Warning Concerning Copyright Restrictions

The Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted materials. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If electronic transmission of reserve material is used for purposes in excess of what constitutes "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.
The Story of the Compromised Author: Parabasis in Friedrich Schlegel and Denis Diderot

STEPHEN MAUTNER

Friedrich Schlegel’s “Über die Unverständlichkeit” is characterized by a return to the problems elicited by his earlier fragments. It is an essay that addresses a readership already familiar with his work and frustrated by its incomprehensibility. In a seeming effort to dispel the confusion, Schlegel places his fragments in an explanatory context. But we soon learn that their difficulty is not explained away; they rather gain in obliqueness. This is partially due to the manner in which the few cited fragments are recalled. At least one is chosen for its tendency to incite misunderstanding, and here the author expresses dismay at the fact that the fragment was misunderstood for the wrong reasons. But what is most interesting about this citation is its strategic significance for the essay as a whole. For Schlegel sees the defense of the fragment lying in the fragment itself:

Schon hat ein scharfsinniger Kunstrichter im Berliner “Archiv der Zeit” das Athénäum gegen diese Vorwürfe freundschaftlich verteidigt, und dabei das berüchtigte Fragment von den drei Tendenzen zum Beispiel gewählt. Ein überaus glücklicher Gedanke! Gerade so müß man die Sache angreifen.¹

Later Schlegel begins his discussion of irony with two fragments about irony, but his ensuing discussion does not specifically seek to elucidate them. Instead, they commence an ironic process, an “irony of irony,” which ultimately consumes the whole essay. The essay becomes a demonstration of irony’s amazing “Nachwirkung,” and thus, more than an indulgent retrospective on the difficulties of the fragments’ critical reception, “Über die Unverständlichkeit” is an exercise in that same irony that initially caused the confusion.
Schlegel does not apologize for his fragments, nor does he explain them. They stand there defiantly, indeed serving as the armature around which his essay is molded. Schlegel's gesture of return, his attempted "engagement" with the readership, must be viewed ironically. The occasion for a discussion about incomprehensibility allows Schlegel to make room for still more bewilderment.

Perhaps one way to come to terms with this ironic effect is to look more closely at the pretense for the writing of "Über die Unverständlichkeit." Schlegel states that he wishes to enter into a dialogue with his readers. One imagines, then, that this must involve a breaking down of the preestablished boundaries separating the author from his reading public. A method by which such a task might be accomplished is ventured by Schlegel in his essay. The author is speaking about his authorship, responding to his readers' collective response. Schlegel presumes to come out from behind his fragments and show himself. We would expect the author, therefore, to mediate the space separating his "incomprehensible" fragments and his uncomprehending audience — if not to bring about understanding, then at least to demonstrate how lack of understanding is useful. But we have seen already how Schlegel's motivation to explain the fragments is compromised by the fact that he presents them as self-sufficient, and this self-sufficiency precludes any attempt at mediation.

Another difficulty in his text is the instability of the notions of author and reader. For at the same time that Schlegel devises to talk with us, he speaks about his plan to create his own ideal reader:

Daher hatte ich schon vor langer Zeit den Entschluß gefaßt, mich mit dem Leser in ein Gespräch über diese Materie zu versetzen, und vor seinen eignen Augen, gleichsam ihm ins Gesicht, einen andern neuen Leser nach meinem Sinne zu konstruiren, ja wenn ich es nöthig finden sollte, denselben sogar zu deduzieren.²

Here Schlegel's predicament is made evident. The author, faced with the incapacity of his reading public, feels compelled to threaten to create a reader of his own design. But the creation of a reader can only be still another product of authorship, a performance accomplished for the benefit of readers over which the author cannot exercise any authorial control. Schlegel envisions a situation of mastery over the entire dialectic involving author, written work, and reading public. He wishes to subsume that part of the cycle of authorship normally out of his conscious domain, i.e., the critical reception of his work, under his own written creation. But ironically this must result in a project open to an autonomous reader's inspection. It is to be enacted before our own eyes.

