment; that is, this whole exists already in the present rather than awaiting its realization in the future. Each of these fragments is part of the dialogue as well as its manifestation or realization. After all, the dialogue is the chain or garland of fragments. That is, the dialogue emerges and exists only in the accumulation and interaction between the fragments, and that is why it can, at least potentially, be carried on indefinitely, across space and time. The medium or environment in which the encounter between writer and reader takes place is language, specifically written language. As the outcome of the encounter is to be a particular kind of relationship (sympoetry), language serves this function not in its capacity of designating or denoting. Instead, it is the playful dimension of language that makes Schlegelian writing and understanding and ultimately sympoetry/symphilosophy possible. As with the concept of understanding and that of the fragment, Schlegel here too overturns the usual hierarchy of values: the connotative and playful dimension of language, usually considered secondary and the exclusive province of poets and the like, is revealed as the core of language and essential to communication or sharing of ideas (and the resulting understanding of an author’s Geist) in Schlegel’s sense. Actually, as I will show in the course of this section, this true Schlegelian communication takes place through the medium of Romantic irony, which is the mode par excellence of a Schlegelian conversation in writing.
The importance of conversation for Schlegel’s project is clear early on in the essay “On Incomprehensibility” when Schlegel explains:


[For this reason, I made a resolution quite some time ago to have a talk about this matter with my reader, and then create before his eyes – in spite of him as it were – another new reader to my own liking: yes, even to deduce him if need be.]

Schlegel’s resolution to have this talk with his reader comes in connection with the alleged incomprehensibility of his *Athenaeum* fragments, and his insistence on “creating” a new reader recalls *Lyceum* fragment #112 on the distinction between analytical and synthetic writers (see discussion in preceding chapter). The latter kind of writers “konstruiert und schafft sich einen Leser, wie er sein soll; er denkt sich denselben nicht ruhend und tot, sondern lebendig und entgegenwirkend.” In other words, Schlegel intends to show readers who complain about incomprehensibility how readers should be, namely, how they should read: actively and *entgegenwirkend*, engaging in the work of Schlegelian understanding.

The decisive part of this definition is, of course, the term *entgegenwirkend*. Interestingly, Schlegel does not construct readers who agree with him; that is, these constructed or ideal readers are free to disagree with the author. The word was coined by Schlegel and follows the pattern of other compound verbs consisting of an adverb (of
direction, for example) and the basic verb. And like many such words, “entgegenwirken” also has more than one meaning. For example, “entgegenkommen” is a common German verb also formed on that same pattern. It means coming against or toward, as in traffic going in the opposite direction or an attacking incoming force. At the same time, it also means coming toward and meeting halfway, accommodate. That is, while both meanings are based on the perspective of the person/thing toward which something else is coming, the difference between them is based on the intention of what is coming – and thus ultimately the relationship between those involved.

Likewise, “entgegenwirken” has more than one meaning; “entgegen” means both “toward” and “against,” and “wirken” is etymologically related to the English word “work” and can refer to many kinds of “creative” activities, including weaving and knitting, exerting influence, and working (work of any kind). By calling the synthetic writers’ ideal readers “entgegenwirkend,” Schlegel gives them an active and important role in the creative process. The readers he has in mind have work to do. In a sense, while the writer is working toward the readers, they must work from their position toward the writer, meeting halfway, so to speak. Unfortunately, in the published translation of Schlegel’s fragment, “entgegenwirkend” is rendered as “critical,” which misses out on the exciting, revolutionary dimension of Schlegel’s model of writing and reading. Schlegelian readers may resist or oppose the author’s views and thus be critical, but what really sets them apart is the active involvement and shared responsibility in the process of creative production.

After all, it is only with readers who are active and entgegenwirkend that the writer can enter into that relationship of sympoetry and symphilosophy – both terms also
Schlegel’s coinages – that is at the core of the communication process in Schlegel’s view. The two terms are formed in analogy to “sympathy” (feeling alongside with); thus, as poetry in its root meaning (*poein*) means making, “sympoetry” then is making, creating, together, jointly, side by side, on an equal basis. Likewise, “symphilosophy” means a joint, shared love of wisdom, a joint dedication to the pursuit or service of philosophy. As in a symbiosis, in these relationships described by the prefix “sym” both parties benefit from the connection; they are together and yet each retains its individuality. Obviously, to establish such a relationship, writers need readers of a very special kind, namely, readers who are active and *entgegenwirkend*. These readers then show their understanding of an author’s *Geist* by translating and transforming the author in various ways while keeping the author’s individuality intact and undiminished (see chapter 2 “Schlegelian Understanding”).

Interestingly, taken together, Schlegel’s essay and the fragments cited above place the relationship of sympoetry both into the process of creation – that is, before the work is finished – and after, for readers will usually only get to read a work once it’s finished and printed. Clearly, however challenging Schlegel’s requirements of the reader may be, the writer has the most challenging task: writing in such a way that the reader can enter the process sympoetically at any later time. In a sense, this means the writer must both finish or complete the work in order to get it printed and placed before the reader and simultaneously not finish it so that the reader can bring to bear his/her activity of *entgegenwirken*. Rather than aiming at a specific effect, synthetic writers thus must write in such a way that the reader is motivated, invited, and enabled to engage in *entgegenwirken*. In writing to create the work synthetic writers (like Schlegel, for
example) must therefore also leave space – *not write* – so that readers can join in the
creative process that gives rise to the work.

Thus, Schlegel’s ideal readers as well as his three fundamental laws of *Mitteilung*
in writing shift the focus from the work and its content and form to the relationship, the
conversation, between writer and reader, a relationship that Schlegel clearly sees as
extended across space and time and thus potentially infinite. Moreover, in this way
Schlegel also moves the locus of control of the communication process from the writer to
the process or interaction between writer and reader. That is, neither writer nor reader is
in sole or total control of the process of creative production or its outcome. Insofar as the
readers constructed by synthetic writers are “living’ and “active,” they also change and
are unpredictable. In particular, Schlegel’s third fundamental law (“man muß es wirklich
mitteilen, mit ihm teilen können, nicht bloß sich äußern, allein; sonst wäre es treffender,
zu schweigen.”) casts the process and even the motivation for written communication in a
new light. The sharing Schlegel refers to is essentially a give-and-take, a conversation or
dialogue, not merely the expression of the writer’s self or any aspect of that self. Of
course, this also means that the reader’s responses and contributions to the conversation
can affect and potentially change what the writer will write. Accordingly, what matters
most for Schlegel is the interaction between writer and reader and what arises from that,
which may be more than what appears in the words of the text as it ultimately stands.

By implication, this also means that the reader is part of the creative process from
the start, not just when the work is finished. Obviously, this is only possible as a
conversation that takes place within the writer’s mind or imagination. In other words, in
the process of writing the writer is not merely a solitary self expressing his/her thoughts.
Instead, through the medium of writing the writer becomes the site where a potentially infinite conversation has its start. Schlegelian writing thus is an inner dialogue, not the outpouring of a unified voice, but the performance and product of sympoetry. As I will show in chapters 4 and 5, for Schlegel, language as such is conversation and consequently he saw the individual subject as essentially a conversation or *Gespräch*. In any case it is not surprising that in “On Incomprehensibility” Schlegel proposes to come to a true understanding of what it means to understand (and by implication of what incomprehensibility is) by means of a *Gespräch* or conversation.

Schlegel here echoes a key passage of Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s “Fairy Tale of the Green Snake,” which also serves as the epigraph to this chapter. The echo is reinforced, so to speak, by Schlegel’s discussion of gold a few sentences after having introduced – indeed, begun – the conversation with the reader. The fairy tale first appeared in 1795 in Friedrich Schiller’s journal *Die Horen*, a publication to which Friedrich Schlegel also contributed at times. In addition to a vast range of symbolic meanings of the characters and figures appearing in this fairy tale, the key passage that is of concern in our context here is the one in the epigraph, where the snake, symbolizing wisdom gives *Gespräch* or conversation a higher value than light or gold because conversation is “*erquicklicher*”, more invigorating, than light or gold. Etymologically, *erquicklich* and the verb *erquicken* are related to the English term *quick* meaning alive, mobile, living (for example: the quick and the dead). Conversation ranks higher than gold because it enlivens, quickens, makes something/someone come alive as gold or even light cannot.
That is, in a Schlegelian dialogue or conversation that consists of Schlegelian fragments, or small yet whole entities, the totality of the contributions or fragments at any one time is greater than their sum. In the process of such a conversation a true sharing takes place, not just self-expression or expression of ideas. Through the unique participation of the reader in this process, something emerges in the dialogue that exceeds the sum of the contributions made and the limited understanding of the participants.

Significantly, the ideal Schlegelian Gespräch takes place in writing, between writer and reader, and thus the latter can apply the magical skill of releasing the author’s spirit from the letter in which it was bound (see also chapters 4 and 5 for further discussion of this). In a sense, then, Schlegel’s task in “On Incomprehensibility” is to demonstrate by example both synthetic writing and Schlegelian reading or understanding while at the same time “tempting” his readers to follow his example and join the process. I would argue that at least part of Schlegel’s incomprehensibility in the eponymous essay is due to it being essentially a conversation of which, however, we see only part in the written text; the remainder is the reader’s contribution, thus subjective and variable.

Interestingly, his reflections on incomprehensibility and the treacherous and misleading nature of language lead Schlegel to a discussion of gold. Specifically, he refers to Girtanner’s prediction that in the nineteenth century it will become possible to make gold – the fulfillment of the alchemists’ ancient dream – and explains: “I had often secretly admired the objectivity of gold, I might even say worshipped it. . . . In short, wherever there is even a little enlightenment and education, silver and gold are comprehensible and through them everything else” (262). Schlegel here refers to the function of gold as a standard for currency and a medium of exchange. In other words,
gold serves to anchor and fix the value of goods and services; their worth is known by how much gold (or currency tied to the gold standard) must be paid for them. Schlegel’s seeming digression about gold is not just a scenic “detour” but follows his discussion of the ideal of a “real language” that would allow us to “stop rummaging about for words and pay attention to the power and source of all activity [alles Wirkens Kraft und Samen]” (260).

In other words, this objective language would, in theory, work like gold: words would have a fixed and verifiable “true” value or meaning. They would thus also have a definite and fixed exchange value to allow for easy translation, much as it is unproblematic to exchange a five dollar bill for five one dollar bills. Such an objective language would entirely resolve the problem of incomprehensibility: “When it comes to pass that every artist possesses these materials in sufficient quantity, then he will be allowed only to write his works in bas-relief, with gold letters on silver tablets. Who would want to reject so beautifully printed a book with the vulgar remark that it doesn’t make any sense?” (262). Yet, “sense” is precisely what would be lacking in such an ideal language; after all, language is not a medium of exchange like currency, nor are words merely names for things. As in Goethe’s fairy tale, gold or a language functioning like gold lacks the enlivening and communicating (mitteilen) quality of a conversation or dialogue. It leaves no room for the reader to become active in entgegenwirken.

Thus, Schlegel is still left with the original problem or challenge of finding a medium in which to capture his thoughts, a way: “um den heiligen, zarten, flüchtigen, luftigen, duftigen, gleichsam imponderablen Gedanken chemisch zu binden. Wie sehr hätte er sonst mißverstanden werden können, da ja erst durch seinen wohlverstandnen
Gebrauch allen verständlichen Mißverständnissen endlich ein Ende gemacht werden sollte? [... to bond chemically the holy, delicate, fleeting, airy, [filmy – my emendation], and, as it were, imponderable thought. Otherwise, how badly might it have been misunderstood, since only through its well-considered employment was an end finally to be made of all understandable misunderstandings?]” This is the reverse process of what the reader does in releasing the author’s Geist or thought from the letter (or word) in which it had been held captive; that is, Schlegel is looking to confine thought into matter permanently, or until the reader with the requisite magical skill appears. The echo of alchemy and its fascination is evident in the rhyming, nearly synonymous words Schlegel uses as though in an incantation (“flüchtigen, luftigen, duftigen”).

At the same time, Schlegel engages here in the same kind of wordplay we have seen above in the fragment on ancient fragments: the definition of understanding/misunderstanding, which this essay and this passage especially ostensibly are to clarify, becomes ever more uncertain and destabilized. This wordplay forms a central thread of the essay. After all, in what sense are “understandable misunderstandings” even misunderstandings? If an end is to be made of such misunderstandings, will this also put an end to those that are not understandable?

