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The Point of Play  
Resuscitating Romantic Irony in Metamodern Poetics

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## Abstract

This essay investigates the prospect of Romantic Irony's potential resurgence in contemporary poetics and discusses its relevance and likeness with metamodernism.

The internet has by now not only seeped into, but fully permeated, the process of literary production and distribution. The effect of this has been the birth of a new kind of poetic discourse which can broadly be called metamodernism, The New Sincerity or Alt-lit. This movement is characterized by its self-reflexive metacommentary, fragmentary nature and an oscillation between of irony and sincerity. Vermeulen and Akker, among others, have hinted at metamodernism's relation to Romanticism, but research into the specifics of its tendency towards Romantic Irony is scarce. By viewing the writings of Steve Roggenbuck (a central figure in the new poetic movement), alongside the philosophy of Friedrich Schlegel, I propose a comparative framework for discussion of sincerity, irony and the instrumentalization of contemporary metamodernist writing.

I demonstrate that Roggenbuck's writing displays narratological, tropological and thematic tendencies commonly associated with both Romantic Irony and metamodernism. Apart from broader structural comparison, I attempt a comparative analysis between Roggenbuck's poetry (2010-2015) and Thomas Carlyle's novel "Sartor Resartus" (1833-1834) in order to provide a visualisation of the rhetorical and narratological strategies of Romantic Irony. I aim to frame Romantic Irony as a sensibility, or mode of discourse - rather than a strict system of thought - which may still be at work today. In extension, the sensibilities of Romantic Irony may shed further light into the philosophical potential of the seemingly incomprehensible and contradictory tendencies of metamodernism. By ironicizing its poetic form, literary ambition and desire for sincerity in a post-postmodern era, Roggenbuck's poetry celebrates ambiguity and literary failure, ultimately framing irony as a constructive and potentially democratic operation.

**Keywords:** Metamodernism, Internet poetry, Romantic Irony, Alt-Lit, New Sincerity, Steve Roggenbuck, Friedrich Schlegel, Thomas Carlyle, Cathy Comstock

“I want to have sex with will smith watching”

- Steve Roggenbuck

A new current has shifted into the literary spotlight. But simply finding a name for this literary movement is almost as problematic and polemicizing as interpretation of the texts themselves: “New Sincerity”, “Alt-Lit”, “meta-modernist” and “post-internet poetics” have all been suggested contenders. These texts are characterized by their contradictory nature, referential humour, self-reflexive ironic metacommentary, and use of (frequently misspelled) internet linguistics. One suggested commonality between these texts is that their authors have all grown up with the internet (Sellers 191). However, among the many difficulties with interpreting these texts, one stands out in particular: a tendency towards self-reflexive negation – a cutting off, an undercutting, an almost asymptotic movement towards - and consequent negation of - meaning. I therefore aim to propose Romantic Irony, a seemingly unconventional comparative touchstone, as a possible avenue for interpretation of contemporary “post-internet” metamodernist poetry.

The contemporary Swedish essayist Oswald Wiklander uses the term “affect-poetry” [affektpoesi] to describe the movement, suggesting that a “post-internet” poetics will require a new paradigm of *affective* readings (para. 7). Wiklander focuses on the media-specificity of post-internet poetry, investigating how the reading situation has been transformed by the advent of social media, and how interpretation of this new kind of literature presupposes a regime of aesthetic acquisition unique to social media. He concludes that this new kind of text, which eludes conventional interpretation and close-reading, achieves a kind of knee jerk artistic affect in its readers, and can best be understood from a cognitive stylistic approach. But going beyond formalism appears to be an endless pursuit, a bottomless pit pointing to the subconscious. I will therefore suggest another possible entry-point for examining these texts: to compare their self-reflexive and self-contradictory nature to a similar tendency in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century tradition: Romantic Irony, “a kind of literary self-consciousness in which an author signals his or her freedom from the limits of a given