Schlegel's conception of a self-wrought reader taxes the limits of Fichte's idealism. For Fichte, an absolute ego generates a second order ego and a world of objects, the not-self. The ego is only conscious of itself insofar as it can be conscious of that which it is not. Therefore, consciousness on the level of absolute self is impossible. The self cannot know that the not-self is its own creation. It cannot be conscious of itself and conscious of the mechanism whereby it can be conscious of itself at the same time. Yet Schlegel seems to strive for this kind of multiple consciousness when he proposes to create for himself a reader after his own design. He momentarily rejects the notion that an author's writing only has meaning insofar as it can be understood by, or have effect on, a reader. Schlegel's reader, who necessarily constitutes the Fichtean not-self against whom Schlegel could achieve self-definition and self-consciousness, is playfully abandoned in favor of a created reader. Of course, this prospect holds drastic consequences for Schlegel's text. The activity of writing is in danger of becoming an entirely self-serving process. Language ceases to serve as a means of communication between separate consciousnesses. The motivation for Schlegel's project, to respond to an uncomprehending readership, is rendered problematic.

We learn at the outset of Schlegel's essay that the Athenäum was to serve as an experiment in communication of a special order:

Was kann wohl von allem, was sich auf die Mitteilung der Ideen bezieht, anziehender sein, als die Frage, ob sie überhaupt möglich sei; und wo hätte man nähere Gelegenheit, über die Möglichkeit oder Unmöglichkeit dieser Sache mancherlei Versuche anzustellen, als wenn man ein Journal wie das Athenäum entweder selbst schreibt, oder doch als Leser an denselben teilnimmt?³

"Über die Unverständlichkeit," on the one hand, is a response to the failure of Schlegel's experiment. It announces the experiment and addresses itself to the results. On the other hand, it continues the experiment. The ironic precariousness of Schlegel's situation becomes clear when we realize that "Über die Unverständlichkeit," while trying to address the problems of communication raised by the Athenäum fragments, is characterized by those same problems. The essay is finally looked upon by the author as nothing less than a repercussion of the contagious irony set into motion by the fragments. It marks a kind of relapse, and we are subsequently warned: "Mit der Ironic ist durchaus nicht zu scherzen. Sie Kann unangenehm lange nachwirken."⁴ It is precisely this severe oscillation between an apparent break in irony (the author steps forward to address his audience) and an apparent redoubled irony (the author...
seeks to create an ideal readership) that lends “Über die Unverständlichkeit” such a degree of dizziness. The oscillation does not result from an indecisiveness on the part of the author, but rather stems from the author’s struggle for mastery over his text. The fragments both require and defy commentary. They are cited purportedly to be clarified but then draw their context, the surrounding commentary, into their obscurity, infecting everything with their irony. Schlegel’s well-intended gesture of return proves to snare him, but he manages to communicate despite himself. His statement comes to equal his situation.

Schlegel’s coming-out as author in “Über die Unverständlichkeit” can be regarded as an instance of *parabasis*, a word that Schlegel was to use in one of his fragments on irony. Originally “parabasis” referred to the convention in ancient Greek Attic comedy when, at the play’s mid-point, the chorus would approach the audience, entolling the virtues of the playwright and commenting on the drama. This movement of parabasis is believed to have descended from the *agon*, which Cornford briefly describes as “a debate between individual representatives of two abstract principles.” The *parabasis* retains the *agon’s* rigid structure, following a “strict canonical form” which demands the chorus break into two halves that perform antiphonally. According to the particular segment of *parabasis* being performed, the players act in or out of role, while all the time addressing the audience.

One of the most remarkable features of the *parabasis* is the dropping of the cloaks, an action the chorus performs directly upon having made its approach to the audience. Cornford asserts that this moment of unmasking disrupts any pretense to dramatic illusion. He traces the gradual disappearance of the *parabasis* from Greek comedy, pointing out that it was the first formal feature of the Old Comedy to decay. This is attributable to its unworkability: “With its stiff canonical structure, it has all the air of a piece of ritual procedure awkwardly interrupting the course of the play.”

G.M. Sifakis, in his book on *parabasis*, insists, however, that no such dramatic illusion was ventured in Greek Attic Comedy. Most of the dramatized plots were commonly known. Audience and players alike sat under the same sun; thus, no separation through lighting could be effected, and the spectators were continually aware that the actor was distinct from the character he portrayed. No willing suspension of the spectator’s disbelief was called for.

The nature of the dramatic illusion operative in the ancient Greek comedy would in large part determine the effect that the *parabasis* brings about. What is important in our consideration of Schlegel, however, is the act of ritual unveiling, a stepping out of role to reveal an underlying self which comments on that role. No matter what the degree of identification that the audience assumes between the actor and his role, the dropping of the *himation* signifies a becoming other — the actor shares with the audience a moment of reflection on the drama as production and on himself as role player. “Über die Unverständlichkeit” would on first inspection strike us as being just such an instance of *parabasis* effecting in the middle of Schlegel’s fragmentary journalistic oeuvre, an oeuvre that depicts the drama of authoring and reading. Schlegel uncoils while approaching his audience, addresses the *Lyceum* and *Athenaeum* magazines as literary productions and himself as their co-author. Only Schlegel’s gesture of unmasking does not end here. “Über die Unverständlichkeit” becomes infested with irony, thus assuming a state of “permanent *parabasis*.” The self-conscious author, Friedrich Schlegel, on the subject of incomprehensibility and his fragments, becomes the product of a new and enlarged authorship. Just as the Greek actor during the *parabasis* divulgued his role as actor, but was still limited to speaking prescribed lines to an audience, Schlegel cannot avoid the scenario of an author writing for his readership. Schlegel on Schlegel, Schlegel on Schlegel on Schlegel, and so on, must still always be Schlegel.

The concept of infinite reflection is important for Schlegel’s theory of romantic poetry, which is given its most concise formulation in the 116th *Athenium* fragment:


But the tone of optimism representative of this fragment turns to wariness when Schlegel, addressing essentially the same qualities in the menacing irony of “Über die Unverständlichkeit,” is finally led to say, “Mit der Ironie ist durchaus nicht zu scherzen. Sie kann unglaublich lange nachwirken.” Schlegel’s essay hovers at the mid-point between the portrayed and the portrayer. In fact, portrayed and portrayer seem constantly in danger of collapsing into one idea. The author and his subject, his authorship, must be distinct in order for “Über die Unverständlichkeit” to stand as an essay responding to a certain situation. Irony begins when that distinctness is lost and the resolute polarities of author and subject matter are drawn together in the language of the essay. The frag-
ments exert their ironical hold over the essay as a whole and the occasion for the writing of “Über die Unverständlichkeit,” purportedly to address the fragments’ incomprehensibility, is momentarily undermined.

We can see this collapsing effect come about when Schlegel introduces the 216th Athenäum fragment into his essay. The inflammatory element in the fragment is the word “Tendenz,” and Schlegel sees fit to comment:


Here Schlegel’s role as commentator on his own work takes an ironic turn. Rather than explain the meaning of a commonly misunderstood word to the satisfaction of his readers, Schlegel misinterprets it in a way that no one else has seized upon. Rather than reduce the multiple meanings of “Tendenz” to his one “intended” meaning, Schlegel has increased its possible meanings by one. The author reads his own fragment incorrectly, as he expected his readers to have done, and then reveals himself as an experimenter, waiting to see if his readers really could have accused him of intending this meaning. This gesture discloses the peculiar nature of the relationship between Schlegel and his material. He invests the words of his fragment with the power to create unintended meanings, even through the author. For a moment, Schlegel becomes his own hypothetical reader gone astray, supplying the misinterpretation that the actual readers were unable to supply. On the other hand, we realize that the language of the fragment is carefully chosen with the idea that the readers be examined as readers. The words must have the determinacy and precision of a test question.

Schlegel, then, alternately controls and is controlled by his fragments. As experimenting author he is the “Darstellende,” seeking to prove a point by his reading audience. As misreader of his own fragment, and ultimately, as one who cannot escape his own irony (“nicht wieder aus der Ironie herauskommen kann”), he is the “Dargestellte,” the virtual subject of his essay. The language of “Über die Unverständlichkeit,” like that of romantic poetry, hovers freely on the wings of poetic reflection, midway between the presented and the representing, as well it should considering the author’s past intentions: “ich wollte zeigen, daß die Worte sich selbst oft besser verstehen, als diejenigen, von denen sie gebraucht werden. . .” 10 The collapsing of portrayed and portrayer results from the situation of permanent parabasis, in which the writer is perpetually what is written, yet remains a writer all the while.

The technique of parabasis seems also to have found its way into Schlegel’s one great novel, Lucinde:

Wenn du es mit der Wahrscheinlichkeit und durchgängigen Bedeutung, einer Allegorie nicht so gar strengennehmen und dabei so viel Ungeschicklichkeit im Erzählen erwartest, so kommt es mir, als man von den Bekentnissen eines Ungeschickten immer muß, wenn das Köstüm nicht verletzt werden soll: so möchte ich dir hier einen der letzten meiner wachsenden Träume erzählen, da er ein ähnliches Resultat gibt wie die Charakteristik der kleinen Wilhelmine. 11

Here the narrator admits, if only for an instant, that he is a persona distinct from the author. Julius becomes the creator of Julius, a broader consciousness who in being a blunderer also is aware of what goes into making one. This gesture surely has a vertiginous effect upon the reader of novels who has been led to expect an unproblematic relationship between the author, the narrator, and the story. Here the traditional hierarchy of control in the novelist’s art (i.e., the author writes the narrator who relates the story) is upset by moments of self-consciousness. The effect of parabasis in a novel is certainly different than its effect in “Über die Unverständlichkeit,” wherein the very premise for writing was an act of self-disclosure. The same conventions regarding an author’s stable hold on his text, however, are assailed. The narrator, by either reevaluating his role in relation to his story or to his creator, can fall victim to Schlegel’s irony of irony, in which “Darstellende” and “Dargestellte” are no longer clearly delimitable.

Equipped with the vocabulary that a brief glance at Schlegel has given us, let us now examine another instance of parabasis as it occurs in fiction among narrators. Doubtless Schlegel’s own interest in
The “permanent parabasis” of irony was excited by such experiments in the novel form as Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste*. His third Critical Fragment comments on the parabatic quality of Diderot’s work: “Wenn Diderot im Jakob etwas recht Genialisches gemacht hat, so kommt er gewöhnlich gleich selbst hinterher und erzählt seine Freude dran, daß es so genialisch geworden ist.” The authorial intrusions of which Schlegel speaks are in no way rare occurrences in Diderot’s novel. Indeed, *Jacques le fataliste* is not so much concerned with the story of Jacques’ loves, which serves as the novel’s excuse, as it is with the problems of telling a story in the first place. The narrator writes himself into the novel as the novel’s organizer, a gesture ironically disruptive of the novel’s organization. In fact, the “story” is so often interrupted that the reader has no recourse but to develop second order expectations— we learn to expect that our expectation of narrative continuity will not be fulfilled.

*Jacques le fataliste* is told in a number of voices and thus the interrelationship of modes of narrative becomes a narrative structure to observe in itself. The omniscient narrator, the first person narrator, and the “scenic” or dramatic form of narrative are all represented. The question of authority is highlighted by the narrator’s frequent boasts concerning his power. These are instances of *parabasis*, in which the reader is removed from the story in order to be reminded that he is *reading* it. Consequently, we enter a different time which seems to encompass the time of the story itself. Very early in the novel, the narrator, displaying his authority, comments on the freedom with which he can meddle with narrative time:

> Vous voyez, lecteur, que je suis en beau chemin, et qu’il ne tiendrait qu’à moi de vous faire attendre un an, deux ans, trois ans, le récit des amours de Jacques, en le séparant de son maître et en leur faisant courir à chacun tous les hasards qu’il me plairait. Qu’est-ce qui m’empêcherait de marier le maître et de le faire couc? d’embarquer Jacques pour les îles? d’y conduire son maître? de les ramener tous les deux en France sur le même vaisseau? Qu’il est facile de faire des contes! Mais ils en seront quittes l’un et l’autre pour une mauvaise nuit, et vous pour ce délai.  

Here the juxtaposed chronologies of story line and of reading find their origin in the narrator. He is the critical element bringing together the world of Jacques’ voyages and the world of our voyages through *Jacques le fataliste*. But in freely alternating between these worlds, the narrator, like Schlegel in “Über die Unverständlichkeit,” inscribes himself into his text and falls victim to it. The act of self-disclosure is again accompanied by a movement toward mendacity, a reducing of the self to fiction, and thus the creation of an ironic tension between the author-narrator and his text.

Authority is a major theme in *Jacques le fataliste et son maître*, as even the title suggests. One of Jacques’ guiding philosophical tenets has to do with the acknowledgment of a primordial, all-determining text—an idea for which he, however, is not personally responsible: “et Jacques disait que son capitaine disait que tout ce qui nous arrive de bien et de mal ici-bas était écrit là-haut.” The causal structure of such a world view is accounted for only a few pages later:

> Le Maître. — Je rêve à une chose; c’est si ton bienfaiteur eût été cocu parce qu’il était écrit là-haut; ou si cela était écrit là-haut parce que tu ferais cocu ton bienfaiteur?  
> Jacques. — Tous les deux étaient écrits l’un à côté de l’autre. Tout a été écrit à la fois. C’est comme un grand rouleau qu’on déploie petit à petit.

Here we have a description of a certain kind of mutual determinism in which the writing of the text and the story line or chain of events effectively bring each other about. Applied to the narration of *Jacques le fataliste*, this theory supports the idea of a dialectical moment of writing in which the text already written commands the writing to come. Where there may seem to be infinite choice, there is actually only one, and that one must come to be.

This becomes interesting when we consider the narrator’s frequent practice of acquainting the reader with the range of his possibilities. Early in the novel, the narrator claims the power to tease us, and in so doing succeeds in teasing:

> Que cette aventure ne deviendrait-elle pas entre mes mains, s’il me prenait en fantaisie de vous désespérer! Je donnerais de l'importance à cette femme; j'en ferais la nièce d'un curé du village voisin; j'amènerais les paysans de ce village; je me préparerai des combats et des amours; car enfin cette paysanne était belle sous le linge. Jacques et son maître s'en étaient aperçus. . . .

Specific elements in the narrative are conditional on the narrator’s whim to cause our “désespoir.” We are given the outline of a viable sequel to the story of Jacques’ loves, but the “occasion séduisante” is allowed to pass by, unpursued. To use the language of Jacques, an amorous adventure commencing here on the roadside was not
“written up yonder.” But as readers party to the control of the narrator, who, we suspect, generates the text of Jacques’ life unknownst to him, we can go further than simply to write this missed chance off to fate, as Jacques himself is forced to do. We can locate the motivation in the realm of demands made by the text upon the narrator. It would be inappropriate to get off on a tangent not connected with the primary story of Jacques’ levée, the one Jacques promises to tell his master and we expect to hear, and the text which lies innermost in Jacques le fataliste, the subject of common attention among characters, narrator, and readers alike. The inappropriate is successfully bypassed. But the act of skirting a potential adventure is itself a detour of a special kind, and worthy of examination.

The narrator discloses himself by boasting about the possibilities for his novel; in disclosing himself he writes himself into the novel as a character. His expression of control (“Que cette aventure ne deviendrait-elle pas entre mes mains...”) is provoked by the text itself, by the chance encounter with the peasant girl’s lingerie. For there is no doubt that what Jacques and his master saw under her petticoats met with their approval, and this fact stands as the elemental circumstance upon which the narrator’s enticing subplot is based. The petticoats motivate the narrator to digress on the possibilities of narrative extrapolation, but the incident itself is established and immutable and represents a text “up yonder” that seems even to predetermine the actions of the narrator. “Enfin cette paysanne était belle sous le linge” is an observation shared by characters and narrator alike.

This is not surprising when we learn that the narrator is a hearer as well as a teller of the tale:

Vous allez prendre l’histoire du capitaine de Jacques pour un conte, et vous aurez tort. Je vous proteste que telle qu’il la racontée à son maître, tel fut le récit que j’en avais entendu faire aux Invalides... et l’historien qui parlait en présence de plusieurs autres officiers de la maison, qui avaient connaissance du fait, était un personnage grave qui n’avait point du tout l’air d’un bardin.17

A premise for validity is established. The truth or falsehood of a narrative depends on how seriously it is recounted. We presume that a serious recounting is one which is faithful either to the events themselves or to another serious recounting of the events. The narrator of Jacques le Fataliste, like Jacques himself, is confined to a previously written text, and we witness his struggle to recount it. At the same time, however, he has established an independence from the text that serves to enlarge the narrative from the story of Jacques’ exploits to the story of telling a story. The narrator either flirts with the story at hand:

Vous voyez, lecteur, combien je suis obligéant; il ne tiendrait qu’a moi de donner un coup de fouet aux chevaux qui traînent le carrosse drapé de noir, d’assembler, a la porte du gîte prochain, Jacques, son maître, les gardes des Fermes ou les cavaliers de maréchaussée avec le reste de leur cortège, d’interrompre l’histoire du capitaine de Jacques et de vous implanter à mon aise; mais pour cela, il faudrait mentir, et je n’aime pas le mensonge... 18

Or it becomes convenient for him to interject: “puisque Jacques et son maître ne sont bons qu’ensemble et ne valent rien séparés non plus que Don Quichotte sans Sancho et Richardet sans Ferragus... causons ensemble jusqu’a ce qu’ils se soient rejoints.” 19 In one way or another, he remains bound to it. Indeed, narrator and narrative write each other, and their interplay is much like Jacques’ unfolding scroll.

The narrator of Jacques le fataliste never breaks free of his function of narrating the story, just as Schlegel is committed to and determined by his fragments. The previously written text becomes stage for a new drama in which narrator and author emerge as characters. What at first strikes us as a gesture of dis-alienation, a mediation between text and audience seeking to reconcile each to each, is in fact a gesture that invites a mounting irony. In a sense, narrator and author act out the simplest definition of irony — they say the opposite of what they mean. Their statement resides in a ventured separateness from the text, while the meaning of their statement is only ascertainable when viewed in the context of their actual in-separability from it. The process of parabasis characterizes both texts, and this is what produces their greatest irony. For to reveal oneself as author or story-teller carries with it the imminent hazard of inscribing oneself as character. Schlegel’s “infinite parabasis” is the compounding realization that the movement towards self-consciousness must be limited to a readable text. The author as “author” or narrator is infinitely only the context for his work.

STEPHEN MAUTNER - The Johns Hopkins University

NOTES

2. Schlegel, p. 332.
On Comparing Apples and Oranges: James Joyce and Thomas Pynchon

SARA M. SOLBERG

Gore Vidal has made the comment that comparing Pynchon to Joyce is like comparing a kindergartener to a graduate student.\(^1\) The bias thus displayed by Mr. Vidal brings up only one in an impressive array of difficulties in the study of comparative literature: namely, the kind of literary snobbiness which is, after all, nothing more than the urge to prove aesthetic superiority by the books we read.

Some of us may have thought that Roland Barthes had changed all that. Certainly he has given us, via a new mythological pantheon, a refreshingly broad definition of “text” — a definition which subsumes plastics and billboards along with more traditional literary texts. In Joyce’s *Ulysses*, where everybody is everybody else and nobody is anybody, and in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where the protagonist literally disintegrates into the print on the page, we have not so much a new kind of fiction as a new kind of reading phenomenon; and the baggage of cause-and-effect, of good and bad, of biographical criticism, of closed systems of any kind, will only weigh us down.

What I am interested in here is the problem of comparing apples and oranges. An interesting expression: my understanding of it is that the wisdom of the language does not object to a comparison of apples and oranges per se. Obviously, we can say: 1) Apples and oranges are both fruit and both more or less round, or 2) Apples are red, whereas oranges are orange, unless green because not yet ripe, or mottled because covered with mold. Color, shape, consistency, and taste are perfectly sensible grounds for comparison. I take it that the implied reproach of the expression refers to taking one’s hierarchy of taste across generic lines. It makes no sense to say that an apple tastes better than an orange; but it makes perfectly good sense to say either that one likes apples better than oranges, or that one apple tastes better than another apple. It also makes perfectly good sense to put an apple down beside an orange to see how each is transformed by the simple presence of the other.