In view of this confusion, the certainty of gold, and of an objective language that works in the same way, becomes exceedingly desirable. However, Girtanner died before the manufacturing of gold became established, and no language has been developed that would work in communication the way gold does in trade. That is, Schlegel cannot bind and confine his ephemeral, fleeting, intangible thoughts in coarse, if expensive, matter of predetermined value and must return to facing the problem of incomprehensibility.
In summary, Schlegel’s approach to the question of (in)comprehensibility consists in a redefinition and revaluation of the term that embraces the connotative, playful aspect of language, and this revaluation is much like the one Schlegel performed on the terms “understanding” in the fragments discussed in chapter 2 and the term “fragment” in the texts discussed above. In all three instances, Schlegel takes a seemingly ordinary and well-known concept – one we think we know – and turns it inside out, revaluing, and in the process redefining it. For example, to define fragments he distinguished them from other things, just as the “definition” of readers by what they do was based on how they are different from writers. In this process, Schlegel is primarily concerned with the boundaries, the lines drawn to separate what is to be defined from “the surrounding world,” and these lines prove less and less substantial the more closely they are examined until they are finally dissolved. For example, the more thoroughly readers follow Schlegel’s model of reading and understanding, the more they engage in the work of understanding, the more they will want to write, that is, to join the ongoing process of production, to enter into sympoetry with the author they are reading – and at the same time inviting other readers to join them in sympoetry in turn. The more deeply readers involve themselves in the work of Schlegelian understanding, the more they will be compelled to contribute to the conversation already underway, the more transformations and “Charakteristiken” they will want and be able to produce. In a sense, then, the better readers are at Schlegelian reading, the more they will turn into writers – at least potential if not actual writers.

Similarly, when Schlegel in “On Incomprehensibility” distinguishes incomprehensibility from understanding and subdivides each into different types, the
more closely the boundaries and distinctions are examined, the more insubstantial they become. In the process, Schlegel firmly anchors readers in the “indissoluble antagonism” – the oscillation – “between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication” and the understanding it requires.\(^{50}\)
Paradoxically, at the core of Schlegelian understanding is incomprehensibility.

Incomprehensibility is both the foundation on which the process of Schlegelian understanding rests and the stimulus that sets the process in motion. As Schlegel demonstrates in the essay devoted to the subject, incomprehensibility is not the same as misunderstanding and is not due to any lack of knowledge or information on the part of the reader. Incomprehensibility is an intrinsic property of a text, and as will become clear below, it is unique to and, for Schlegel, necessary for writing.

As the preceding discussions of the concepts “understanding” and “fragment” should lead us to expect, Schlegel does not use “incomprehensibility” in the usual sense of the term meaning something writers try to avoid by being as clear and unambiguous as possible. Readers hold writers responsible for writing clearly so that readers can understand them. However, incomprehensibility in Schlegel’s sense cannot be remedied by more clarification. It does not call for disambiguation and in that differs from misunderstanding. In “On Incomprehensibility” the significance of incomprehensibility emerges through the contrast with related but essentially different concepts.

For example, when Schlegel is looking for a way “den heiligen, zarten, flüchtigen, luftigen, duftigen, gleichsam imponderablen Gedanken chemisch zu binden [... to bond chemically the holy, delicate, fleeting, airy, [filmy – my emendation], and, as it were, imponderable thought,” he claims that the well-understood application of this thought,
properly expressed, will then make an end of “allen verständlichen Mißverständnissen [all understandable misunderstandings].” Since they are “understandable,” such misunderstandings are obviously not incomprehensible and can be remedied through the writer’s careful, well-considered choice of expression so as to guide readers to the correct interpretation. This effect remains hypothetical, however; Schlegel has shown that there is no “real language” and that the language we have does not function like gold or currency. No unambiguous language of definite meanings – and thus guaranteed interpretations – exists, and thus misunderstandings are inevitable. Even when writers understand how a misunderstanding arose, preventing one may result in other misunderstandings cropping up. No matter how hard writers try to guide readers to the “correct” interpretation, readers can still err and go astray.

More than that, writers cannot even reliably produce misunderstandings, as Schlegel shows in a dramatic example. He quotes his well-known Athenaeum fragment #216 on the three tendencies of the age and laments that readers misunderstood him even though the opinions expressed there should have been familiar to them from his other writings. However, readers not only failed to understand Schlegel here but also failed to misunderstand him as they were “invited” or meant to do. According to Schlegel, the term “tendencies” in the fragment’s first sentence could easily have been misunderstood in at least two ways. Even though Schlegel saw the chance of being misunderstood, he did not take steps to prevent this and steer readers to the “correct” understanding. Instead, he took this opportunity to conduct an experiment: “I was perfectly aware of this [the possibility of misunderstanding], but I thought I would like to try and see if anyone
would accuse me of having so bad an intention [as the misunderstanding would suggest].”

Interestingly, Schlegel’s experiment fails: “No one seems to have noticed it. Why should I provide misunderstandings when no one wants to take them up?” This early instance of Schlegelian irony casts a revealing light on the (in)comprehensibility and understanding: if readers had understood Schlegel’s fragment “correctly,” they would have misunderstood him. However, they ignored or missed the opportunity for misunderstanding, likely due to the same background and contextual knowledge that did not prevent them from misunderstanding Schlegel’s fragment in other ways, ways he had not intended. This play on the concepts of understanding and misunderstanding demonstrates vividly Schlegel’s sense that writers cannot reliably secure either the one or the other. Readers, on the other hand, may be convinced they have understood a text and not realize that they have misunderstood it. Misunderstandings usually arise in the “better understanding” (understanding an author better than he/she understood himself/herself) that is the first step in the process of Schlegelian understanding. That is, both misunderstandings and the “better understanding” are steps in the process of “true” understanding, and moreover, in striving to understand an author better, from the wider and superior perspective of readers with more contextual knowledge, readers may misunderstand the author. The “better understanding” may also be a misunderstanding in regard to facts and information – it is always a mis-understanding where understanding the Geist of an author is concerned.

Thus, like “fragment” and “understanding,” “misunderstanding” in Schlegel’s use of the term also proves to be a multidimensional concept. While misunderstandings in the
ordinary sense of the term can be remedied or eliminated through clarification or additional information – this is especially true of the ones Schlegel calls “understandable misunderstandings” – they are also chance occurrences that cannot be avoided: misinterpretations happen in spite of the writer’s best efforts to prevent them and despite what should be sufficient background knowledge and context on the part of the reader. This latter kind of misunderstanding is clearly due to the intrinsic ambiguity of language; this is the kind of misunderstanding that would not occur if there were a “real language” functioning like gold. Yet, the more significant dimension of the concept emerges in its application in the context of Schlegelian understanding. Insofar as, for Schlegel, the goal of reading/understanding is to be able to act in accordance with an author’s Geist, “to translate . . . and transform” the author in many ways “without diminishing his individuality” (fragment #287) and the process requires first understanding an author better than he/she understood himself/herself, and then in a second step to understand the author just as well – i.e., just as imperfectly – as he/she did, then clearly in that sense the initial, “better understanding” is also always a misunderstanding, not least because it is only a partial understanding.

Unlike the other kinds of misunderstandings, this latter kind (the “better understanding”) cannot be rectified through more knowledge or information; it is a misunderstanding not so much on the level of content – what the author says – but rather of being, of who the author is. That is, much as with the concept “fragment” (see discussion in chapter 3), Schlegel uses the term “(mis)understanding” on several levels simultaneously, calling into question our ordinary understanding of the term and eventually overturning what seemed a stable dichotomy or distinction: we either
understand a text or we misunderstand it. Though in “On Incomprehensibility” Schlegel seemingly sets out to address readers’ difficulties in understanding his contributions to the Athenaeum – indeed, raising expectations of coming clarifications – he demonstrates the narrowness and limitations of their concept of understanding. Neither understanding nor misunderstanding are as clearly defined and juxtaposed as is generally assumed. Misunderstanding is not necessarily an obstacle to understanding in the Schlegelian sense, and “better understanding” by itself is neither a guarantee against misunderstanding nor the end goal of the process of understanding. In fact, as Schlegel showed in his experiment, failure to misunderstand can itself be a misunderstanding.

More than anything else, the essay is an instructive demonstration in Schlegelian reading; that is, readers cannot understand Schlegel’s writing as long as they insist on reading him primarily for content. Indeed, reading “On Incomprehensibility” for the gist of it, for what it is about or refers to, is misreading it. Like so many of Schlegel’s other texts, the essay remains opaque and nearly impenetrable – that is, incomprehensible – if approached with the conventional mode of reading. Instead of conveying information or clarifying misunderstandings, Schlegel is concerned in this essay with leading readers from reading for reference to an appreciation and use of language that is not bound by reference to a reality outside of language. As Marcus Bullock in his fascinating article “Eclipse of the Sun: Mystical Terminology, Revolutionary Method, and Esoteric Power in Friedrich Schlegel” described Schlegel’s writing: “The negation of ‘world’ as the complement of language, as being which is in stable or penetrable contact with language, is the fundamental feature of Schlegel’s writing altogether during this period.”  

51 That is,
Schlegel’s writing is characterized by a “quite explicit” “break with truth and communicable meaning or comprehensibility.”

Unlike misunderstandings, incomprehensibility in Schlegel’s sense is not a call for more information but for a different reading. In essence, this incomprehensibility is the text’s refusal to be read for content, purely for reference to a reality outside language. As Schlegel formulates it in his essay, everything rests on a core foundation of incomprehensibility, a foundation that “would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis.”

Not surprisingly, Schlegel consistently uses analogies from alchemy for reading and writing. As Schlegel’s philosophical fragment #1229 succinctly summarizes: “Buchstabe ist fixierter Geist. Lesen heißt, gebundenen Geist frei machen, also eine magische Handlung” [The spirit is bound into the letter. Reading is to set free release the confined spirit; it is a magical act.]. This release of the spirit held captive in the letter clearly has nothing to do with information or knowledge conveyed. Rather, it evokes the goal of Schlegelian understanding: readers show they have understood an author when they can act in the author’s Geist and translate and transform the author (see discussion of fragment #287 in chapter 2). As release of a bound spirit is the alchemical equivalent to reading, so Schlegel likewise sees writing as corresponding to the binding or confining of this spirit into more or less coarse matter; that is, writers seek to “bond chemically the holy, delicate, fleeting, airy, [filmy], and, as it were, imponderable thought.” Schlegel’s concept of writing is a long way from John Locke’s earlier definition of words as “marks for the Ideas within his [the speaker’s] own Mind, whereby they might be made known to others, and the Thoughts of Men’s Minds be conveyed from one to another” (III.i.1-2; see
Schlegel’s alchemical analogy also casts an interesting light on his characterization of his ideal readers as “lebendig und entgegenwirkend”; that is, the activity of “entgegenwirken” could well be that of setting free the spirit bound in the letter, as this is the “opposite” activity to what the writer does in confining the spirit into the letter.

Schlegelian understanding thus is not concerned primarily with language as designation; rather, its goal is ultimately a relationship, namely, the sympoetry that arises between reader and writer by virtue of the written language that connects them, more precisely because of the non-referential, connotative aspects of that written language. Clearly, this calls not only for a particular approach on the part of writer and reader but also for a particular and peculiar use (and understanding) of language. As I will show in the course of this chapter, this peculiar quality of language, in Schlegel’s case, is irony, specifically, Romantic or Schlegelian irony. It is the irony inherent to Schlegel’s use of language that produces the non-referential quality of his writing, what Bullock summarizes as follows: “Every word [in Schlegel’s view/use of it] is a potential parable, for not only can it mean something in being adequate to a ‘signified’ in the visible world, but it may further be an indication of the invisible, the absent, in its inadequacy, its shortcoming, which allows it to break out of the orbit of the mundane, and function as an indicator of the ultramondane, to be ‘ex-centric.’ In giving up its claim to fixed and full meaning, it becomes progressive, and free” (460).

Bullock fails to connect Schlegel’s relationship and use of language to irony, but the effect characterized here is indeed the most striking one produced by Romantic irony. In particular, what makes Schlegel’s approach stand out is his embrace of language’s
shortcomings and deficiencies. For Schlegel, words can indicate the “ultramondane” precisely because they do not unambiguously designate the mundane and, indeed, are generally not commensurate to what they are supposed (and, often, understood) to say. As I will show in the discussion of Romantic irony below, this irony grows out of a particular understanding or view of language and is essentially a special mode of writing that, at its best, opens up a space for sympoetry/symphilosophy between reader and writer.

Friedrich Schlegel already linked (mis)understanding and irony when discussing the options of misunderstanding he offered to readers in Athenaeum fragment #216: “there is something else in the fragment that might in fact be misunderstood. This lies in the word “tendencies” and this is where the irony begins” (263). Ironically, then, a fragment Schlegel claims to have written “almost without any irony at all” turns out to be ironic already in its very first sentence. Schlegel makes an even stronger case for the connection between irony and understanding when he begins the second part of “On Incomprehensibility” by tracing incomprehensibility to irony as its cause: “A great part of the incomprehensibility of the Athenaeum is unquestionably due to the irony that to a greater or lesser extent is to be found everywhere in it” (265, second emphasis mine). (Mis)Reading this sentence with the expectation that Schlegel will mend his ways and offer clear and unequivocal explanations results only in frustration. As discussed above, neither “incomprehensibility” nor “irony” means what readers might presume them to say. In fact, the above-quoted sentence works on several levels, in multiple directions, at once. It is thus both a cause and a symptom of the incomprehensibility Schlegel is concerned with. In a sense, this sentence embodies the culmination of Schlegel’s model
of understanding and is thus best read as a multidimensional performance of Schlegelian irony.

In particular, if irony can be “found nearly everywhere” in the Athenaeum, it is practically impossible to distinguish ironic passages from serious, straightforward ones. In other words, Schlegel here calls into question the very possibility of saying with certainty whether any part of the Athenaeum is ironic. At least potentially, any part of it could be ironic; moreover, as a result of this uncertainty irony proliferates. Not only does clearly identified irony “bleed” into even purportedly non-ironic text, but since readers cannot know for sure which part of a text is ironic, they essentially have to give everything a double reading: as straightforward, serious and also as ironic. Of course, once a text has been read as potentially ironic, it is no longer entirely straightforward or non-ironic; it stops being so merely by having invited a double reading, by offering the possibility of having more than one meaning.

This raises the question of irony’s effect on understanding: what does it mean to understand a text, especially after such a double reading, and what constitutes a text’s (in)comprehensibility? Of course, in view of the above, the sentence under discussion (“A great part…”) must itself also be read as at least potentially ironic, and all the concepts referred to here must be questioned accordingly. Schlegel’s concept of irony must be clearly distinguished from the more common and familiar rhetorical irony, from irony as a rhetorical trope or figure. Generally, rhetorical irony consists of saying one thing and meaning another, usually the opposite. Rhetorical irony can impede understanding or at least delay it because readers may misunderstand it or not notice it initially. Yet, rhetorical irony does not render a text incomprehensible. It functions more
like a detour rather than an obstruction to understanding, and sooner or later readers understand this irony and can deduce the underlying meaning even though it does not appear on the text’s surface. Accordingly, the trope of irony is essentially a matter of stylistic embellishment, not an intrinsic component of the meaning being expressed, which could have been conveyed without irony. Thus, rhetorical irony was among the “embellishments” the natural philosophers of the Classical Age wanted to eliminate from all serious discourse and relegate entirely to the realm of poetry and other arts (see discussion in chapter 3).

Likewise, the trope of irony does not present any real obstacle to the “better understanding” that constitutes the first stage of Schlegelian reading/understanding and neither hinders nor helps the next step of understanding the author just “as well as he understood himself.” Essentially, rhetorical irony is extrinsic to the “schriftstellerische Mitteilung” as Schlegel characterizes it in his Lyceum fragment #98 (see discussion in chapter 3).

In contrast, the irony Schlegel has in mind as being “found everywhere” in the Athenaeum is an intrinsic dimension of what the author has to say and of the writing. The irony in question here is usually called Romantic irony, a somewhat misleading designation because this irony is not entirely unique to the Romantic era (though especially prominent then) and is not found in all or most Romantic writing. I will alternately call it Schlegelian irony here because Schlegel defined it most clearly and used it most widely and most skillfully. Historically speaking, the view of language that emerged with Romanticism was especially conducive to Romantic irony (see chapter 3) as it emphasized dimensions of language other than reference or designation. Given this
view of language and the desire for a “schriftstellerische Mitteilung” that ultimately aims at establishing a co-creative relationship with readers (as opposed to merely conveying information or making an impact on readers), Romantic irony appears as the optimal medium for achieving this goal.

Unlike rhetorical irony, Schlegelian irony intervenes in the conventional process of understanding so as to render it practically impossible. That is, Schlegelian irony frustrates and blocks reading for content, for reference to a world outside language. Thus, Schlegelian irony can produce incomprehensibility because it impedes reading for content; in contrast, rhetorical irony does not lead to incomprehensibility. As discussed above, incomprehensibility, in Schlegel’s use of it, refers not only to the readers’ sense of not having understood what an author said. Rather, incomprehensibility is itself an integral part of the process of Schlegelian understanding. In a sense, being incomprehensible is the writer’s way of ensuring that readers go beyond “better understanding” to understanding the author as well and as imperfectly as he/she did. In a sense, a text’s incomprehensibility constitutes its resistance to being read purely for content and reference. Ironically, paradoxically, Schlegelian understanding and the symposium it aims for can occur only after the “failure” of understanding Schlegel calls incomprehensibility.

Schlegelian irony and its relationship to incomprehensibility play out strikingly in the above-mentioned sentence that introduces the second section of “On Incomprehensibility”: “A great part of the incomprehensibility of the Athenaeum is unquestionably due to the irony that to a greater or lesser extent is to be found everywhere in it” (265) – its rather innocuous appearance notwithstanding. It seemingly
validates readers’ complaints by admitting that the Athenaeum (mostly Schlegel’s writing) is incomprehensible – that is, readers are not at fault and understandably do not understand. At the same time, that sentence also denies readers’ complaints: readers do not understand because they have been reading merely for content, passively, rather than “entgegenwirkend.” And, of course, the Athenaeum, especially Schlegel’s essay, is nearly impossible to understand when read in the conventional way for the content. That is, readers’ desire to understand clearly and fully is frustrated because Schlegel’s text refuses to open itself to conventional reading. However, if readers were to approach the text with a Schlegelian reading – that is, if they were undertaking the work of Schlegel’s understanding – the essay might lead them to understanding Schlegel’s Geist and to sympoetry/symphilosophy with him.

Unlike in rhetorical irony, in Romantic irony the play on the meaning and implications of the concepts involved perpetuates itself rather than coming to rest on a definitive meaning that can be legitimized as “what the author really means.” Schlegelian irony is not a merely formal or stylistic feature; rather, it is integral to the author’s “schriftstellerische Mitteilung” and an intrinsic property of Schlegel’s language – indeed, as will become clear, of language in general. Schlegel paradoxically demonstrates this when he attempts to define irony, to “facilitate a survey of the whole system of irony” by describing “a few of the choicest kinds” (266). That is, Schlegel’s attempt at classifying and analyzing irony in “On Incomprehensibility” is instructive primarily because it falls so far short of the stated goal and instead dramatically shows that irony can easily get out of control – and usually does. Before Schlegel has even finished enumerating the kinds of
irony, the subject gets away from him, pulling him along into a vortex of ever more levels of irony with no end in sight:

Was wir aber hier zunächst unter Ironie der Ironie verstanden wissen wollen, das entsteht auf mehr als einem Wege. Wenn man ohne Ironie von der Ironie redet, wie es soeben der Fall war; wenn man mit Ironie von einer Ironie redet, ohne zu merken, daß man sich zu eben der Zeit in einer andren viel auffallenderen Ironie befindet; wenn man nicht wieder aus der Ironie herauskommen kann, wie es in diesem Versuch über die Unverständlichkeit zu sein scheint; wenn die Ironie Manier wird, und so den Dichter gleichsam wieder ironiert; wenn man Ironie zu einem überflüssigen Taschenbuche versprochen hat, ohne seinen Vorrat vorher zu überschlagen und nun wider Willen Ironie machen muß, . . . wenn die Ironie wild wird, und sich gar nicht mehr regieren läßt. (369)

[But what we want this irony\(^54\) to mean in the first place is something that happens in more ways than one. For example, if one speaks of irony without using it, as I have just done; if one speaks irony ironically without in the process being aware of having fallen into a far more noticeable irony; if one can’t disentangle oneself from irony anymore, as seems to be happening in this essay on incomprehensibility; if irony turns into a mannerism and becomes, as it were, ironical about the author; if one has promised to be ironical for some useless book without first having checked one’s supply and then having to produce it against one’s will, . . . and if irony runs wild and can’t be controlled any longer. (267)]
Seemingly, Schlegel here attempts a clear-cut definition of his subject, but as Marike Finlay in her excellent study, *The Romantic Irony of Semiotics*, points out: “he seems to be producing signifiers to stand for irony which replace, contradict, and confuse each other instead of constructing a nice neat paradigm according to the laws of taxonomy.” In other words, Schlegel’s approach fails to meet the usual criteria of a definition or taxonomy and instead resembles what Shelley does in his *Defence of Poetry* by defining poetry in different and even contradictory, rapidly changing ways, for example, as “the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially” (291) and “a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted” (281), to mention only two (see chapter 1).

However, much like Shelley in his *Defence*, Schlegel is doing more here than attempting and failing at a definition of irony. In both instances, the subject – poetry and irony, respectively – is shown to be elusive and not amenable to unequivocal definition on the pattern of “x is y.” Ultimately, the subject in each case encompasses any definition of itself; it is larger and more comprehensive than any description or definition. Moreover, in both cases, seemingly contradictory (though insufficient) definitions can be said to do equal justice to the subject. That is, poetry can be said to be both like the first acorn and to be also “a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted”; at the same time, poetry can, of course, also be characterized as a “sword of lightning.” All are equally incommensurate to poetry, and yet none of them is “wrong.”

Likewise, Schlegel’s irony is both avoidable (“if one speaks of irony without using it”) and inevitable (“if one speaks of irony ironically without in the process being aware of having fallen into a far more noticeable irony”). In this latter case, the “bigger” irony is more noticeable to readers – that is, writers can produce irony deliberately and
can also themselves become an (unconscious, involuntary) object of irony by creating it without noticing it. Regarding Schlegelian irony, writers are not entirely in control. Insofar as this irony is also a property of language (in the Romantic view of language), text can be ironic without the author’s involvement and even against the author’s will. Ironically, then, both readers and writers cannot always readily and clearly distinguish (Romantically) ironic from non-ironic text. As a corollary to this, texts may not mean what they seem to mean. By the same token, writers may find it difficult, or perhaps impossible, to write without irony (even when claiming to write “without any irony at all,” as Schlegel does).

In its linguistic aspect, Schlegelian irony is due to the ambiguous nature of all language; because it is not the “real language” operating like gold or currency, language is inherently ironic in the Schlegelian sense. Specifically, Schlegelian irony, as we have seen, keeps the multiple meanings and nuances of words continuously in play. Meaning thus arises and vanishes in a “steten Wechsel von Selbstschöpfung und Selbstvernichtung” [“continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction”]56, as Schlegel described irony in Athenaeum fragment #51. This perpetual oscillation between alternatives is never resolved in favor of one or the other or through subsumption of all in a “higher” synthesis. As Schlegel formulated it in fragment #121, irony is “der stete sich selbst erzeugende Wechsel zwei streitender Gedanken” [“the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts”].57

Seemingly, Romantic irony goes against the conventional notion of writing. After all, writing is usually assumed to be about conveying an idea or conviction; traditionally, writing is the expression of unified content by one voice. Schlegel offers a more complex
and complicated understanding of writing, one that lends itself to Romantic irony. As the
discussion of Schlegel’s *Lyceum* fragment #112 has shown (see discussion in chapter 2),
Schlegelian reading/understanding makes special demands on readers and writers.
Readers are to be active and “entgegenwirkend,” and synthetic writers (like Schlegel)
must take into account such active readers and not aim at merely creating an effect but at
entering “into the sacred relationship of deepest symp hilosophy or sympoetry” with their
readers.

Moreover, in his fundamental laws of written communication (*Lyceum* fragment
#98, see also discussion in chapter 3 above), Schlegel emphasizes that writing is not
primarily about self-expression:

Folgendes sind allgemeingültige Grundgesetze der schriftstellerischen Mitteilung:
1) Man muß etwas haben, was mitgeteilt werden soll; 2) man muß jemand haben,
dem man´s mitteilen wollen darf; 3) man muß es wirklich mitteilen, mit ihm teilen
können, nicht bloß sich äußern, allein; sonst wäre es treffender, zu schweigen.

[The following are universally valid and fundamental laws of written
communication: (1) one should have something to communicate; (2) one should
have somebody to whom one wants to communicate it; (3) one should really be
able to communicate it and share it with [that person – *emendation mine*], not
simply express oneself. Otherwise it would be wiser to keep silent.]58

The surprising and astonishing third law has generally not received the critical attention it
deserves. In fact, Schlegel here overturns what seems an accepted axiom of Romantic
writing in particular, namely, that writers pour out their heart and soul and write mainly
for self-expression. In contrast, what matters most for Schlegel is the engagement of the reader, the relationship between reader and writer. This relationship naturally starts in the writer’s mind with the “constructing and creating” of the reader “as he should be,” the ideal reader. Still, from the outset the reader, if only virtually, is part of the process of creation. Synthetic writers not only consider how readers might react to their work, but make readers part of the process already in the conception and development of their work. In a sense, writers virtually alternate between the roles of writer and reader while in the process of creation. That is, in the process of creation writers essentially are taking on both the “wirkend” and “entgegenwirkend” activities: they are both carrying out their work (“wirkend”) and also do the readers’ work of “entgegenwirken.” Writing, in Schlegel’s model, is thus the result of a continuous inner oscillation between two roles – and therefore always the product of a dialogue or Gespräch. Writing is not linear but rather undertaken simultaneously from opposite poles, so to speak. Clearly, in Schlegel’s model, the focus on relationship (sympoetry) and “Mitteilung” as opposed to self-expression predisposes writers (and writing) to Romantic irony.

The mutual affinity of writing (in Schlegel’s sense) and Romantic irony is evident in Schlegel’s Lyceum fragment #37 on writing well:

Um über einen Gegenstand gut schreiben zu können, muß man sich nicht mehr für ihn interessieren; der Gedanke, den man mit Besonnenheit ausdrücken soll, muß schon gänzlich vorbei sein, einen nicht mehr eigentlich beschäftigen. So lange der Künstler erfindet und begeistert ist, befindet er sich für die Mitteilung wenigstens in einem illiberalen Zustande.
[In order to write well about something, one shouldn’t be interested in it any longer. To express an idea with due circumspection, one must have relegated it wholly to one’s past; one must no longer be preoccupied with it. As long as the artist is in the process of discovery and inspiration, he is in a state which, as far as communication is concerned is at the very least intolerant (unfree – my emendation).] \(^{59}\)

Even though Schlegel is not specifically discussing poetry here, the reversal of the stereotype of the Romantic inspired writer is striking. Schlegel already dissolved genre boundaries in his famous fragment #116 on Romantic poetry, and thus it is seems legitimate to extrapolate from this fragment on writers/artists and apply Schlegel’s advice to all artistic, creative writing, including philosophy as well as poetry. The image of the writer as operating under divine or similar external inspiration and pouring out the whisperings of the muses can be traced back to Homer and even poets and bards before him. In this model of inspired writing, the quality of the writing was directly proportional to the quality of the inspiration: the more profoundly inspired a writer, the better the resulting work. The more clearly a writer could express the inspiration, the better the work.

In contrast, for Schlegel, writing happens after the inspiration and enthusiasm have abated or died down. Going beyond Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquility,” Schlegel seems to demand that writers step away from the “emotion” or inspiration entirely – but only after having experienced it fully. After all, only when the excitement of enthusiasm and inspiration has passed will writers be able to write for more
than mere self-expression. Once having relegated the content or idea to be expressed to the past, writers can focus on establishing the relationship of sympoetry with their readers. In a way, the writer’s experience of the surging and then ebbing away of enthusiasm creates the space for readers to bring to bear their activity of *entgegenwirken* and for sympoetry to develop. That is, the freedom Schlegel sees writers gain once they have passed beyond enthusiasm to a certain detachment regarding their thoughts also sets readers free. They do not have to be passive recipients to receive the author’s inspired ideas but can freely “*entgegenwirken*.” In regard to the subject matter, both writer and reader are then free. At the same time, writers can then also allow language to unfold in free play of multiple meanings – that is, writers are then free to use language not only as a tool to designate but also in its non-referential dimension.

In Schlegel’s view, once the author’s excitement about an idea has abated, he/she can exercise the self-restriction so essential to artistic creation as well as to life (fragment #37):

Das Notwendigste: denn überall, wo man sich nicht selbst beschränkt, beschränkt einen die Welt; wodurch man ein Knecht wird. Das Höchste: denn man kann sich nur in den Punkten und an den Seiten selbst beschränken, wo man unendliche Kraft hat, Selbtschöpfung und Selbstvernichtung. Selbst ein freundschaftliches Gespräch, was nicht in jedem Augenblick frei abbrechen kann, aus unbedingter Willkür, hat etwas illiberales.

[Most necessary because wherever one does not restrict oneself, one is restricted by the world; and that makes one a slave. The highest because one can only restrict oneself at those points and places where one possesses infinite power,
self-creation, and self-destruction. Even a friendly conversation which cannot be broken off at any moment, completely arbitrarily, has something intolerant [unfree – my emendation] about it.\textsuperscript{60}

That is, the constant movement – oscillation – between self-creation and self-destruction/self-restriction that characterizes Schlegelian irony is already inherent in the process of writing. According to Schlegel, writers have to maintain a similar tension between the two poles of saying everything and not saying enough. As he put it in his \textit{Lyceum} fragment #33:

\begin{quote}
Eins von beiden ist fasst immer herrschende Neigung jedes Schriftstellers: entweder manches nicht zu sagen, was durchaus gesagt werden müßte, oder vieles zu sagen, was durchaus nicht gesagt zu werden brauchte. Das erste ist die Erbsünde der synthetischen Naturen, das letzte der analytischen. [The overriding disposition of every writer is almost always to lean in one of two directions: either not to say a number of things that absolutely need saying, or else to say a great many things that absolutely ought to be left unsaid. The former is the original sin of synthetic, the latter of analytic minds.]\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

That is, synthetic writers may overdo the self-restriction while analytic writers may not apply enough self-restraint. Indeed, as Schlegel put it in fragment #37 on writing, “Ein Schriftsteller aber, der sich rein ausreden will und kann, der nichts für sich behält, und alles sagen mag, was er weiß, ist sehr zu beklagen. [But a writer who can and does talk himself out, who keeps nothing back for himself, and likes to tell everything he knows, is
to be pitied." Of course, as the discussion of incomprehensibility and irony above has shown, it is not possible for a writer to make sure of having said everything because readers’ interpretations and understanding of a text cannot be controlled. Moreover, language, not being that “real language” Schlegel described in “On Incomprehensibility,” does not unambiguously designate anything; in other words, trying to say everything would turn into a never-ending process. In Schlegel’s model, the process of reading requires the active involvement of readers. Moreover, writers who keep nothing back leave no room for readers to become “entgegenwirkend” – to understand the author’s Geist and act in accordance with it. That is, the magical act of releasing the spirit from its confinement in the letter cannot take place, and there is no “teilen” or true sharing, and thus no sympoetry.

In Schlegel’s model writing itself is an inherently multivocal process, a Gespräch among multiple voices. Interestingly, Schlegel’s fascination with Gespräch and dialogue – as seen in the discussion of fragments as constituting a dialogue, for example – centers on written dialogue; the conversations Schlegel is concerned with take place in writing, across space and time. Not coincidentally, another of Schlegel’s significant works of the early Romantic era, the Conversations on Poetry (Das Gespräch über die Poesie) is a combination of spoken and written dialogue. Patterned after Plato’s symposia, the Conversations consists in large part of written dialogue where the contributions are in writing and read by their author to the assembled group of friends. A more detailed discussion of this work follows in the next chapter; here it serves as a noteworthy example of how clearly Schlegel privileges writing over spoken communication.
As indicated above, Schlegelian irony essentially inhabits writing; it is not likely
to be effective in speaking, among other reasons because speakers reveal much of their
meaning in non-linguistic ways, making speaking always more a matter of self-
expression than writing (especially Schlegelian “schriftstellerische Mitteilung,” which is
not about self-expression). The face-to-face presence of the speaker would likely distract
and possibly entirely destroy the irony. It is ultimately communication in writing,
“schriftstellerische Mitteilung,” in Schlegel’s terms, that grants readers the freedom to be
active and “entgegenwirkend” and to retain the same freedom toward the subject matter
that writers have – the freedom that is possible by virtue of the process of writing as
Schlegel describes it in the fragment discussed above.

It may seem counterintuitive that Schlegel, as one of the foremost writers of early
Romanticism, privileges writing rather than speaking and oral literature, which is more
commonly associated with Romanticism (for example, Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s
call for a poetry using the “real language of men”). However, it is especially in writing
that language can speak in multiple voices. In writing a sentence, like the one in “On
Incomprehensibility” discussed earlier in this chapter, can move in several directions at
once, something that would be nearly impossible to sustain in speaking. Thus, not only
does Schlegel have a favorable view of the shortcomings and failings of language – even
when words often “understand themselves better than do those who use them,” as he put
it in “On Incomprehensibility” – and the inadequacy by virtue of which it can serve “as
an indication of the invisible, the absent” (see above), but he also values especially the
necessity of self-restriction writing imposes. The tension between the desire to say
everything and the necessity to allow readers space for their “entgegenwirkende” activity
is most acute and powerful in the writing process, as compared to speaking. It is writing, rather than speaking, that gives rise to the question of whether the communication of ideas “is actually possible,” as Schlegel asked in “On Incomprehensibility.” And it is in writing that we find the “indissoluble antagonism between … the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication.”

It is writing, rather than speaking, that gives rise to the incomprehensibility essential to Schlegelian understanding; without it, sympoetry would not be possible. Not understanding a spoken sentence easily distracts into asking questions for further clarification even though, as we have seen, the incomprehensibility meant here is not “remedied” or resolved through more explanations or information. It is in writing, more specifically in reading writing, that we are forced to “endure” and sustain incomprehensibility; thus, reading/writing confronts us with the essentially mysterious nature of language and communication, with the non-referential dimensions of language we can neither control nor fully understand. In other words, in Schlegel’s model true understanding of an author’s Geist is possible only through reading the author’s works – not through interviewing him/her in person. That is, the writer becomes understandable precisely because of his/her absence.

Likewise, the relationship of sympoetry is essentially conceived as a kind of co-creative conversation extending over great distances in time and space and carried out in the medium of writing. Even though Schlegel and his friends in Jena circle often collaborated and thus engaged in sympoetry, so to speak, the relationship he had in mind as the goal of synthetic writing is on a larger scale in time and space and includes only the reader’s virtual presence in the writer’s mind, not an actual presence. Sympoetry, as
Schlegel envisioned it, thus also largely depends on the absence of writer and reader from each other.

In contrast to the immediacy and intimacy so many Romantic writers valued in oral literature and face-to-face collaboration, Schlegel expands the circumference of sympoetry virtually to infinity. Like Shelley in the *Defence of Poetry*, Schlegel is deeply concerned with futurity, a concern that led both writers to experiment with the timelessness and multi-dimensionality of written language.

Schlegel’s special appreciation of writing is revealed in his letter “On Philosophy – To Dorothea.” Written in the year before “On Incomprehensibility,” the letter is addressed to Schlegel’s wife and continues a discussion on philosophy they had begun in one of their conversations. Significantly, Schlegel chooses to write the contribution he had promised rather than say it – even though, as he admits, Dorothea “might have preferred a conversation.” Yet, as Schlegel explains:

Die Schrift hat für mich ich weiß nicht welchen geheimen Zauber vielleicht durch die Dämmerung von Ewigkeit, welche sie umschwebt. Ja ich gestehe Dir, ich wundre mich, welche geheime Kraft in diesen todten Zügen verborgen liegt; wie die einfachsten Ausdrücke, die nichts weiter als wahr und genau scheinen, so bedeutend seyn können, daß sie wie aus hellen Augen blicken, oder so sprechend wie kunstlose Accente aus der tiefsten Seele. Man glaubt zu hören, was man nur liest, und doch kann ein Vorleser bey diesen eigentlich schönen Stellen nichts thun, als sich bestreben, sie nicht zu verderben. Die stillen Züge scheinen mir eine schicklichere Hülle für diese tiefsten unmittelbarsten Aeußerungen des Geistes als das Geräusch der Lippen. Fast möchte ich in der etwas mystischen Sprache unsers
H. sagen: Leben sey Schreiben; die einzige Bestimmung des Menschen sey, die Gedanken der Gottheit mit dem Griffel des bildenden Geistes in die Tafeln der Natur zu graben.

[Writing has for me some secret magic I don’t know, perhaps because of the sense of eternity that hovers around it. I admit, I wonder at the secret, mysterious power that lies concealed in these dead characters, how the simplest expressions, that seem to be nothing more than true and exact, can be so meaningful that they seem to look out of bright eyes or to speak with artless accents out of the depths of the soul. It is as though one can hear what one is only reading, and yet, the reader can do nothing more at these beautiful passages than to try as best he can to not spoil them. The silent characters seem to me a more fitting clothing for these most profound and most intimate expression of the spirit than the sound of the lips. I am tempted to say in the words of out H [Novalis, Hardenberg]: life is writing, and the only destiny and purpose of human beings is to engrave the thoughts of the deity into nature with the stylus of the transforming spirit.]^{65}

That is, more than for its lasting value for posterity, Schlegel prefers writing over speaking because it allows what he termed the magical act of releasing the spirit confined in the letter and, by implication, the prior act of binding (al)chemically “the holy, delicate, fleeting, … imponderable thought” (261). By virtue of its inherent (Schlegelian) irony and incomprehensibility, written language allows writers to both write and not write, to say and not say, at the same time, as we saw in the above-discussed sentence about the irony in the Athenaeum. That is, writing makes it possible to both “have a
system” and have none, to acknowledge the necessity of complete communication together with its impossibility, to embrace the impossibility of complete communication while accepting its necessity.

At the same time, unlike speaking, writing preserves a space for the writer to stand apart from his/her thoughts, to both hold them fully and yet also keep them at a critical distance. And writing’s incomprehensibility, as well as its Romantic irony, grants readers the same freedom of critical distance and “entgegenwirkend” activity. Thus, the revolutionary (and often underappreciated) potential of Romanticism is to be found at the core of Romantic writing, in its incomprehensibility and irony.
Chapter 5

Schlegelian Irony and *Gespräch: Beyond a Defense of Poetry*

A poem should not mean
But be.
Archibald MacLeish, “Ars Poetica”

“Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted”
Percy B. Shelley, *Defence of Poetry*

“Is, then, everything poetry?”
Friedrich Schlegel, *Gespräch über Poesie*

A poem should be, says MacLeish with deceptive simplicity, and we may agree but cannot help asking the question his bare statement inevitably raises, namely, the question of what the “be-ing” of poetry is. That is, “Ars Poetica” raises – indeed, embodies – but does not answer the question of poetry’s “be-ing”; the poem claims but does not define or detail poetry’s independent ontological status. In fact, more than a hundred years before MacLeish’s “Ars Poetica,” Friedrich Schlegel’s *Dialogue on Poetry* and Percy B. Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* continue the exploration of poetry’s status and “be-ing” beyond the point where MacLeish left off. It may seem odd to discuss MacLeish’s “Ars Poetica” in the same paragraph with Schlegel’s *Dialogue* and Shelley’s *Defence* since these authors did not directly influence each other nor had the benefit of reading each other’s work (as far as we know). They are separated in time and space, and compared to their differences in form and approach and the conclusions they reach, the fact that they address the same basic issues seems of almost negligible significance.

Yet, based on the process of Schlegelian understanding, discussing them together is not only fully justified but also yields a highly productive reading of them. After all,
Schlegelian understanding is not concerned so much with what an author said, and even less so with what the author said in a particular work; according to Athenaeum fragment #237 (see discussion in chapter 2), Schlegelian understanding aims at the author’s Geist. A Schlegelian reading thus requires that we go beyond the content conveyed and beyond any surface contradictions in an author’s writings; even the changes and developments an author and his/her work undergo in the course of a lifetime are of secondary importance only: we must look past all these aspects of surface or appearance to the underlying Geist (perhaps best rendered here as “creative spirit”) that animates the individual works and expresses itself in each as well as in their totality.

Logically, this means seeing the totality of an author’s works as an integrated system with its unique internal order and structure. To understand such a system therefore means to study it in its relation to other similar systems and to the larger system of which they all are a part. This synthetic rather than merely analytical approach to literary criticism is at the heart of Schlegel’s study of Lessing. As Schlegel described it in the conclusion to his essay on Lessing, written near the end of 1800 and published in 1801:

so werdet ihr es über kurz oder lang auch wohl anerkennen müssen, daß nur der den Geist eines Künstlers kennt, der diejenigen gefunden hat, auf die er sich, äußerlich vielleicht durch Nationen und Jahrhunderte getrennt, unsichtbar dennoch bezieht, und mit denen er ein Ganzes bildet, von dem er selbst nur ein Glied ist.66

Thus, sooner or later, you will have to acknowledge that only those know an artist’s spirit who have found the ones to whom the artist responds, those to whom, even if perhaps externally separated by nations and centuries, he
nevertheless invisibly still responds and with whom that artist thus forms a whole
of which he himself is only a part. [Translation mine]

Accordingly, Schlegelian understanding and thus criticism are not determined by the
accident of historical sequence or other contingent properties of the works in question.
Rather, understanding according to Schlegel’s model concerns itself with closely
examining the relation of an author’s works to each other and to the larger system
(usually the genre) of works to which they belong, the conversation in which they take
part.

Schlegelian criticism examines an author’s (or work’s) position in this larger
whole in order to arrive at the deepest and richest understanding of a work, an author, a
genre, and ultimately art in general. All other questions, such as those regarding
biographical influences, political orientation, character development, plot, and so on, are
relevant only insofar as they illuminate a work’s place in the larger system, that is, in
their structural function. A work’s or author’s position in this larger system is determined
by the latter’s internal structure and laws, not by superficial features or content of the
work(s) or the chronological sequence of creation or publication. Interestingly, then, in
Schlegel’s model critical assessment of a work is not based on the work’s surface features
or properties and even less on its verisimilitude but rather on its character as a work and
relation as a work to other works and to the larger system, the genre, constituted by the
totality of such works. In other words, the essential criteria for evaluating a work, though
not located strictly within the boundaries of the work, are nevertheless not “outside” in
the sense of the work representing or referring or imitating a given reality “out there.”
Rather, Schlegelian criticism of a work is based on its objective character as a work and its articulation and representation of and relationship to the essential principles and structures of the system that comprises it. For Schlegel, then, a literary work’s relationship to a reality beyond itself is not that of mimesis, of more or less accurately representing or imitating a given world of facts. That is, like MacLeish, Schlegel does not require poems to “mean” in the sense of referring to something. As a closer reading of his *Dialogue on Poetry* will show, Schlegel sees poetry as pointing to, indicating, a higher, absolute reality or spirit, more specifically the artist’s creative and productive relationship to this ultimate reality.

In understanding and characterizing a work, Schlegel wants to examine the artistic relationship between works (and their authors), a relationship that is neither obvious nor accidental – and not necessarily apparent on a work’s surface – but is a necessary consequence of both the works’ and the system’s internal structure and organization. Dieter Mettler aptly summarizes this point in his essay on literary criticism by saying that the works in such a relation to each other “brauchen sich an der Oberfläche gar nicht zu ähneln, weil ihre Beziehung für Schlegel vielmehr in einer tieferen, wenn man so will, strukturellen Verwandtschaft der Systeme liegt, die sie beide jeweils bilden.”  

As a corollary, the works studied, in addition to being part of their systems (each author’s total oeuvre), must together with their systems also belong to a larger one, usually the genre or a class of art works. This larger whole is the foundation or medium making possible the relationships between works (and smaller systems). Thus, the sub-systems are set in relation to each other through the larger system that encompasses them, and this latter system in turn is part of a yet larger system, and so on. The structure and
principles of each system determine the phenotype, so to speak, of the sub-systems and their parts. That is, however much the works of different authors (or different works by the same author) may differ from each other, what justifies discussing them together, what connects them below the surface level of features and properties, is that they are different treatments or expressions ultimately called forth by the same given principles and structures of the system comprising all of them. Consequently, the structure, form, and unfolding of a work in this sense is not arbitrary or accidental (and not primarily a reflection of the artist’s own taste or personality) but shaped by the larger system’s inner necessity and intrinsic principles, which the individual artwork both articulates and responds to.

Obviously, the above-mentioned sub-systems and their relationships to each other and the larger whole they constitute are reminiscent of Schlegelian fragments – indeed, they fit Schlegel’s definition of fragments. As discussed in chapter 3, fragments, as Schlegel defines them, are wholes in themselves and complete, but they can join with others, like links in a garland or wreath, to form a larger whole, namely, a dialogue. As Schlegel puts it in *Athenaeum* fragment #77:

Ein Dialog ist eine Kette, oder ein Kranz von Fragmenten. Ein Briefwechsel ist ein Dialog in vergrößertem Maßstabe, und Memorabilien sind ein System von Fragmenten. [A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a dialogue on a larger scale, and memoirs constitute a system of fragments.]^68
Reading Schlegel’s essay on Lessing in light of the above fragment logically suggests that all works, insofar as they belong to a system larger than themselves, are fragments, and each system in turn is a fragment because a sub-system of a larger one. Interestingly, this fragmentary (in Schlegel’s sense) nature of a work or (sub-)system shows itself most clearly at the moment of its integration into a larger whole. At the same time, its own unique character as a work complete in itself becomes visible most sharply through this integration. Thus, the individual fragment at all times also retains its nature as a complete whole in itself.

Schlegelian fragments, then, are “simultaneously completely subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in a system.” Far from incomplete, these fragments are both part and whole at the same time, and it is because of this dual quality that the systems (such as the genre) encompassing them are capable of expansion and integration into still larger wholes. Ultimately, all sub-systems, and with them all the works that constitute them, will find their necessary position in the all-encompassing, foundational system of art. By the same token, this also means that in Schlegel’s sense of it, all art is essentially fragmentary and must of necessity be so.

At the same time, as one of the speakers of the Dialogue puts it, “each work should have a thoroughly definite character according to form and genre” (Dialogue, 77). That is, to be a work at all, a work must have boundaries separating it from all other works, and likewise every sub-system must be clearly delimited to distinguish it from others – much as each fragment in the above-mentioned garland is clearly separate and distinguished from the others. This delimitation makes it possible for each component of
the whole to retain its identity and individuality in the larger whole even when fully integrated into the latter.

Along these lines, then, the pronounced differences and delimitations separating individual works from each other not only make them distinguishable from others, defining each as a work, but also allow them to join with others in constituting a larger whole. Thus, paradoxically, the relationships between particular works (and systems) are based at least as much on their differences, on what distinguishes and separates them from each other, as on their similarities. Their affinity, as explained above, lies precisely in the different response to the given same artistic necessities and principles that each articulates and embodies.

Accordingly, it is less odd than it first appeared to discuss Schlegel’s *Dialogue* and Shelley’s *Defence* and MacLeish’s “*Ars Poetica*” in conjunction. In fact, in Schlegel’s sense, all three texts under discussion here are fragments and can fruitfully be read as contributions to the same dialogue, one that is still ongoing, of course. The dialogue of which they are part is the genre, or literary sub-system, known as defense or apology (apologia) of poetry. That is, each of these works gives – and *is* – an answer to the question of what poetry is, and each in various ways makes a number of claims for the value of poetry in an effort to legitimize it as art. Significantly, each of these three works is shaped by an awareness of the long and extensive tradition of defenses, and each includes – and also *is* – a reflection on that tradition and the particular work’s own place in that tradition or system. That is, the authors do not simply imitate well-known models from antiquity but rather reflect on them, adapt and change them to their own design. In
the process the three above-mentioned works reveal themselves as “potentized” reflections, so to speak, of their models.

In particular, MacLeish’s poem is a response to and repudiation of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, which is essentially a compilation of instructions and advice on how to write poetry that will please the audience. Far from offering aspiring poets any practical advice whatsoever, MacLeish turns the Horatian instruction, “poetry should,” against itself and in so doing affirms poetry’s autonomous status as, simply and fully, “be-ing.” For MacLeish, poetry “should be” and, indeed, *is* liberated from the necessity of having to refer to (“mean”) anything outside itself. Poetry thus is set free from the necessity of language to mean, to refer to some content or meaning, in accordance with the applicable rules and conventions of diction and syntax. However much words outside of poetry are compelled to mean and signify, within a poem, as a poem, they are free to “be.” MacLeish’s poem itself does not “mean”; that is, it does not convey information or say anything at all about Horace or any of the things it mentions – the poem contains nothing that could be taken as a factual (or counterfactual) statement about extralinguistic reality. Yet, though not “meaning” in the conventional sense, the poem is not “meaning-less.” By transcending the dichotomy between meaning this or meaning that, the poem both responds to Horace and is that response.

In a sense, then, “Ars Poetica” meets one of Schlegel’s essential criteria for a work of art – indeed, specifically a Romantic work – by articulating and thus reflecting as well as reflecting on the conditions and principles of its creation. It both calls for poems to *be* and demonstrates or embodies this “be-ing.” While directly responding to Horace, the poem, like Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, joins the larger dialogue made up of other defenses
or similar discussions of poetry, a dialogue to which Schlegel’s *Dialogue* and Shelley’s *Defence* belong equally, notwithstanding their different approach and conclusions. Each of these works, regardless of whether they or their authors influenced each other in any way directly or indirectly, contributes to and changes the nature and quality of the dialogue while responding to and participating in it. Each contribution expands the scope of the dialogue as well as its depth because each is also a reflection *on* as well as a reflection *of* the dialogue as it has been up to that moment.

This effect resulting from the relations among the individual works and sub-systems becomes evident only through the passage of time, that is, only for posterity. A work’s openness to being integrated into a larger system (such as its genre) is also its opening to the future. In a sense, then, what connects the works under discussion here is not so much their shared topic or other surface similarities. Though the similarities, particularly between Schlegel’s and Shelley’s texts, are considerable (to be discussed below), they are comparatively a matter of surface appearance and were already “fixed” in the past. Rather, the affinity of these three works lies in the *Gespräch* to which they belong, specifically, in the new quality and dimension with which each of the three works endues the dialogue, both individually and jointly through their relations to each other. Ultimately, this means that their kinship is based on their futurity; their affinity is in what they were “written toward,” not so much in what they were “written from.”

As will become clearer below, its position in the larger system/dialogue both enhances and strengthens the boundaries of each work and at the same time makes those boundaries permeable, opens them up, and allows them to be transcended. This constellation of whole and part, the relationship of the poet to poetry as art, the relation
between fragment and the larger dialogue – all these shape the discussions that make up Schlegel’s *Dialogue* and are also central to Shelley’s *Defence*, albeit with slightly changed emphasis. Significantly, both texts shape themselves through movement between these contrasts or opposite poles, much as MacLeish’s poem is shaped by the contrast between “mean” and “be.” Basically, the opposite poles operating in Shelley’s *Defence* and Schlegel’s *Dialogue* can be seen as different iterations or facets of one basic, core opposition, that between being and becoming. That is, both Shelley and Schlegel, while essentially in agreement with MacLeish, would have raised his dictum to a higher level: poetry should not merely *be*, but *become*. That is, for Shelley and Schlegel, the moment in which a poem is read (and responded to) ultimately matters more than the moment in which it written. Poems then achieve their “be-ing” not in the moment of their creation but in that of active reception. Given the potentially inexhaustible readings and meanings a poem – and most especially a Romantic poem in line with Schlegel’s fragment #116 – and the active role of the reader – the dialogic nature of the work – a (Romantic) poem’s *being* is this quality of *becoming*. For Shelley and Schlegel, a poem’s openness and generative power, giving rise to more poetry (or *Charakteristiken*), define its being, its nature. It’s *be-ing* is thus a *be-coming*: it is a process and not a state or condition. Accordingly, a poem certainly does not have to “mean” (refer to anything), and it’s defining characteristic is also not “being” this or that, but its very openness to be “transformed,” “translated” (see discussion of Schlegel’s fragment #287 in chapter 2 above), to join a conversation and give rise to more of it. In this sense, then, Romantic poetry (in the broad definition both Schlegel and Shelley give it) is a process, not a product.
Thus, Shelley and Schlegel both see poetry as *becoming*, as both product and enactment of an ongoing, potentially infinite process of creation and development. For example, in the *Defence* Shelley refers to individual poetic compositions of antiquity as “episodes to that great poem, which all poets, like the cooperating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world.” Schlegel’s *Dialogue* reverberates with an “anticipatory echo” of this view: “All poems of antiquity join one to the other, till from ever increasing masses and members the whole is formed. . . . Ancient poetry is a single, indivisible, and perfect poem” (*Dialogue*, 82). Both Shelley and Schlegel are at pains to claim for the poetry of their time a status that exceeds even the exalted role they believe poetry to have played in antiquity, largely due to its deep involvement with religion and ritual.

The never-ending becoming of poetry is a recurrent theme in much of Schlegel’s writing on the subject – for example, in the famous fragment #116 on Romantic poetry – and the *Dialogue*, in particular, both discusses and also demonstrates, embodies, Schlegel’s theory of poetry as an open-ended, potentially infinite conversation, that is, a *becoming*, rather than a *being*. Of course, in speaking of poetry as always becoming, in progress, Schlegel already takes as given its autonomous ontological status. As a result, Schlegel, like Shelley, focuses more on a defense of poetry as art, rather than on individual works. In fact, their discussions of individual works give far less weight than usual to outstanding stylistic features or subject matter of those poems. As is especially evident in Schlegel’s and Shelley’s comments on the works they claim for poetry in contravention of their usual classification in a different genre – for example, Plato’s dialogues – what makes a work poetry in this sense is not the work’s phenotype, so to
speak, not its appearance or formal elements, but the creative artistic process it embodies, reflects, and articulates.

As MacLeish is answering Horace, so Shelley and Schlegel model their defenses of poetry on Plato’s dialogues. This is a particularly interesting choice in view of Plato’s generally negative judgment of poetry. That is, far from considering poetry foremost among the arts, Plato in his dialogues, by and large, assigns poetry a subordinate role in human life and society. Particularly Book X of Plato’s Republic is a fairly broadsided attack against poetry and highlights poetry’s failure to accurately portray absolute truth (the Ideas) or bring people closer to realizing or knowing that truth. Thus, the use of the Platonic model – most pronounced in Schlegel’s Dialogue – suggests a subtle, subversive, and also ironic deployment of Plato’s style and approach in a repudiation of him. Actually, both Shelley and Schlegel go even further in repudiating Plato’s verdict against poetry: they simply incorporate his dialogues into poetry.

By subsuming Plato’s devaluation of poetry under poetry, the Romantic authors revaluate and transvaluate the Platonic dialogues; they absorb the attack, thus robbing it of its sting and rendering it not just harmless but, indeed, poetic. This move of transvaluation or overturning of the usual valuation of a term, work, or genre is familiar from the discussion above of Schlegelian understanding and fragments (see chapters 2 and 3). As will become clear in the course of this chapter, in Schlegel’s philosophy of language this move is a driving force in the creative or artistic use of language.

As MacLeish turns a prominent feature of Horace’s style (the oft-repeated “should”) against him, so Schlegel and Shelley in their texts rich with echoes of Plato’s style and approach make use of prominent elements of the Platonic dialogues to subvert
Plato’s attack on poetry. Nevertheless, both start from agreement with Plato, basing their assessment of poetry in part on the Platonic notion of a higher, absolute reality or truth. That is, in both texts the refracted echoes of Plato in their Schlegelian irony mark the first step in the ironic overturning of Plato’s judgment that poetry is “not to be taken seriously as attaining to the truth” and the assertion that poetry, more even than all other arts, has a special and privileged relationship to this higher truth. For Shelley and Schlegel, poetry is an expression approximating this highest or absolute truth and is a path to it; rather than referring to a factual reality or truth – or “mean” something about it – poetry in these Romantic defenses is of a piece with the absolute. Based on that premise, poetry then shares the ontological status, the autonomy, of the absolute and is thus elevated above other cultural productions.

Interestingly, in contrast to the widespread notion of Romantic poetry as intensely personal and individual – an outpouring of the poet’s heart and soul – the Schlegelian view of poetry renders it strangely impersonal. For Schlegel, as likewise for Shelley, the work’s and poet’s place in the larger system of poetry outranks the individual poem’s importance as an expression of the poet’s personality. Thus, poetry is here more important than the poet and the poet’s personal life thus subordinate to what might be called the higher calling of the poetic work. For example, Schlegel demands of poetry, and all art, a consistent orientation to the whole, an orientation for which another name is Schlegelian irony.

[Wir fordern, sic] Ironie; wir fordern, daß die Begebenheiten, die Menschen, kurz das ganze Spiel des Lebens wirklich auch als Spiel genommen und dargestellt sei. . . . Wir halten uns also nur an die Bedeutung des Ganzen; was den Sinn, das
Herz, den Verstand, die Einbildung einzeln reizt, rührt, bechaftigt und ergötzt, scheint uns nur Zeichen, Mittel zur Anschauung des Ganzen, in dem Augenblick, wo wir uns zu diesem erheben. (Gespräch, 323) [“We demand irony; we demand that events, men, in short the play of life, be taken as play and represented as such. . . . We are concerned only with the meaning of the whole; and things which individually excite, move, occupy, and delight our sense, our hearts, understanding, and imagination seem to us to be only a sign, a means for viewing the whole at the moment when we rise to such a view.” (Dialogue, 89)]

That is, in Schlegel’s view, the various incidents and characters in a work – including descriptions, stylistic flourishes, and other details that catch readers’ attention – are not primarily significant in their own right, much less as “keys” to biographical information about the author. Instead, to read the work properly in the Schlegelian way, these details must be read as signs or indicators pointing to the whole, that is, the absolute underlying reality. These signs may permit a momentary glimpse of that higher reality they point to but cannot encompass.

In particular, Schlegel’s term “das ganze Spiel des Lebens” (= the whole play of life, all the play of life) encapsulates what poetry (literature in general) should represent or display (darstellen) and already includes the inherent tension between what poetry should contain but what can be present in poetry only in its very absence. That is, “the play of life” (Dialogue, 89) is both play in the aesthetic sense, a representation, and thus strictly limited as well as play in the sense of movement, as in the expression “the play of light on the water’s surface.” In this sense of movement – or oscillation – “play” is, at
least potentially, unlimited, open-ended, and each moment or representation of it is thus significant in its relation to the ongoing movement that transcends the representation’s limits.

In Schlegel’s *Dialogue* the above-quoted demand for representation of the play of life is answered with the comment, “All the sacred plays of art are only a remote imitation of the infinite play of the universe, the work of art which eternally creates itself anew.” “Imitation” here is thus not mimesis in the sense of copying or portraying a given reality; rather, it is a relocation of the universal creative process into the medium of art. Significantly, each work individually in its creative process and the totality of all works both comprise this “remote imitation.” An essential element of this imitation is thus the relationship of the individual work to the totality of works, that is, to the realm of art as a whole.

As Schlegel formulated it in the conclusion to his essay on Lessing: “Das Wesen der höhern Kunst und Form besteht in der Beziehung aufs Ganze. . . . Jedes Gedicht, jedes Werk soll das Ganze bedeuten,72 wirklich und in der Tat bedeuten, und durch die Bedeutung und Nachbildung auch wirklich und in der Tat sein.”73 In other words, by being both a whole, complete work and a fragment in Schlegel’s sense of the term, a poem both represents (*Nachbildung*) and embodies, *is*, the relationship of itself to the (larger) whole. This productive and oscillating relation of whole and part is one of the threads linking Schlegel’s literary fragments published in the years between 1797 and 1800 in the *Lyceum* and *Athenaeum* and culminating in his *Gespräch über Poesie* (*Dialogue on Poetry*), which was written in 1800 and first published that same year in the *Athenaeum*, thus being roughly contemporaneous with the essay on Lessing.
In particular, this relationship of the individual work to the whole marks the opening of poetry (literary art in general) to futurity; Shelley famously characterized this openness to the future in the closing lines of his *Defence*:

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves.\(^74\)

In other words, while Schlegel and Shelley both discuss ancient and more recent works of poetry, their concern is actually with the future. In both Romantic defenses of poetry time plays an important role in the very “be-ing” of poetry, not just in readers’ understanding of it. Ultimately, in referring to the larger whole of which it is a part, a poem (or other work of art) transcends the boundaries of its moment of creation. In an interesting paradox, a work thus reflects its own time and place most clearly when it is looking beyond them, so to speak. Its connection to the historical situation and place of its creation is most revealing and visible insofar as the work is oriented beyond the constraints and exigencies of its “here and now.”

It is because of poetry’s openness to this transcending of boundaries that it can relate to the Absolute or sublime. Its limitation to the aesthetic realm (as opposed to being a mimetic account of a reality) and its emphasis on the boundaries of individual works at the same time allow poetry to point to and embody its relation to the infinite or sublime. This “double” nature of poetry is succinctly summarized in the comment one of the participants in the *Dialogue* contributes: “Mit anderen Worten: alle Schönheit ist
Allegorie. Das Höchste kann man eben weil es unausprechlich ist, nur allegorisch sagen”
[“In other words, all beauty is allegory. The sublime, because it is unutterable, can be
expressed only allegorically.”] (Dialogue, 90; Gespräch, 324). Insofar as the root
meaning of “allegory” is “saying other” or “saying different(ly),” the conclusion here is
that poets can express the sublime or ultimate reality only by saying something else,
something different – that is, by not saying or expressing it. Instead, poems cannot do
more than verweisen, point to, the sublime and in so doing articulate their own inability
to express, capture, articulate it. In a sense, it is by highlighting their limitations, their
boundaries as works, that poems enact their relation to the inexpressible whole beyond
their boundaries.

For Schlegel, poetry’s intrinsic character of pointing to/at what it cannot say is
found not only in poems (however defined) but is ultimately already inherent in language
itself. Thus, the contribution to the Dialogue following on the quote above simply
acknowledges the necessity of “saying differently” if there is to be any saying at all:
“Oder die Mitteilung und Darstellung aller Künste und aller Wissenschaften kann nicht
ohne einen poetischen Bestandteil sein” [“Or the communication and representation of all
the arts and knowledge cannot exist without a poetic component”] (ibid.). It is in this
sense that the question voiced earlier in the Dialogue, “Is, then, everything poetry?” (75)
must ultimately be answered in the affirmative: for Schlegel, all Mitteilung aiming at the
whole, which cannot be expressed, is poetic and is thus of necessity allegorical – at least
in part.

It is of course no coincidence that Schlegel here links poetry and Mitteilung, a
term that requires a closer look because – as with the above-discussed terms “fragment”
and “understanding” – Schlegel gives it a complicating turn in his context. In particular, though it is translated, largely correctly, as “communication,” the word’s root components “teilen” and “mit” mean “share with”; by implication, this makes the role of recipient/reader equal in importance to that of the writer. In addition, though not referring to this meaning directly, the word Mitteilung in German also carries the echo of “Mitte,” middle. In a sense, the term highlights the tripartite structure of communication in Schlegel’s model. That is, Schlegelian Mitteilung, like poetry, is not primarily about self-expression. Schlegel’s insistence on going beyond self-expression is clear in his Lyceum fragment #98, discussed above (chapter 3, pp. 20). According to that fragment, the essential element of written communication (schriftstellerische Mitteilung) is to really “communicate . . . and share” with the reader, a process Schlegel emphatically distinguishes from “simply” expressing oneself for in that case “it would be wiser to keep silent” (“sonst wäre es treffender, zu schweigen”). Moreover, Schlegel posits as one of the preconditions of Mitteilung “jemand . . . dem man’s mitteilen wollen darf” [someone to whom one is allowed to want to communicate it – translation mine]. That is, for Mitteilung to occur it is not enough that the writer (the “laws” refer to written communication) has something to say; rather, the reader also must desire the communication and thus be willing and open to receive it. One could say that the reader’s and writer’s desire for the Mitteilung enhance and intensify each other and culminate in the Mitteilung where the desires meet; the Mitteilung itself is ultimately more important as the meeting point of these desires than as communication referring to an outside reality. Schlegelian schriftstellerische Mitteilung is like a dance writer and reader perform around and with the music, not the pattern of dance steps nor the music. In other words,
for Schlegel written communication is primarily about forming (*bilden*) and giving form to “the sacred relationship of deepest symp hilosophy or sympoetry” (fragment #112, see chapter 2) between (synthetic, poetic) writer and reader.

Accordingly, even written communication calls for a give-and-take, and thus a conversation or dialogue is its highest form. Of course, this means also that, just as in poetry, the essence of the *Mitteilung* emerges in the process, in and through the dialogue; it is not given beforehand. The *Mitteilung* thus emerges only at a later stage of the writing process; it is neither the starting point nor does it coincide with the concrete product of the writing, the text as such; above all, it requires the “presence” of the reader and cannot occur without that.

Contrary to the usual notion of writers being inspired by an idea and enthusiastic to communicate it, Schlegel adds complicating layers to the process. While writers may generally imagine the readers for whom they write, for Schlegel, the essential point is to imagine (“deduce,” as he says in “On Incomprehensibility”) a reader who is *entgegenwirkend*, that is, an active participant in the process of communication. The dialogue between writer and reader is located in the writer’s mind, of course, accompanying if not preceding the process of writing. Beyond that, however, in Schlegel’s model the writer in a sense *is* already a dialogue to begin with: “Und ist das Leben eines denkenden Menschen wohl etwas andres als eine stete innere Symphilosophie?” [“Is the life of a thinking human being anything else than a continuous inner symphilosophy?”]76 If the writer’s thinking or inner life is already in symphilosophy, then writing will expand this symphilosophy to include the reader. Clearly, symphilosophy and sympoetry are not so much goals to be achieved but
processes at various stages of development and intensity. Thus, symphilosophy does not just occur once the writing has been read but is already prepared for and, indeed, integral to the writing process from the very beginning – and even before the actual writing was begun.

Interestingly, as that same fragment makes clear, one of the hallmarks of symphilosophy and *Mitteilung* is not just complete understanding but rather also incomprehension, as explained in chapter 4 above:

> Wenn man in der Mitteilung der Gedanken zwischen absolutem Verstehen und absolutem Nichtverstehen abwechselt, so darf das schon eine philosophische Freundschaft genannt werden. Geht es uns doch mit uns selbst nicht besser. Und ist das Leben eines denkenden Menschen wohl etwas andres als eine stete innere Symphilosophie?

[If in communicating a thought, one fluctuates between absolute comprehension and absolute incomprehension, then this process might already be termed a philosophical friendship. For it’s no different with ourselves. Is the life of a thinking human being anything else than a continuous inner symphilosophy?]?

In other words, Schlegel’s elusive concept of symphilosophy (or, in its creative, productive aspect, sympoetry) is based on a core of incomprehension – the very incomprehensibility that is the subject of his essay “On Incomprehensibility” discussed in chapter 4. Thus, the ongoing process of symphilosophy develops or shapes itself around sites or moments of incomprehension whose location may vary – that is, one or the other part of the text may become incomprehensible – and that can never be totally eliminated.

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Among other implications, this fragment suggests that Schlegel’s choice of presenting his theory of poetry in the form of a dialogue is neither coincidental nor merely a matter of echoing Plato. Rather, Schlegel’s dialogue articulates its author’s multivocal symphilosophy. Though all the views of poetry in the dialogue are ultimately Schlegel’s own, when read in the light of other related fragments, the dialogue is less about the opinions expressed and more about the process in which they emerge and the interplay between them. For example, the Gespräch consists of several formal elements and thus several interruptions of the conversation. Moreover, it begins with an introductory narrative setting the stage; the narrator is a presence through the voice telling us what is happening and what the participants are saying. At the same time, the narrator is not part of the dialogue, but merely observes and records it, occasionally adding comments. The narrator thus both presents the dialogue to us and at the same time keeps it at a further remove from us, inserting an additional space or distance between the dialogue – usually an immediate and personal genre – and us as readers. This contravention of dialogue’s usual immediate presence underlines that Schlegel values a quality this dialogue has by virtue of being written over the intimacy and spontaneity of in-person conversation.

Despite its title, the Gespräch actually consists to a large part of written treatises that have been prepared in advance and are read aloud by their authors. The purpose of these lectures – one of them is called a “letter” – is to help the assembled friends realize clearly … the diversity of their views. . . . Each, or perhaps at first only one who felt most inclined, should speak from the bottom of his heart his thoughts
about poetry or about a part, and aspect of it, or better still, write them down, so that they would have the opinion of each in black and white. (Dialogue, 56)

As in the “argument” of symphilosophical thinking, the goal of these written “arguments” is to sharpen the conflict, heighten the contradictions. As one of the friends explains, “the battle” would then “become quite hot, which it must be, for otherwise there was no hope for eternal peace” (ibid.). Moreover, the essays would mean “a change from the eternal reading.”

Of course, several contradictions are operating simultaneously in these passages. For example, the treatises are read aloud by their authors; the other friends in the circle are listening, not reading along in a copy. Presumably, this is not much different from their usual meetings when they read their own works to each other; thus, the “change from the eternal reading” is a more subtle one, in that the “readings” here call for entgegenwirken from the group. In addition, in contrast to the usual association of fixing opinions and the like in writing to avoid disagreements or misunderstandings, the explicit purpose of the writing here is to create or at least heighten disagreement. That is, the “readers” – who are actually listeners in this dialogue – must be “entgegenwirkend.” As discussed above (chapter 3, pp. 25), this term is crucial in Schlegel’s model of reading and writing. Significantly, despite the “diversity of their views” the friends have already expressed in previous discussions and despite the possibly heated exchanges about them, it is when those different views are expressed in writing that entgegenwirken is evoked from them. At the same time, for us as readers the entire Dialogue exists of course only in writing. That is, as the treatises call for entgegenwirkende readers/listeners, so the
Dialogue in its entirety can be examined for the room it leaves for the entgegenwirkende activity of its readers (us).

Insofar as writing, at least conventionally, is considered at a remove from the immediacy and direct presence of the speaker, Schlegel’s Dialogue offers several levels of such a remove while calling in question conventional notions of presence. For example, as indicated above, the narrator through whose presence we perceive the dialogue, creates a distance that pure dialogue, as in drama, would not have. The written treatises are at yet another remove; they were written outside the confines of the text in which they appear, and their reading, though without editorial comments from the narrator, is already incorporated into the narrator’s voice in the introductory explanation that of the conversations reported here “much . . . is true, other things are invented. Such, too, is the present dialogue” (Dialogue, 55). In other words, before getting to the treatises themselves, the narrator/author has already laid claim to them as either remembered or invented by himself. Despite the various techniques of distancing and the number of personas Schlegel adopts here, ultimately the entire Dialogue is of course his. Though not made explicit in the Dialogue through straightforward explication, Schlegel’s view of the subject encompasses all the voices present here; for readers following Schlegel’s model of reading and understanding, the author’s view emerges in this conversation as larger than the sum of its parts.

However, in Schlegel’s case this does not necessarily mean that all views and opinions expressed are his, fully and “from the bottom of his heart.” Nor are they to be taken as a trying on of different positions or playing them out against each other so as to
arrive at a compromise or synthesis; instead, the diversity contained in the *Dialogue* is best understood in terms of Schlegel’s *Athenaeum* fragment #121:

> Aber sich willkürlich bald in diese bald in jene Sphäre, wie in eine andre Welt, nicht bloß mit dem Verstande und der Einbildung, sondern mit ganzer Seele versetzen; bald auf diesen bald auf jenen Teil seines Wesens frei Verzicht tun, und sich auf einen anderen ganz beschränken; jetzt in diesem, jetzt in jenem Individuum sein Eins und Alles suchen und finden, und alle übrigen absichtlich vergessen: das kann nur ein Geist, der gleichsam eine Mehrheit von Geistern, und ein ganzes System von Personen in sich enthält, und in dessen Innerm das Universum, welches, wie man sagt, in jeder Monade keimen soll, ausgewachsen, und reif geworden ist.

[But to transport oneself arbitrarily now into this, now into that sphere, as if into another world, not merely with one’s reason and imagination, but with one’s whole soul; to freely relinquish first one and then another part of one’s being, and confine oneself entirely to a third; to seek and find now in this, now in that individual the be-all and end-all of existence, and intentionally forget everyone else: of this only a mind is capable that contains within itself simultaneously a plurality of minds and a whole system of persons, and in whose inner being the universe which, as they say, should germinate in every monad, has grown to fullness and maturity.]\(^{78}\)

That is, Schlegel takes on each position or persona in the *Dialogue*, temporarily “forgetting” all others, and does so precisely to highlight the diversity rather than to find
a compromise. In this way, the Dialogue reenacts the “be-ing” of poetry in the relationship of part (work) to the whole.

Thus, while each part of the dialogue remains recognizable as a separate contribution, all of them together form a larger whole, the Dialogue, which again is a part of a yet larger whole, such as the system (or genre) of defenses of poetry. Moreover, despite its rather formal beginning (the authorial prologue), the Dialogue ends without any formality. In the first edition, the conversation simply ends, or at least, the record ends. The narrator does not explain or editorialize or formally conclude the conversation. That is, the Dialogue is essentially open-ended, much like Romantic poetry. The Dialogue both presents and embodies in itself, in its own structure, Schlegel’s philosophy of poetry. Like Romantic poetry as Schlegel characterized it in his famous Athenaeum fragment #116, the Dialogue – that is, the theory and criticism of poetry – is a Schlegelian fragment and “progressive” in that it can potentially continue indefinitely. Interestingly, the Dialogue, like any dialogue and Romantic poetry and even literary art as a whole, can go on because it can also stop at any moment and still be whole. As Schlegel phrases it in fragment #37 on the freedom of writer: “Even a friendly conversation which cannot be broken off at any moment, completely arbitrarily, has something intolerant [Illiberales] about it.” The Dialogue is both open-ended and could have ended at any of the junctures where new contributions are added and at any junction within them where new material is introduced (for example, before or after the quotations included in most of the written contributions the friends read).

Thus, the openness of the Dialogue is not limited to its ending; each reading of a treatise represents an opening to what is outside of the text, a perforation point or junction
at which other contributions – i.e., fragments – could be integrated into the dialogue, or at which it could conceivably end. In addition, one of the participants, Lothario, wishes he “had put my thoughts about it [Eleusinian mysteries] on paper, so that I could present them to you in the order and detail befitting the dignity and importance of the subject” (Dialogue, 91) but does not express his thoughts even in a disorderly fashion. The other friends had expected a poetic work from him, but he disappoints them. Thus, the end of the Dialogue is much like an interruption, fraught with waiting or expectation for a continuation, possibly at the time when Lothario has his work ready to read.
Inevitably, the exploration of Schlegelian reading and writing leads to the question of what implications this model could have for translation and writing. As I have argued in the chapters above on Schlegelian reading, the understanding emerging when Schlegel’s model is applied is far more complex and productive than what is generally called “understanding better.” It is a “true” understanding in the same sense Schlegel speaks of a “true” translation in the fragment quoted above (dating from 1798) – that is, it is provisional or fragmentary in Schlegel’s sense, open to further refinement, revision, and addition. More important, it is aware of its own deliberately fragmentary nature.

Schlegelian translating and writing are thus distinguished by their active, deliberate openness to the future, specifically, to other contributions to the dialogue in which they participate.

Like understanding, Schlegelian translation requires going beyond “better understanding” in the translation process to an understanding that is equal to the author’s. This means translators must do the work necessary to achieve the “better understanding” and then on that basis step into the author’s shoes, so to speak. The resulting translation includes not only the “better understanding” but also takes into account the author’s as
well as the translator’s misunderstandings and the multiplicity of voices constituting the
writing “self,” which is not a univocal self in the usual sense. In a way the Schlegelian
translator takes on the role of the “entgegenwirkende” reader constructed by the synthetic
writer in addition to playing the role of the writer. In the process the conversation that
both constitutes the work to be translated and gives rise to it is continued in a new,
refreshed, and rejuvenated form expanded with the translator’s own multiplicity of
voices. In other words, translation at its best is the form of sympoetry.

Arguably, then, translators, like writers, work their way from enthusiasm or
inspiration to detachment and locate themselves in the tension between “absolute
comprehension and absolute incomprehension,” that is, between “having a system and
having none” or between “the impossibility and the necessity of complete
communication.” For translators, of course, the overriding tension is that between the
necessity of translation – not least because it is the mark of understanding – and the utter
impossibility of translation.

Much as Schlegelian schriftstellerische Mitteilung, translation is like a dance
writers, reader, and translators perform around and with the music, not the pattern of
dance steps nor the music. In other words, like Schlegelian writing, translation is
primarily about continuing and expanding “the sacred relationship of deepest
symphilosophy or sympoetry” (fragment #112, see chapter 2). Schlegelian translation is a
transplantation in the sense that musical notes are “transplanted” to a different scale when
a score is transposed for different instruments. Much like the melody in that case,
translations alternate between saying the same thing as the original and not doing so
because the new text must be adapted to its different environment. Translations following
Schlegel’s model thus intentionally alternate between being “true” to the original and saying more – and less – than the original text. That is, they are characterized and structured by Romantic irony. They succeed to the extent that their oscillations between being the same as the original and being different, between understanding fully or better and not doing so, harmonize with the oscillations between opposing views that constitute the original.

Schlegelian translation starts from an understanding of any text as part of a dialogue, as a response to other contributions to the same conversation. The task of the translator then is to uncover what a text is responding to specifically, in response to what given structural and other constraints it took shape. This conversation is an essential part of the translation process and informs the resulting translation whether appearing on the latter’s surface or not. In my translations of Schlegel’s texts I have followed this dialogic model and have pointed out when published translations not following Schlegel’s model lead to problems and misunderstandings that potentially foreclose such a dialogue.

As my arguments in the preceding chapters show, the hallmark of Schlegelian writing (and thus also of translation) is a reconceptualization of the writing process and all its participants. Reconceived as a dialogue in which readers, writers, and even language itself play an active role, Schlegelian writing dissolves the entrenched positions typical and largely inevitable adversarial framework of conventional expository or rhetorical writing and translating.

This shift in orientation may seem too subtle and minor to be relevant in translation and writing practice or pedagogy. Yet, as Schlegel pointed out in his fragments on *schriftstellerische Mitteilung* and synthetic writers, once writers orient
themselves toward a different goal – namely, sympoetry rather than mere self-expression, persuasion, or factual information – and especially once they have achieved detachment and thus freedom in relation to the subject matter, they think of their readers differently. Thinking of readers as active and “entgegenwirkend” will lead writers to choices in wording and tone very different from those prompted by considering readers passive recipients. That is, the crucial difference that moves writing/translating into this new model is that writers do not target their readers as they currently are to manipulate them and achieve a predetermined effect. In Schlegel’s model readers do not have to be brought to abandon their view on the subject matter and adopt the writer’s; instead, they are considered already in engaged in an interested dialogue with the writer. Rather than reader and writer facing each other on opposite sides of the text that both connects and keeps them separate, they are on the same side facing the subject matter in regard to which both are free.

Because of this shift in orientation, Schlegelian writing and translating essentially starts where conventional writing and translating end: in establishing an agreement of some kind between reader and writer, but the relationship of sympoetry is based on free and creative dialogue, not on subduing one view in favor of another. Writers are thus freed from compelling readers to change their opinions, to have an effect on them, and readers are freed from having to defend (to themselves at least) their views. As a result, writers are free to engage in the playful aspects of language; this makes possible the creative leeway to say by not saying – to communicate the “Nicht-Mitteilbare,” the unsayable, as Walter Benjamin called it.
Regarding a pedagogy for writing and translating, I would argue that most important element of the Schlegelian model is indeed the orientation toward movement—a movement between understanding and incomprehensibility. While playful and enjoyable, the movement between the poles of Romantic irony and paradox is not a trivial matter but profoundly brings home the realization of the limits of language and understanding. It encourages deliberate and playful use of those limitations and reveals the promise of “better understanding” as essentially misleading.

Thus, as for a Necker cube the oscillation between the two views is the salient “message” of the drawing—there is no cube there, only lines forming a square on the page—so Shelley’s “unsuccessful” metaphors and Schlegel’s Romantic irony set oscillations in motion and perpetuate them, thus compelling words to speak beyond themselves.
Notes

Introduction

Chapter 1


4 Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*. In *Shelley’s Prose; Or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), 275-297. Citations from Shelley’s prose refer to this edition; page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text. The text is also available online.


6 Wright, 21.

7 Wright, 21.


9 Hogle, 10.

10 For example, see William Keach, *Shelley’s Style* (New York: Methuen, 1984).


12 Ricoeur, *ibid*.

It would be instructive to study how people unschooled in interpreting drawings respond to the Necker cube drawing and to examine if they also “see” the two orientations of the cube.

Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” 245. Page numbers for further citations from this essay will be given parenthetically in the text.


For example, George Lakoff, “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor” and Donald Schön, “Generative Metaphor: A Perspective on Problem-Setting in Social Policy” both in Ortony, Metaphor and Thought.


Chapter 2


Schlegel, op. cit., 256; Firchow, op. cit., 241.


Addition to translation is mine: The German text reads “und wie in einer Reihe von Spiegeln vervielfachen”; that is, it compares the effect of the poetic reflection to that of images multiplied in a series of mirrors. The mirror serves as an analogy only; Schlegel does not say that poetic reflection is a mirror in nature or function. This is a subtle difference, but it is worth pointing out because a mirror usually produces an exact likeness. Mirrors are valued for precisely this exact image they offer; however, if read carefully, Schlegel here emphasizes the multiplication effect. That is, like a series of mirrors, the potentized reflection produced by Romantic poetry offers a potentially infinite number of images as though through multiplication of the first one. No statement is made – or implied, in my view – about whether the poetic reflections are identical or look-alikes among each other or compared to the first one. In other words, Schlegel’s description of the poetic reflections (both the process of reflecting and the reflection as outcome) allows for the possibility of transformation (“verändern”) called for in his model of understanding. The reflections, that is, are multiplied as though in a series of mirrors, but unlike mirror images, they may all be different, transformed in various ways. As I see it, this difference, or at least potential difference, among the reflections is significant because it binds together the nature of the reader Schlegel envisions with that of the writer. Romantic poetry as a universal and always becoming genre is not created by one or even a few writers but essentially requires that readers become writers also and join in the process so as to ensure its continuation. If readers are active and “entgegenwirkend” (see below), as Schlegel wants them, then the transformations and reflections based on their understanding of an author will necessarily not be alike. In fact, it is that difference that makes the perpetuation of the process possible.

25 Firchow, op. cit., 175; German text in Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe, op. cit., 182.


27 Firchow, op. cit., 156–157; German text in Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe, vol 2, op. cit., 161. See in the text below for comments on the translation.

28 Schlegel would most likely have said, with typical irony, that language makes the relationship of sympoetry possible and impossible at the same time.

29 Firchow, op. cit., 153; German text in Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe, op. cit., 157.

30 Schlegel phrased this more pointedly in his Lyceum fragment # 117: “Poesie kann nur durch Poesie kritisiert werden. Ein Kunsturteil, welches nicht selbst ein Kunstwerk ist, entweder im Stoff, als Darstellung des notwendigen Eindrucks in seinem Werden, oder durch eine schöne Form, und einen im Geist der alten römischen Satire liberalen Ton, hat gar kein Bürgerrecht im Reiche der Kunst” [“Poetry can only be criticized by way of
poetry. A critical judgment of an artistic production has no civil rights in the realm of art if it isn’t itself a work of art, either in its substance, as a representation of a necessary impression in the state of becoming, or in the beauty of its form and open tone, like that of the old Roman satires”] (Firchow, op. cit., 157; German text Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe, op. cit., 162). That is, the process of reading/understanding that goes hand in hand with Romantic poetry turns readers, at least potentially, into Romantic poets, especially so since Romantic poetry mixes and fuses poetry and criticism (see earlier discussion).

31 See above, note 7.

Chapter 3

33 Schlegel, op. cit., 197; Firchow, op. cit., 189. Translation amended: Igel is a hedgehog, not native to the US, not a porcupine, which is native to the US and somewhat similar.


35 Shelley, op. cit., 287.

36 Schlegel, op. cit., 169; Firchow, op. cit., 164.

37 Schlegel, op. cit., 176 Firchow, op. cit., 170. The term genre in the translation seems problematic to me because it is so general as to leave room for any possible genre to meet the requirements Schlegel then lists. However, it seems clear from his use of the relative “keins” that he refers back to “System von Fragmenten,” with the implication that while there are already systems of fragments in the area of memoirs, a system of fragments for the sciences has not yet been developed. In other words, just as for literature and memoirs, regarding the sciences, too, Schlegel considers a system of fragments necessary. In a sense, he has worked on developing one.

38 Schlegel, op. cit., 182; Firchow, op. cit., 175.

39 Schlegel, op. cit., 363ff.; Firchow, op. cit., 259ff. Page numbers for further references are given parenthetically in the text.

41 Schlegel, op. cit., 214; Firchow, op. cit., 203. See also chapter 2 above.


45 Quoted in Land, op. cit., 33.

46 Quoted in Land, op. cit., 36.

47 Schlegel, op. cit., 158; Firchow, op. cit., 154.

48 Schlegel, op. cit., 363; Firchow, op. cit., 260.

49 Available online at http://www.matoni.de/goethe/goemaer1.htm.

50 Schlegel, op. cit., 368; Firchow, op. cit., 265.

Chapter 4


54 In original: “Ironie der Ironie” – that is, “irony of irony,” a formulation that makes clear – as the published translation does not – that Schlegelian irony involves more than the stylistic or surface level of a text.

56 Schlegel, op. cit., 172; Firchow, op. cit., 167.

57 Schlegel, op. cit., 184; Firchow, op. cit., 176–177.

58 Schlegel, op. cit., 158; Firchow, op. cit., 154.

59 Schlegel, op. cit., 151; Firchow, op. cit., 146–147.

60 Ibid.

61 Schlegel, op. cit., 150; Firchow, op. cit., 146.


64 Fragment #108 quoted in “On Incomprehensibility,” Schlegel, op. cit., 368; Firchow, op. cit., 265.


Chapter 5


69 Ibid.


72 The intricate relationship between the meanings involved here is difficult to express in English. In German “deuten,” the root or stem word of “bedeuten” means both “point” (as with a finger) and “interpret” or “decipher,” “make out”; thus, it always implies the presence of a sign of some kind and a something to which the sign points, for which it stands, or that it signals. The action of “deuten” becomes more specified in “bedeuten,” which means “to mean” or “signify,” “imply,” “connote,” “stand for,” etc. That is, to some extent the meaning “point to” still reverberates in the German word “bedeuten” in a way it does not in the English word.

73 Schlegel, op. cit., 414.

74 Shelley, op. cit., 297.

75 Schlegel, Lyceum fragment # 98, op. cit., 158; Firchow, op. cit., 154.

76 Schlegel, *Blütenstaub* fragment # 20, op. cit., 164; Firchow, fragment # 2, op. cit., 160.

77 Ibid.

78 Schlegel, op. cit., 184–185; Firchow, op. cit., 176–177.
Bibliography