work by puncturing its fictional illusion and exposing its process of composition as a matter of authorial whim” (Oxford Reference). The two primary sources I will rely on are: Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34), and the more contemporary *Calculating How Big Of A Tip To Give Is The Easiest Thing Ever, Shout Out To My Family & Friends* (2015) by Steve Roggenbuck. For the purpose of this project, the focus will lie primarily on Roggenbuck’s printed works, recorded performances and video essays, while not in depth investigating the medium-specific aspects of his artistry, but rather viewing these works as informed by, and in dialogue with, metamodern sensibilities. I intend to demonstrate that Roggenbuck’s writing displays narratological, tropological and thematic tendencies commonly associated with Romantic Irony. These similarities offer insights into the seemingly incomprehensible aspects of his writings, and by extension, may help to provide a comparative framework for discussing issues of sincerity, irony and the instrumentalization of contemporary metamodern writing.

Despite having been stirring for over a decade, research on the New Sincerity and Alt-lit movements has remained a somewhat obscure field in literary scholarship. The main forum for discussion and analysis of these texts is currently confined to undergraduate projects, niche literary magazines and a handful of pop-cultural newspaper articles. As James B Falandays has suggested, recent poetic discourse appears to have been “split into two separate strands, print and digital” while simultaneously “for modern artists” existing in a kind of symbiotic relation (2). There is no question that the rise of digital media in general, and the internet in particular, has radically affected the means and forms of poetic production (and consumption) – but what kind of commonality can be found in texts produced under these circumstances and how might they impact attempts at traditional interpretation of them? To answer these questions, Bridget L Sellers has attempted to survey emergent trends in poetry and analyse them from a generational perspective. Seeking to define and frame the illusive movement in question, Sellers provides a bird’s eye view of its characteristics, concluding that it belies the common source of being created and informed by *millennial* sensibilities (189). She begins her discussion by framing the contemporary movement as a reaction to post-modernity and modernity while also problematizing these kinds of heuristic labels. Quoting Kenneth Goldsmith and Garry Forrester she suggests that “[t]he interest no longer lies with ‘making the machines

jump’ or even continuing to prove the relevance of conceptualism— rather, ‘the real race has been to claim naming rights for the edifice that comes after’” (Sellers 3).

One could imagine the “syntactically correct but semantically meaningless” (Vermeulen and Akker 3) term *post-postmodernism* as being useful, but perhaps a more constructive term may be found by looking at the conditions for the genesis of this movement. The preferred term may then become *post-internet* - as it frames the movement not only heuristically, in relation to post-modernity, but also chronologically and technologically. This falls in line with Falandays’ claim that poets have always been influenced by the materials at their disposal, but that the “Internet Generation merely appears radical because it highlights an aspect of poetic meaning that has, historically, often been ignored: the technological aspect” (4). Sellers goes on to concretize the technological aspect and its unique relation to millennial generations:

The thematics of metamodernism correspond with the outlooks of millennials; the current post-internet creations reflect a casual and unconcerned use of the internet that only millennials have; the new poems accept the political, express ideas through new textual linguistic patterns. (Sellers 191)

The impact of this outlook is a generation “defined by their paradoxical characteristics” (ibid 192).

An explanation for these paradoxical characteristics has been offered by Vermeulen and Akker, when discussing the various claims for the naming the movement. By attempting to analyse emergent trends and form both an ontological and heuristic conceptualization, they have advocated for the term *meta-modernism* to encompass the movement. Akker & Vermeulen note an oscillation between “a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony” - a kind of pendulum between sincerity and scepticism - as a key characteristic of metamodernism (6). This oscillation is however not simply a pendulum, but rather a “*both-neither* dynamic” [my emphasis] tending to be at once “modern and postmodern and neither of them” (Vermeulen and Akker 6). The term they use to describe this paradoxical state of being and not being is *metaxis* – quoting Avramenko, Vermuelen and Akker define this as an inherent quality of existence, of being in-between - “constituted by the tension, nay, by the irreconcilability of man’s participatory existence between finite processes on the one hand, and an unlimited, intracosmic or transmundane reality on the other” (qtd. in

Vermuelen and Akker 6). This concept of an interplay, or metaxis, between the finite and the absolute may be kept in mind as we venture further.

