

L I L I A N R. F U R S T

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FICTIONS OF  
ROMANTIC IRONY  
IN EUROPEAN  
NARRATIVE,  
1760 - 1857



JANE AUSTEN, FLAUBERT,  
BYRON, JEAN PAUL, DIDEROT,  
— STERNE —

FICTIONS OF ROMANTIC IRONY  
IN EUROPEAN NARRATIVE, 1760-1857

*By the same author*

ROMANTICISM IN PERSPECTIVE

ROMANTICISM

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ROMANTIC IRONY  
IN EUROPEAN  
NARRATIVE, 1760–1857

Lilian R. Furst

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‘Mit der Ironie ist durchaus nicht zu scherzen’  
Friedrich Schlegel  
(‘Irony is certainly no matter for jest’)

‘Irony is a disciplinarian feared only by those  
who do not know it, but cherished by those who do.’  
Søren Kierkegaard

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# Preface

This book has grown out of an essay I was asked to contribute to a volume on romantic irony. In the course of writing the piece that has since appeared under the title 'Romantic Irony and Narrative Stance',<sup>1</sup> I became so aware of both the ramifications and the intrinsic importance of the topic that I eventually decided to develop my work into a more extensive study in which the questions raised by my initial research could be more fully pursued.

The questions are as intriguing as the complexities of the subject are daunting. How is romantic irony to be defined? Who coined and popularised the term itself? How valid is the common assumption that romantic irony began during the Romantic period and that Friedrich Schlegel was its 'father'?<sup>2</sup> What about its earlier manifestations in the novels of Cervantes, Sterne and Diderot, which Schlegel himself recognised as models? What is specifically romantic about this type of irony? Where does its centre of gravity lie? How does it relate to the spirit of the age whose name it bears? Such questions provoke enquiries of a more fundamental nature: What is the relationship of romantic irony to traditional irony? Is romantic irony an independent, distinctive phenomenon, or is it a variant on traditional irony? Is it a generic category unto itself? If so, are its lines of demarcation primarily historical or modal? How does romantic irony fit into the larger systems of irony outlined by such critics as Northrop Frye, Douglas Muecke and Wayne Booth? These questions in turn lead to a confrontation of the basic issues of irony: What is generally meant by irony? How does it function in a literary text? What are its possibilities – and its difficulties – as a form of discourse?

This book does not purport to answer all these questions. It aims for a clearer understanding of what romantic irony denotes in theory, how it works in practice, and the extent to which

theory and practice coalesce. This entails an attempt to re-think romantic irony by envisaging the topic in a broader context, looking spatially and temporally beyond Friedrich Schlegel and German Romantic literary theory<sup>3</sup> and seeing it in its wider European setting in relation to earlier and contemporaneous thought and practice. By placing romantic irony in this perspective, the philosophical and literary factors crucial to the phenomenon can be identified, and an understanding of its workings can be evolved that does not depend solely on the Romantics' own often cryptic terminology.

My primary focus is on the correlation between traditional and romantic irony. For if the term 'romantic irony' is to have any signification and usefulness in literary analysis and history, its interface with normative notions of irony must be explored. I am therefore examining the distinctions between traditional and romantic irony in both the concepts advanced by the thinkers and the practices adopted by leading fiction writers between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth century. The parameters of my study are determined by the subject itself. The mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century is the period when irony became a vital concern for philosophers and also a central force in fiction. The narrative genre is chosen for the equally obvious reason that it was the main arena for the exercise of irony. *Tristram Shandy* (1760–7) is a natural starting date in so far as its innovative manipulation of irony marks an important point in the florescence of the European novel. The other works were selected because irony is crucial to the theme and mode of each. Jane Austen, Flaubert, Byron, Jean Paul and Diderot are, alongside Sterne, acknowledged as major ironists of the period, though others could well have been included. But my aim is not comprehensiveness for I am not writing a history of irony in the century after 1760. I am trying, rather, to elucidate a problem: the denotation of 'romantic irony'. For this reason a more traditional ironist such as Austen had to be considered as well as the experimenters, Sterne, Diderot and Jean Paul. For this reason also the arrangement of the works deliberately departs from the chronological sequence in favour of an order that more clearly reveals the distinction between traditional and romantic irony. It is the inner evolution of modes of irony that I want to trace, not the outer threads of literary history. And just as I have resisted a purely historical framework, so I have eschewed an

overly systematic pattern lest the desire to fit individual works into a preordained schema foster distorted or biased readings. I have followed the demands of the subject by fusing the diachronic with the synchronic. My approach is predominantly pragmatic and inductive in attempting to deduce a prescriptive theory from a descriptive analysis of the concepts and, above all, the practices of irony.

It is a pleasure to express my gratitude to the institutions and the people who have actively helped this book along. The Stanford Humanities Center under the sagacious direction of Ian Watt provided the ideal balance of tranquillity and stimulation in which to complete and revise the manuscript. The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation bestowed the precious gift of free time. The University of Texas at Dallas gave me a grant from its organised research funds. I am greatly indebted to the curiosity of the many patient listeners I have had in the years that I have travelled with my lectures and my anxieties about irony. Among them five have been particularly instrumental in shaping this book: Martha Satz in Dallas, who first realised the potential of the topic; Hans Eichner in Toronto, who gave me decisive encouragement through his enthusiasm at its genesis, who continued to help me with suggestions and expert advice, and who checked my foolhardiness through his cautious objections; the late Eugène Vinaver in Canterbury, who extended to me, as ever, reassurance and understanding, and who so generously let me share his vast insights into literature; Walter Strauss in Cleveland, a brilliant and benevolent devil's advocate, whose probing clarified my ideas and whose confidence in the project sustained me through fits of doubt; and Anne Hendren in California, who led me towards the discovery of the title. Finally, my gratitude, as always, to my father for the invariable good humour with which he bears my exasperation at myself, for his sanguine common sense, and for his original and comforting comparison of the writing of a book to the process of distilling from wagonloads of pitch a microquantity of uranium.

*Stanford*

L. F.

# 1 Beware of Irony

‘Irony is a sharp instrument; but ill  
to handle without cutting *yourself!*’

Thomas Carlyle, letter to  
John Stuart Mill, 24 September 1833.

## 1

‘Irony’, Lionel Trilling tells us, ‘is one of those words, like love, which are best not talked about if they are to retain any force of meaning.’<sup>1</sup> This is typical of the warnings issued to those approaching irony. Often the caveats resort to the imagery of dangerous ground, pitfalls and fogs, evoking the picture of an unwary pilgrim’s progress. Yet the term has become one of the key concepts of contemporary critical vocabulary, as necessary to the discussion of literature as love is to the maintenance of life. Despite Trilling’s and similar warnings, we must come to grips with irony, and with romantic irony too, if we are to understand modern literature.

Before venturing into the thickets of romantic irony, we need to look into the general problems of irony, to ask why in fact it poses such severe problems. Several extensive, illuminating studies of irony have appeared in recent years, notably D. C. Muecke’s *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969) and Wayne C. Booth’s *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974). The purpose of this chapter therefore is merely to map the terrain and to identify the pitfalls.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives three principal meanings for ‘irony’: first, ‘a figure of speech, in which the intended meaning is the opposite to that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt’; second, figuratively,