

ONE



FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL'S
THEORY OF THE FRAGMENT

In his *Gespräch über die Poesie, Fragmente, and Ideen*,¹ Friedrich Schlegel addresses the question as to how to make concrete a philosophical idea, or how to reconcile the intelligible and the sensible. It is an impossible synthesis of *Geist* (spirit) and *Buchstabe* (letter) that Schlegel sees fulfilled—and lost—in Greek nature poetry as this was characterized by an organic-instinctive vitality that was at once an imitation and a perfection of nature's self-subsistence. In contrast, the romantic (post-classical) era, still according to Schlegel, is inflicted with a radical split between mind and matter. It is a division through which poetry (Schlegel's general term for literature) has lost its perfection, but through which it has gained a progressive nature. For having lapsed into a duality—one through which the work of art is suspended between ideality and reality, or content and form—it is now the purpose of the work of art to overcome that split in a third realm: the synthesis of the artist's idea and the concrete work of art. In this moment the organic unity of Greek nature poetry will be restored on a spiritual level, as the self-presentation of the artistic idea. However, since this involves a unification of two opposites—of spirit and nature—the ideal can never be achieved as such, and thus renders poetry's progression infinite. No sooner is the idea concretized by the singular work than both lie fragmented and, in their imperfection, require further completion. The fragment is, in this way, the moment when the idea and the concrete work unite in an

act of annihilation, in an instant of self-destruction that reduces the work to a seed—or sketch—awaiting fulfillment in the future. To the extent that Schlegel's fragmentary work thus exists in its dissolution, its future completion—its ideality—is guaranteed. Such is the nature of the fragment: forever incomplete (only a part) and hence caught in an unceasing progress through which the idea as ideality, that is, as future fulfillment, is presented—although only in a fragmentary way.² The idea is concretized insofar as it is never completed and renders its self-presentation infinite. The idea *is*, then, the process of production in which nothing ever simply *is*, but in which the work is suspended in continuous self-irony.³

In his justly famous *Athenäum Fragment* 116, Schlegel describes this self-production of the idea (or subject) as the infinite self-completion of romantic literature:

Die romantische Poesie ist eine progressive Universalpoesie. Ihre Bestimmung ist nicht bloß, alle getrennte Gattungen der Poesie wieder zu vereinigen, und die Poesie mit der Philosophie und Rhetorik in Berührung zu setzen. Sie will, und soll auch Poesie und Prosa, Genialität und Kritik, Kunstpoesie und Naturpoesie bald mischen, bald verschmelzen, die Poesie lebendig und gesellig, und das Leben und die Gesellschaft poetisch machen, den Witz poetisieren, und die Formen der Kunst mit gediegnem Bildungsstoff jeder Art anfüllen und sättigen, und durch die Schwingungen des Humors beseelen. Sie umfaßt alles, was nur poetisch ist, vom größten wieder mehre Systeme in sich enthaltenden Systeme der Kunst, bis zu dem Seufzer, dem Kuß, den das dichtende Kind aushaucht in kunstlosen Gesang. Sie kann sich so in das Dargestellte verlieren, daß man glauben möchte, poetische Individuen jeder Art zu charakterisieren, sei ihr Eins und Alles; und doch gibt es noch keine Form, die so dazu gemacht wäre, den Geist des Autors vollständig auszudrücken: so daß manche Künstler, die nur auch einen Roman schreiben wollten, von ungefähr sich selbst dargestellt haben. Nur sie kann gleich dem Epos ein Spiegel der ganzen umgebenden Welt, ein Bild des Zeitalters werden. Und doch kann auch sie am meisten zwischen dem Dargestellten und dem Darstellenden, frei von allem realen und idealen Interesse auf den Flügeln der poetischen Reflexion in der Mitte schweben, diese Reflexion immer wieder potenzieren und wie in einer endlosen Reihe von Spiegeln vervielfachen. Sie ist der höchsten und der allseitigsten Bil-

dung fähig; nicht bloß von innen heraus, sondern auch von außen hinein . . . Die romantische Poesie ist unter den Künsten was der Witz der Philosophie, und die Gesellschaft, Umgang, Freundschaft und Liebe im Leben ist. Andre Dichtarten sind fertig, und können nun vollständig zergliedert werden. Die romantische Dichtart ist noch im Werden; ja das ist ihr eigentliches Wesen, daß sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann. Sie kann durch keine Theorie erschöpft werden, und nur eine divinatorische Kritik dürfte es wagen, ihr Ideal charakterisieren zu wollen. Sie allein ist unendlich, wie sie allein frei ist, und das als ihr erstes Gesetz anerkennt, daß die Willkür des Dichters kein Gesetz über sich leide. Die romantische Dichtart ist die einzige, die mehr als Art, und gleichsam die Dichtkunst selbst ist: denn in einem gewissen Sinn ist oder soll alle Poesie romantisch sein.⁴

[Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. Its aim isn't merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It 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; poetize wit and fill and saturate the forms of art with every kind of good, solid matter for instruction, and animate them with the pulsations of humor. It embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest systems of art, containing within themselves still further systems, to the sigh, the kiss that the poetizing child breathes forth in artless song. It can so lose itself in what it describes that one might believe it exists only to characterize poetical individuals of all sorts; and yet there still is no form so fit for expressing the entire spirit of an author: so that many artists who started out to write only a novel ended up by providing us with a portrait of themselves. It alone can become, like the epic, a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age. And it can also—more than any other form—hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portayer, 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 in an endless succession of mirrors. It is capable of the highest and most variegated refinement, not only from within outwards, but also from without inwards . . . Romantic poetry is

in the arts what wit is in philosophy, and what society and sociability, friendship and love are in life. Other kinds of poetry are finished and are now capable of being fully analyzed. The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free; and it recognizes as its first commandment that the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself. The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic.⁵]

If, for Schlegel, romantic poetry first of all aims at the fusion not only of different genres—of poetry and philosophy, poetry and prose, artistic inspiration and criticism—but also of art and life, or art and nature, it is because romantic poetry is universal and progressive. It is a plural universality that Schlegel describes as poetry's "state of becoming" dictated by no other law than the absolute freedom of the artist's will. This implies that poetry's ideality is to be situated in the creative freedom of its producer, or in the autonomy of his (the masculine is intended) imaginative production. In the free play and self-determination of the artistic imagination lie enclosed a multiplicity of genres and, more precisely, the impossible coexistence of two opposites, of philosophy and literature—one which involves the self-concretization of the artist's spirit in the incompleteness (the state of becoming) of the letter.

This peculiar confusion of letter and spirit—or of the work and its artist—in the former's progressive character Schlegel further defines as the moment in which art loses "itself in what it describes" (in the portrayed) to such an extent that the representation takes on a life of its own (it assumes the shape of a "poetical individual"), and in this manner becomes indicative of the *Willkür* (the capricious wings of reflective freedom) inherent in poetic inspiration (the portrayer). Thus, although the romantic synthesis of the artist and what he has brought forth is constituted by the former's incapacity to control (or complete) the latter, it is exactly in this independence of the work that the artist confirms his creation as an act of absolute freedom. More specifically, forever a project in need of completion, the artist's (self-)creation promises fulfillment in the

future and, through this temporal self-transcendence, gains the freedom to embrace "everything that is purely poetic," from the most complex of the artist's systems to the artless songs of a child. Encompassing all other novels and genres in its uncontainable growth, the romantic work thus manifests itself as the literary genre par excellence, the genre of literature in general.⁶

Now the question arises: does Schlegel's preference for the term *Romantisch* have anything to do with his appreciation of the *Roman*? Following Eichner's discussion of this extremely complex matter,⁷ I would argue that it does, but only if we consider the term *Roman* in its widest sense: not simply as the modern genre that arose in the eighteenth century but as the postclassical art form that first emerged during the Middle Ages in the writings of Boccaccio and Dante and, later on, in Ariosto, Cervantes, and even Shakespeare. The word *Roman* in the eighteenth century refers to the romance, according to Schlegel's *Gespräch über die Poesie*, "written in the age of chivalry, love and fairy tales." When the philosopher declares the novel to be the romantic poetry of his age, he interprets this genre broadly enough to incorporate prose as well as poetry, romance as well as realism, fantasy as well as sentiment: a form varied enough to combine all traditional—classical—genres either in one work (as he would accomplish in *Lucinde*) or in a series of sub-categories such as the sentimental novel, the historical novel, the gothic novel, the realist novel. Flexible in form but also in content, the romantic novel is the genre of all genres, the minimal fragment incorporating the whole of literature, and indeed the idea of production itself: "Alle P[oesie] soll Prosa, und alle Prosa soll P[oesie] sein. Alle Prosa soll romantisch sein.- Alle Geisteswerke sollen roman-tisieren, dem Roman sich möglichst approximiren"⁸ [All p{oetry} should be prose, and all prose should be p{oetry}. All prose should be romantic.- All spiritual works should romanticize, approximate the novel as closely as possible (my translation)]. Hence, Schlegel's *poetische Roman* is both more and less than the novel in its traditional sense: "The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic." *Romantic*, as should be clear by now, refers to the ideality of the *Roman*, which, being both a work of art and the idea or genre of art, is as much present as it is absent, as much singular as it is plural. This duplicity, for Schlegel, makes for a self-contained novel concerned with "the joining or separating of the ideal and the real" as this characterizes fragments and projects:

Das Wesentliche ist die Fähigkeit, Gegenstände unmittelbar zugleich zu idealisieren, und zu realisieren, zu ergänzen, und teilweise in sich auszuführen. Da nun transzendental eben das ist, was auf die Verbindung oder Trennung des Idealen und des Realen Bezug hat; so könnte man wohl sagen, der Sinn für Fragmente und Projekte sei der transzendente Bestandteil des historischen Geistes.⁹

[What is essential is to be able to idealize and realize objects immediately and simultaneously: to complete them and in part carry them out within oneself. Since transcendental is precisely whatever relates to the joining or separating of the ideal and the real, one might very well say that the feeling for fragments and projects is the transcendental element of the historical spirit.¹⁰]

What is crucial in Schlegel's conception of art is its deliberate fragmentariness, for it is through this incompleteness that the ideal presents itself in the real. Insofar as romantic literature is a fragment, the philosophical idea of literature is present in the work itself. The fragment *as fragments* (for in its synthetic nature the fragment is plural) is what unites the work and the philosophy of the work, or in the words of the passage quoted above: it makes of poetry a transcendental poetry. And given that—as AF 116 has it—"only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize" the romantic poetic ideal, then the fragment Schlegel has in mind—the fragment as synthesis of the concrete and the ideal—might well be regarded as a mixture of transcendental or "divinatory" *poetry as well as criticism*. After all, does not Schlegel explicitly state that romantic poetry "should mix and fuse . . . inspiration and criticism?" It is this interdependence of literature and its critique, or of practice and theory, that we need to explore in more detail.

Schlegel's criticism, or what he occasionally refers to as "theory," is the moment in which the opposition between the universal and the singular, between the spirit and the letter, dissolves and their synthesis takes place. The synthesizing view of plurality thus presented is one that undoes not only the opposition between but also the individuality of the two opposites, who, in their mutual destruction, reaffirm their polarization on a higher synthetic level.¹¹ Schlegel's concept of criticism as this self-generative process of dissolution and re-combination, of destruction and production, of unity and separation is constitutive of the artist's spirit positing

itself on an increasingly concrete level without ever fully realizing itself. At times, Schlegel speaks of criticism as a "pure sensible seeing," a "self-intuiting idea" that the artist has, but that can never be known as such. At other moments, he defines it as *intellektuelle* (or *intellektuale*) *Anschauung*, which designates the immediate self-apperception of human consciousness or, more radically, the capacity of the mind to create itself in its reflection.¹² However, since intellectual intuition thus involves the mind's mode of being as pure reflection or as an imaginative projection of non-being, since it is in the process of thinking that the artist's idea presents itself, the synthesis at which it aims—the coincidence of consciousness (subject) with itself (object)—necessarily belongs to the future. The idea is, in other words, still to be created—theory is praxis—and its truth or content is that which needs to be known. That explains why Schlegel compares intellectual intuition to Kant's moral or categorical imperative: "Die intellektuale Anschauung ist der kategorische Imperativ der Theorie"¹³ [An intellectual intuition is the categorical imperative of any theory¹⁴]. The self-constitution of consciousness in intellectual intuition asserts itself as a project or a tendency that ought to be fulfilled, while theory is not simply an "understanding" of truth (a self-understanding by the mind) but rather the subject's immanent consciousness of its necessity to create truth—a call for self-realization that in its immediacy already determines the direction in which this will be realized. (From here it is only a small leap into a moral or religious imperative, that is, faith, which Schlegel will radically perform in his conversion to Catholicism in 1808: "Der Verstand, sagt der Verfasser der Reden über die Religion [Schleiermacher], weiß nur vom Universum; die Fantasie herrsche, so habt ihr einen Gott. Ganz recht, die Fantasie ist das Organ des Menschen für die Gottheit"¹⁵ [The mind, says the author of the *Talks on Religion* (Schleiermacher), can understand only the universe. Let imagination take over and you will have a God. Quite right: for the imagination is man's faculty for perceiving divinity¹⁶].

Thus it is that in Schlegel's philosophy artistic self-creation becomes a mode of balancing between *Geist* and *Buchstabe*. Here theory and praxis are one in an act or fact of the imagination that progresses (as praxis or artistic production) in a permanent reflection (as theory or criticism) upon itself. Consequently, Schlegel's *Einbildungskraft* as this artistic synthesis of the sensible and the intelligible, of art and criticism, exists as moments of suspension. What it makes present is its own nonbeing (its being a mere reflec-

tion), so that one can say that the presentation is such that it insists on something very different from what has been created (we are reminded of Schlegel's use of the symbol). For in its self-annihilation the creation is never what it is. In fact, it never simply is, and hence—here is the point—one needs to speak of the work of art in terms of appearance. It belongs, indeed, to the essence of artistic presentation that it dissolves in its self-positing, so that its reality (the work of art) is always preliminary (*vorläufig*, a *Tendenz*) and never more than a simulacrum. That Schlegel's work of art approximates or mimicks what it presents but never coincides with it implies that, in the same breath, Schlegel's art is and insists that it is not. For romantic art is only in this self-negating revelation of its appearance. Only by critically referring to itself as unreal does the work affirm its "true" nature: that it is mere *Schein* or *Einbildung*. Criticism is just this power of artistic production to offer a vision of truth—a very ironic truth which Schlegel calls *Witz*—in a continual confrontation with its own *Darstellung*. Or as the *Gespräch über die Poesie* puts it: the theory of the novel is itself a novel "der jeden ewigen Ton der Fantasie fantastisch wiedergäbe, und das chaos der Ritterwelt noch einmal verwirrte"¹⁷ [which would reflect imaginatively every eternal tone of the imagination and would again confound the chaos of the world of the knights¹⁸].

This moment of critical self-destruction within art is what Schlegel occasionally defines as the sublime. Although the sublime in Schlegel's theory does not hold the special status that it does in Kant—or at least not in the post-Lyotardian, present-day Kant—it is important enough, and indeed recurs often enough, to merit careful consideration. A brief recapitulation of Kant's reflections on the sublime will serve as a model against which to read Schlegel's personal revision of the concept.

TWO



A HISTORY OF THE SUBLIME

As is well known, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is based on the distinction between the aesthetic feelings of the beautiful and those of the sublime. Whereas the experience of beauty is associated with the experience of form and harmony within the subject, the sublime is connected with what is formless. In the aesthetic judgment of beauty, there is a free accord between imagination and understanding based on the objective form of nature. One finds an object of nature (its form) beautiful when a contingent accord takes place between the purposelessness of nature and the free harmony between the faculties. In the judgment of beauty, the imagination—instigated by the purposive freedom of nature—freely produces indeterminate forms that, although not yet bound by the laws of the understanding (concepts), are limited by the subject's assumption of common sense: the idea that our feelings of beauty are universal. The assumption of the communicability of such a thing as beauty is what freely brings imagination into harmony with understanding.

In the feelings of the sublime, by contrast, the imagination is faced with what is formless in nature and, confronted with its own limits, goes beyond itself, thereby bringing about an accord with reason. In the face of overwhelming depths, immeasurable heights, and violent thunderstorms, Kant says, the mind is overpowered with a sense of its own inability to grasp the totality of the scene in one moment of perception, in one form. We are made aware of our

incapacity to gather, let alone understand, the magnitude and the power of what we see. This defeat of the imagination (the faculty responsible for synthesizing the manifold impressions into one image) fills us with feelings of pain and fear. At the same time, however, we realize that although nature appears to us as threatening, there remains a comfortable distance between ourselves and the immense object. The secure position we occupy in front of such a vastness or even destructiveness fills us with confidence, with a sense of our own superiority, and hence with feelings of delight. What was first perceived as the threatening grandeur of nature now becomes a sign of the infinity of human reason. In other words, the sublime is a feeling with a double face: upon contemplating what exceeds the human imagination we are filled with fear; at the same time this sense of limitation awakens us to the awareness that there is a force inside us that does not let itself be subdued by nature. This is the force of moral reason, filling us with moral joy.

The Kantian sublime concerns the conflict between man and nature insofar as this takes place inside the subject, namely, between the faculties of reason and imagination. In the defeat of the imagination reason forms its ideas of totality and infinity. It is clear that Kant's theory of the sublime is based on that profound dualism that Schlegel aimed to overcome: here the natural, physical self is threatened by an immense object, only to evoke an awareness of the unfathomable depth of the supersensible, the moral, and eternal within the self. The feeling of the sublime in the end affirms—in true Kantian spirit—the victory of reason over the senses.

Kant's *Third Critique* takes it upon itself to think the realm of the aesthetic as the site where nature and freedom paradoxically unite. Ironically, the sublime as the feeling in which this synthesis directly takes place (in the feelings of beauty it occurs by way of the forms of nature) is also the place where the imagination yields its freedom to the moral laws of reason. How aesthetic can this moral feeling of freedom be? Doesn't Kant, in the end, sacrifice his aesthetic feelings for the sake of an ethical idea? It is not in his analysis of the sublime but in his definition of genius that the philosopher seems to find a more aesthetic harmony between nature and spirit.¹ Genius, defined as the innate disposition of the mind through which nature gives art its synthetic rules, is the capacity to recreate nature in such a way that its distortions become expressive of the aesthetic idea. The latter seems to be the sensuous counterpart to the idea of reason: whereas the ideas of reason defy sensuous presentation (as in the sublime), the aesthetic idea involves a

sensuous presentation that gives the mind too much to think: now it is the understanding (and even reason?) that is made to face its limits. In the latter case, the freedom of the imagination is no longer bound by the assumption of common sense (as in the beautiful), nor by a rigid moral law (as in the sublime), but by the laws of creativity itself. It is this recuperation of transgression as intrinsic to the subject's productivity (Genius) itself, that will become the romantic way of conceiving a more positive sublime.

It is undoubtedly because Schlegel, in contrast to Kant, never developed a clear-cut view on the relation between the beautiful and the sublime that Schlegel critics have been particularly silent on the matter. In fact, as Dietrich Mathy—one of the few critics to give this subject some serious thought—has convincingly argued,² in Schlegel's aesthetic philosophy, the sublime and the beautiful are qualitatively indifferent. In contrast to Kant, for whom the negative sublime exists in an opposition to the beautiful, Schlegel views it as a negative phase immanent in the self-transcendence of the beautiful. The clearest statement on this matter comes from *AF* 108: "Schön ist, was zugleich reizend und erhaben ist"³ [Beautiful is what is at once charming and sublime⁴].

Both negative and positive, the sublime in Schlegel's *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie* is identified as *erhabne Schönheit*, filling the audience with complete joy, and *erhabne Häßlichkeit*, producing effects of despair, pain, and indignation. Hence, also, Schlegel's insistence that the intensity of sublime ugliness depends on the degree of anticipated beauty that it negates: "Die notwendige Bedingung des Häßlichen ist eine *getäuschte* Erwartung, ein erregtes und dann beleidigtes Verlangen"⁵ [The necessary condition of ugliness is a *deceived* expectation, an aroused and then offended longing (my translation, my emphasis)]. When a few lines later Schlegel calls sublime ugliness a deception (*Täuschung*), its disharmony a mere *Schein*, he means nothing less than the fact that to the extent that disorder can only be perceived in relation to the unity that it disrupts, ugliness as such does not exist. In contrast to Kant, for whom the sublime is a negative sensation of the (idea of the) absolutely great, Schlegel emphasizes that there is no negativity without a positive force to produce it. Furthermore, the latter insists, the absolute is by no means a universal concept beyond which nothing can be conceived. Rather than being an absolute maximum, the sublime points up the necessary incompleteness (perfectibility) of such an idea. Schlegel calls it a relative maximum, the highest point of beauty one can reach at a particu-

lar moment in time. This idea of the sublime as the perfectibility or incompleteness of beauty explains why, in fact, Schlegel prefers talking about it in terms of ugliness: *das Häßliche* is the sublime conceived as the negative of *beauty*. Bosanquet hints at the importance of Schlegel in this respect and identifies the German philosopher as the first to make mention of a "theory of ugliness" that seems at first not simply reducible to a theory of the beautiful but, in the end, turns out to be co-ordinate to it.⁶

The passage Bosanquet has in mind comes from *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*, section 5, in which Schlegel defends the seeming incoherence and lack of taste in Greek tragedy and comedy (Aristophanes) against the narrow conception of aesthetic beauty of his contemporaries. In opposition to the prudish view of eighteenth-century art criticism, and in order to understand Greek literature on its own terms, Schlegel extends the concept of the beautiful to include the sublime. Against the beautiful in its limited sense—concerned with the limited unity of a limited multiplicity—he posits the idea of the sublime appearance of infinite fullness and harmony, characterized by endless lack (*Mangel*) and disharmony. Now what else is this chaos that Schlegel recognizes in Greek drama if not the dissolution of classical beauty at the very peak of antiquity? Or, to use Schlegel's own oppositional terms: what is the sublime ugliness of Greek drama if not the self-transgression of "objective" (natural) unity into a "subjective" (artificial) particularity. Rather than negatively presenting a (Greek) universal ideal, the sublime in Schlegel is historicized (it presents a historical ideal) and made relative to the subjective disposition of the person experiencing it, "denn es gibt für jede individuelle Empfänglichkeit eine bestimmte Gränze des Ekels, der Pein, der Verzweiflung, jenseits welcher die Besonnenheit aufhören würde" [since every individual receptiveness has a certain limit of repulsion, of pain, of despair, where level-headedness would come to an end (my translation)]. With this emphasis on the receptive powers (*Empfänglichkeit*) of the subject, Schlegel disconnects the operation of the sublime from the productive powers of the Greek artist to relate it to the presence of a perhaps more prudish audience. Equally, the disharmony that was first recognized as part of *objective nature* poetry now becomes relative to the *human nature* receiving it. By thus contextualizing the production of Greek art, the romantic philosopher accomplishes two things: he draws out the historical limits of what the Greeks achieved and he assigns to the category of the sublime the task of designating these borders of the classical, natural ideal of beauty, while heralding the arrival of its

other—modern literature. In fact, one could go as far as saying that the sublime here points to the presence of the “modern” receiver—let’s call him Schlegel for the time being—at the end of the natural cycles of birth and death along which Greek poetry evolves.⁸ With this move from artist to reader—from text to context—as well as from the classics to the romantics, we have historicized the sublime, which now is made to present the sensuous perfection of the Greeks as radiant with a more than universal power, namely, a historical one.

As a conditioned maximum, Schlegel’s sublime is different from the Kantian experience of a transcendental conflict between the faculties of reason and imagination. For Schlegel, the sublime is inherent in art, which is not, as for Kant, an imitation of the purposelessness of nature—a universal ideal which the Greeks finalized—but an incomplete creation by a subject limited by its very interests in nature. This subjective appropriation of natural beauty implies a fragmentation of its ideal. What is important is that the conflict between the subjective and the objective thus generated cannot be interpreted simply as the negative manifestation of an unattainable idea but also as a positive, individual—and I will argue, self-critical—appropriation of that ideal. Whereas in Kant the feelings of the sublime result from the blockage or self-violation of the imagination in the face of the laws of reason (freedom) *exterior to it*, Schlegel’s sublime denotes the excessive freedom of the imagination transgressing its own lawfulness and harmony to a point of perversion or self-parody. In the words of Bosanquet: “The positive negation will be, so we should say, in some degree a confusion—a parody or perversion of the type of beauty to which it is correlative.”⁹

One of those moments in which beauty perverts itself, thereby signalling the historicity of its achievement, is the birth of Greek comedy. In his essay “Epochen der Dichtkunst” Schlegel embeds the arrival of Attic comedy in the development of Greek poetry: from its origins in the Homeric epic and its ironic counterpart—the iambic poetry of the Ionians—via the lyric, and Sophocles’s harmonious tragedy, to its fulfillment in Aristophanes:

Stoff und Urbilder fanden die Stifter der tragischen Kunst im Epos, und wie dieses aus sich selbst die Parodie entwickelte, so spielten dieselben Meister, welche die Tragödie erfanden, in Erfindung satyrischer Dramen. Zugleich mit der Plastik entstand die neue Gattung, ihr ähnlich in der Kraft der Bildung

und im Gesetz des Gliederbaus. Aus der Verbindung der Parodie mit den alten Jamben und als Gegensatz der Tragödie entsprang die Komödie, voll der höchsten Mimik die nur in Worten möglich ist. Wie dort Handlungen und Begebenheiten, Eigentümlichkeit und Leidenschaft, aus der gegebenen Sage zu einem schönen System harmonisch geordnet und gebildet wurden, so ward hier eine verschwenderische Fülle von Erfindung als Rhapsodie kühn hingeworfen, mit tiefem Verstand im scheinbaren Unzusammenhang. Beide Arten des attischen Drama griffen aufs wirksamste ins Leben ein, durch ihre Beziehung auf das Ideal der beiden großen Formen, in denen das höchste und einzige Leben, das Leben des Menschen unter Menschen erscheint.¹⁰

[The founders of the art of tragedy found their material and their prototypes in the epic. Just as the epic developed parody within itself, so did the same masters who invented tragedy delight in the invention of satirical plays. Simultaneously with sculpture, there originated a new genre similar to it in the power of form and the laws of structure. From the union of parody and the old iambic poetry there arose, in contrast to tragedy, comedy, which abounds in the highest kind of mimicry that is possible only in words. Whereas in tragedy actions and events, characteristic features, and passion were harmoniously ordered and formed out of a given legend into a beautiful system; here, a lavish abundance of ingenuity was boldly cast as a rhapsody, with deep understanding in seeming incoherence. Both kinds of Attic drama intruded most effectively into life through their relationship to the ideal of both great forms, in which the highest and only life appears, the life of man among men.¹¹]

What is so unique about Greek comedy, what makes it sublime in the sense that the *Studium* essay attributed to it, is the seeming incoherence, the abundance of ingenuity, and the excess of mimicry (play of masks) with which the highest form of life—that of man among men—is dramatized. Where tragedy brings “drama and life” (the words are Joyce’s) together in a harmonious fashion, comedy portrays human relationships with a taste for the inadequacy of content and form, reality and fantasy, life and art, text and context. Closely related to this intimation of conflict between the artificial (the masks) and the real (everyday life) is the rise of comedy out of

the primordial antithesis between the natural, Homeric epic and its artificial, iambic counterpart. Schlegel's history of Greek literature is such that its "natural" development could be said to generate its own (artificial) self-parody, which runs from the iambic poem, via the choral song, to Attic tragedy (uniting both the iamb and the chorus) and comedy (where the chorus performs, as we will see, the famous Schlegelian parabasis). The high point of this ironic disjunction between the natural and the artificial in Aristophanes's work also characterizes the end of Greek literature and the beginning of the Roman satire.

That the Roman satire is the only genre with which, according to Schlegel, the Latin poets managed to enrich the realm of art is due to its furtherance of Greek comedy through an evocation of discordant elements, such as poetry and urbanity, fantasy and social reality, wit and seriousness. Saturated with (the Latin *satura* means "medley") colliding dictions of the high and the low, the poetic and prosaic, Roman satire increases the sublime disharmony first introduced by Attic comedy.

From Horatius onward European literature increasingly assimilates what is different—the "charming fairy tales of the Orient" for instance—until in the Middle Ages "modern" literature finds its first dignified expression in the religious, but vernacular, poetry of Dante. Combining vision and realistic detail, mysticism and earthly love, Christianity and antiquity, Dante stands at the beginning of a literary tradition that becomes increasingly formless as it unites different genres and styles in its linear progression. A parody of the abundance of nature, modern art could be said to be as natural as it is artificial, as unifying as it is disjunctive. The development of modern literature as Schlegel describes it in his early essays on Greek art stages the uncontainable growth of the sublime perversion that he first recognizes in Greek comedy. This autonomous, contaminating force, presenting the absolute freedom of the imagination to incorporate its own historical context, threatens the beauty of what it brings forth—Dante degenerates into Ariosto's grotesque—until in the art of the Renaissance beauty and ugliness become inseparable: here the peak of modern art—also the death of classical beauty—takes place in a return to antiquity. Prime examples of this untenable unity between the classical and the modern are, of course, Cervantes and Shakespeare. Their works give expression to that subversive, chaotic power which doubles the reality of what is created into a sublime appearance, a fragment indeed, of the infinite fullness of life: the life of man among men. If

Cervantes holds a special place in Schlegel's aesthetics it is because he is the first to translate his comic precursors into a full-length novel (*Don Quixote*)—a novel, moreover, the second part of which constitutes a critical judgment of the humorous events in the first part. This kind of fusion between the comic and the serious leads us directly to Cervantes's dramatic counterpart, Shakespeare. As Schlegel's *Studium* essay explains, Shakespeare's tragicomic "modernization" of classical drama breaks with the harmonious totality of Greek tragedy by staging its a priori, abstract conflict between the hero and his destiny as a personal struggle inside the protagonist: with Joyce's words in mind, drama becomes an "interplay of passions to portray truth" between or within common men:

Überhaupt ist in Shakespeares Dramen der Zusammenhang selbst zwar so einfach und klar, daß er offen und unbefangenen Sinnen sichtbar und von selbst einleuchtet. Der Grund des Zusammenhanges aber liegt oft so tief verborgen, die unsichtbaren Bande, die Beziehungen sind so fein, daß auch die scharfsinnigste kritische Analyse mißglücken muß, wenn es an Takt fehlt, wenn man falsche Erwartungen mitbringt, oder von irrigen Grundsätzen ausgeht. Im HAMLET entwickeln sich alle einzelnen Teile notwendig aus einem gemeinschaftlichen Mittelpunkt, und wirken wiederum auf ihn zurück. Nichts ist fremd, überflüssig, oder zufällig in diesem Meisterstück künstlerischer Weisheit. Der Mittelpunkt des Ganzen liegt im Charakter des Helden. Durch eine wunderbare Situation wird alle Stärke seiner edeln Natur in den Verstand zusammengedrängt, die tätige Kraft aber ganz vernichtet . . . Es gibt vielleicht keine vollkommnere Darstellung der unauflöslichen Disharmonie, welche der eigentliche Gegenstand der philosophischen Tragödie ist, als ein so gränzenloses Mißverhältnis der denkenden und der tätigen Kraft, wie in Hamlets Charakter. Der Totaleindruck dieser Tragödie ist ein *Maximum der Verzweiflung*. Alle Eindrücke, welche einzeln groß und wichtig schienen, verschwinden als trivial vor dem, was hier als das letzte, einzige Resultat alles Seins und Denkens erscheint; vor der ewigen *Kolossalen Dissonanz*, welche die Menschheit und das Schicksal unendlich trennt.¹²

[In Shakespeare's plays, the correlation is altogether so simple and evident that it is immediately and automatically clear to

any open and unbiased mind. The foundation of that correlation, however, is often hidden so deep, the invisible ties, the relationships are so subtle that even the most shrewd critical analysis cannot but fail when it shows lack of tact, when it starts from false expectations or from fallacious principles. In *HAMLET*, all parts necessarily develop from and, conversely, react on one common center. Nothing is out of place, superfluous, or accidental in this masterpiece of artistic wisdom. Its center is in the hero's character. Owing to some curious situation, the strength of his noble character is concentrated in his mind, whereas his power to act is completely paralyzed ... Such a boundless discrepancy between reflection and deed as portrayed in Hamlet's character may be the most perfect representation of the insoluble disharmony that is the true subject of philosophical tragedy. The overall impression of this tragedy is a *maximum of despair*. Every single impression, which in itself seemed great and important, shrinks into insignificance when compared to what emerges here as the ultimate and only result of all existence and thought, the eternal *colossal dissonance*, endlessly dividing humanity and fate. (My translation)

The confusion that emerges from *Hamlet* is instigated by the gap between the whole of the work and the individual character in which the totality finds its concrete, fragmentary form—a discrepancy that is simultaneously overcome and intensified in Hamlet's interior struggle between theory (reflection) and practice (deed). It is this "interest" in the reality, or individuality, of the work—this typically modern drive toward the subjective and the particular putting an end to the Kantian disinterested pleasure of beauty—that is responsible for the total loss of Greek unity (beauty) and the concomitant yearning for that lost ideal on the part of Shakespeare's characters. In modern drama, then, the hero's strife embodies the "colossal dissonance" between the real and the ideal, necessity and freedom, which in Greek times was supposed to be timeless.¹³ Only in comedy did this dissonance find a particular outlet. With this transition from antiquity to the Renaissance the conflict that was so far the domain of comedy becomes an integrative part of tragedy, which Schlegel redefines as "philosophical tragedy": the contemplative enactment of the abyss.

From Shakespeare onward, modern literature runs the risk of developing into two extremes—into an art form concerned only

with the beauty of its exterior form (the particular) or, alternatively, into a philosophy about lost aesthetic ideals (the universal). Hence, it is, according to Schlegel, the task of romanticism to contain this double threat to art by overcoming its schism in a third phase in which the disjunction between the particular and the universal—that eternal “colossal dissonance”—becomes the inexhaustible source of an art form that is as unifying as it is disjunctive. The distance of this ideal is what has driven Schlegel’s own literary writings into a continuing, theoretical digression on the need for a new genre that will combine the “intrusion into life” characteristic of modern drama with a philosophical view of the whole. He claimed to find that genre in the romantic novel and wrote *Lucinde*.

It will be clear that Schlegel’s essentially “modern” category of the sublime is closely linked to a deeply historical understanding of literature. His recovery of ugliness at the heart of classical beauty identifies that moment in literary history when a critical awareness of the inadequacy between content and form, life and art, was first—unknowingly—articulated. This anti-mimetic rupture at the very core of Greek *adaequatio* sets into motion an alternative development in which the *natural* growth of art, by transgressing its own laws of beauty, is seen to embrace the plurality or fullness, rather than simply the unity, of nature. From this perspective, the sublime unleashes a creative, particularizing, *historical* power that no artistic form can contain. While in Greek art this (at that time still natural) self-transgression coincides with the emergence of a multiplicity of genres—comic drama staging the dissolution of epic, lyric, and tragic poetry—in modern art, it leads to the (by then subjective) dramatization of finitude by means of “philosophical tragedy,” until in romanticism the *knowledge*, or idea, of this self-transgressive power paves the way for a future reunification of all genres in what the young Joyce would later call “[t]he great human comedy in which each has share, giv[ing] limitless scope to the true artist, to-day as yesterday and as in years gone.”¹⁴

Undoubtedly, Schlegel’s interest in the ugly and the comic was articulated in response to the emerging “realist” concern of his contemporaries, concern that had found its first significant expression in the rise of the eighteenth-century novel. His own reflections on the novel as the genre of all genres in which the becoming of art as such finds a suitable—albeit fragmentary—form leaves little doubt about Schlegel’s indebtedness to Sterne, Fielding, and, to a lesser extent, Richardson. But the connection between comedy and

realism runs deeper than the fascination with the contemporary and the banal expressed by the early, realist novel. In fact, in Schlegel's view, the eighteenth-century novel fails to translate into prose what Greek comedy accomplished on stage: to make of art the expression of nature's abundant powers, that is, ultimately the life of man among men. His own novel *Lucinde* was to artfully order the chaos of surrounding nature as Aristophanes's vital comedies had done many centuries before: "Sollte es nicht ein Dichtungswerk geben können das zugleich Roman und classische Komödie wäre . . ." ¹⁵ [Should it not be possible to conceive a poetic work that is at once a novel and a classical comedy . . . (my translation)]. Or again, "Jedes Gedicht, jeder Roman soll eine festliche Verschwendung sein, eine aristoph[anische] Komödie und ein Glücksspiel wie Trag[ödie]" ¹⁶ [Every poem, every novel should be a festive extravagance, an Aristoph(anic) comedy, and a game of chance like trag(edy) (my translation)].

In his essay "Vom ästhetischen Werte der griechischen Komödie," ¹⁷ Schlegel traces the origins of Aristophanes's comedy back to the "holy joy" that the Greeks experienced in their celebration of Dionysus (God of drama and wine) or that the Romans felt during their Saturnalia, the feasts in honor of the God of agriculture (Saturn). These religious rituals, characterized as they were by a mixture of the high and the low, demonstrate joy to be the highest, natural power of mankind. A limitless expression of the abundance of nature, joy transcends the boundaries among individuals and unites them at the highest point of their vital powers. Love is what Schlegel calls this religious loss—or doubling—of self in absolute pleasure, while the mode of expression most suitable to it he recognizes in the all-encompassing depths of the lyric:

Eine bloße Äußerung des Gefühls, die lyrische Darstellung der Freude, kommt nicht so leicht in Gefahr, ihre äußere Freiheit zu verlieren,—desto mehr die dramatische. Sie nimmt den Stoff zu ihren Schöpfungen aus der Wirklichkeit, ihre Bestimmung ist eine öffentliche laute Darstellung des Lächerlichen, und ihre Freiheit ist dem Laster, der Torheit, dem geheiligten Irrtume fürchterlich. Aber eben dadurch wird sie einer neuen hohen Bedeutung, einer neuen Schönheit fähig; wenn die Freude, wo wir Schranken erwarteten, uns mit Freiheit überrascht, so wird sie das schönste Symbol der bürgerlichen Freiheit. ¹⁸

[A mere expression of feeling, the poetic representation of joy does not so easily run the risk of losing its external freedom,—this applies even more to dramatic representation. The subject matter of its creations is taken from reality, its purpose is a public, loud representation of ridiculous situations, and its freedom has no mercy on vice, folly, and hallowed error. But that is the very reason why it becomes capable of transmitting new meaning, a new beauty; when joy surprises us with freedom instead of restriction, it becomes the greatest symbol of civil freedom. (My translation)]

Since the freedom of the lyric is inwardly oriented, since it is produced by a subject that under the aegis of its sentiments incorporates everything beyond itself, the joy inherent in it is unifying and hence harmonious and beautiful. Drama, on the contrary, is less an expression of subjective feelings than it is an imitation (*Nachahmung*) of the real. Here, the artistic freedom of the subject is limited by an external power—that of reality—which the dramatic form never ceases to face. Thus caught in a perpetual strife between the freedom of fantasy and the demand for realism, drama takes the freedom of the artist less for granted and, in fact, lays bare before us the incongruity of artistic representation. It is this inner conflict at the heart of drama that threatens the art form with extinction. At the same time, however, the very fact that drama is able to affirm itself over and against its destructive forces adds to its creativity a sense of exuberance that reduces all traces of negativity to a harmless illusion. Precisely here, in this re-affirmation of subjective freedom, lie the roots not only of drama's democratic power (Attic comedy was written at the time of Athenian democracy) but also of its comic force: "Fast alles Komische beruht auf dem Schein von Selbstvernichtung"¹⁹ [Nearly everything comic is based on the illusion of self-destruction (my translation)]. In laughter the exterior and destructive limits to freedom—as well as the irruption of ugliness and evil accompanying them—are demolished, the dissonance reduced to a mere illusion. In it the conflict between art and reality is stripped of its impact and recuperated as part of the play. Through this process of ironization ugliness loses its purely negative function and becomes the condition under which a *playful* contact with reality—and hence drama itself—is possible. "Familiarization" is what Bakhtin calls this humorous simultaneity of distance and closeness in his essay "Epic and Novel."²⁰ In Schlegel's terms, the real is made unreal so that the