Having named the movement, and suggested its *ironic* tendencies, we must now attempt to reach a baseline definition of irony. Vermeulen and Akker begin to approach the *concept* - and I use this term cautiously - of irony, through its postmodern and perhaps most prevailing definition, "The expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect" (OED "Irony" 1). This definition is one which has been solidified by the insincere and detached scepticism of the postmodern 1990's, and it appears to have by now become, in everyday use, almost synonymous with sarcasm. But this colloquial definition appears to lack important nuances of the original term, as if irony had been reduced to an act of signifying the opposite of what is intended.

One theoretician who has written and lectured extensively on the topic is Paul de Man. We may attempt to use de Man in order to plot the conceptual background of irony, and to provide some basic terminology before we proceed. It is important to note that de Man's conception of irony is based on a post-structural reappropriation of Friedrich Schlegel's, and his perspective should be utilized with caution. The fundamental definition suggested by de Man is that irony is at its core not a concept, but rather a trope or a series of tropes; defined by Northrop Frye as "a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning" (Frye 40). Nonetheless, the dominating popular conceptions of irony, in the postmodern paradigm, appear to have been reduced primarily to three forms: Verbal Irony<sup>1</sup>, Sarcasm<sup>2</sup>, and Situational Irony<sup>3</sup>. A common trope of all of these is an effect of diametrical signification: ironic language is used to signify the opposite of its literal meaning. For later writers such as Vermuelen and Akker, this kind of irony may be linked to a postmodern scepticism. But with such an association the problem of intent arises: how do we know when someone is being *Ironic* or *Sincere*, or perhaps *sincerely Ironic*? For de Man, these questions of ironic intent lead to what Kierkegaard termed an *infinite negativity*, an endless self-negation which, "pursued to

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<sup>1</sup> "The expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect." (OED "Irony" 1)

<sup>2</sup> "The use of [verbal] irony to mock or convey contempt." (ibid "Sarcasm" 1)

<sup>3</sup> "A state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what one expects and is often wryly amusing as a result." (ibid "Irony" 1.1)

the end [...] can dissolve everything, in an infinite chain of solvents” (166). The question of intent illuminates the performative aspect of irony, but this seems to lead to an array of hermeneutic dead ends.

However, authors growing up in the 90’s have come of age in an era dominated by this sceptical and detached irony, and have somehow come to speak its language fluently, to the point of reaching out of it, into sincerity. Noting that irony, in the post-postmodern age has become an oversaturated and almost unusable term, (especially in the age of Trump, who is as Slavoj Žižek puts it, is “his own parody” (para. 5))- theoreticians must scramble to conceive of the edifice that comes after postmodern irony. Rather than solely looking back at the postmodern irony of the later 21<sup>st</sup> century, a more fruitful approach may be to investigate a movement with striking structural similarities to that of metamodernism.

We pivot now, at last, to Romantic Irony. Beginning with a figurehead who is nearly impossible to avoid when conceptualizing irony and Romanticism: the early 19<sup>th</sup> century theoretician Friedrich Schlegel. Often referred to as the grandfather of Romantic Irony, writing at the breaking point of German Romanticism and at the height of theoreticization of Irony, he is almost unavoidable in the context (de Man 164). De Man attempts to reframe and deconstruct Schlegel’s writings on Irony, based on a formative text entitled “Über die Unverständlichkeit” [On incomprehensibility]. He details how ironic language allows a speaker or writer to have the experience of standing “above” oneself – to create a detached self which stands infinitely outside of its own phenomenological experience (de Man 177). This practice is approached and explained through de Man’s interpretation of the Fichtean subject as “an inherently linguistic” entity (172), which when commenting on itself achieves the position of experiencing itself as both object and subject simultaneously. