



## Analysing European Romanticism

### *Urbanity and romantic irony*

Complementing the strong sense of mission, which was the cement of the first Romantic circle, there was an equally strong and opposite spirit of urbanity which defused conflict in typically Romantic, self deprecating humour and irony. This is clearly exemplified not only in their personal relations but also in their writing strategies. One of their favourite modes of expression was the collection of aphorisms or, as the Romantics prefer to call them, fragments. Against the background of Romantic philosophical and aesthetic convictions no text could ever aspire to the status of rounded and finished whole. To avoid any semblance of this, Romantics cultivated irony so intensively that they were able to claim their own variant of this rhetorical figure. Normal or classical irony signals that some passage in a text merely means the opposite of what it appears to say. Romantic irony is much more radical. It undermines any impression that an entire text might be definitive with a panoply of self reflexive devices. Hence every Romantic utterance, even if it claims as a personal revelation to be the continuation of the Bible no less, always underlines its artificiality and provisional semantic status. No matter how long, every Romantic text is intrinsically a fragment which hints at what the impossible rounded whole would have been, but never could be. This, then, is why the early Romantics were particularly attached to collections of aphorisms or short fragments. These, unlike an essay or a treatise, or any other one-dimensional text, often bring together contradictory standpoints, often flowing from the pen of more than one author, designed to stir the reader's own latent creativity, to provoke the reader's own attempt at synthesis. Schleiermacher, Novalis, Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, and others, all combined to produce the so-called Athenaeum Fragments, the signature collection of fragments in the first Romantic manifesto of 1798. This sense of the intrinsic limitations of any text also underlies the early Romantic love of criticism. Romantic texts may be by definition unclosed but that does not mean they cannot be continued with prophet/profit(?) by someone else, namely the productive reader or critic. The true reader must be the author expanded, insisted Novalis. Romantics thought of the fundamental structure of all language as communicative, as an unending dialogue in which all texts, no matter how successful, and even if they're by Homer, Shakespeare or Goethe, are intrinsically involved. This is why they valued criticism far more highly than any other previous literary or intellectual movement. They valued it as a dialogue with a literary text. Friedrich Schlegel was the arch critic of early Romanticism. He'd read the Enlightenment classical philologist, Friedrich August Wolf, and was fascinated by the discovery that the greatest literary texts of classical antiquity, Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, had actually been written by a collective, and a collective moreover, which not only consisted of poets in the narrow sense, but also included critics. The critics' reflection on the evolving text, he learned, had helped to improve it, had led it towards the literary perfection it was generally held by Schlegel's age to exhibit. Just as the Greek critics perfected the Homer so Schlegel, seeing himself as their modern equivalent, applied himself to the task of reflecting on, and perfecting, the greatest epic narrative of modern Germany, Goethe's novel, Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship. He impishly called his own equally masterly critique, Wilhelm Meister Squared or The Übermeister. But this was only the tip of the iceberg of the Romantic practice of collective authorship and collective critique. Novalis's notebooks seemed variably take the form of an unending self dialogue. He would send all of his writings to his French legal for editing and improving in this sense, and almost nothing by his hand appeared in his lifetime which had not first been modified by Schlegel. In his own most developed metaphorical formulations Novalis thought of this process of critical co-authorship as mutual fertilisation, as literary seeding, grafting, pollination. This dual literary practice, thus, on the one hand recognised the inevitability of fragmentation through irony, and on the other hand combated fragmentation from mutual critique, all in the cause of the unending pursuit of wholeness. And this is also expressed in the way the Romantics lived their lives. Seeing themselves as an avant-garde missionary elite, possessed of a vision of the future not shared by the common run of folk just yet, they fostered this self consciousness

with frequent meetings of the collective. These included a famous symposium-like meeting at Dresden in 1798 which included extended study of the visionary art treasures in the gallery there. These meetings, in which the limitations of the individual are overcome in the organic unity of the whole, were the first practical realisations of the Romantic idea of mutual complementarity. Another example of this is the Romantics' notion of marriage. Romantics rejected the legalistic Enlightenment notion of marriage as a ceremony performed by a priest contractually linking a man and a woman in economic and reproductive partnership. For them marriage was the emotional and intellectual fusion of two pre-destined personalities in which each partner self consciously took on the gender characteristics of the other, so far as this is possible. This androgynous complementarity of the sexes, which incidentally extended to recognising the woman's rights as an author, they regarded as a unity greater than the sum of its constituent gender parts, a truly humane being, the image of human perfection seemingly promised in Plato's Symposium and in the first book of Genesis, a full redemption of our divided and fallen humanity. This, and a Romantic fondness for socialising in the literary salon of the age, are their concrete anticipations of the Utopian social future.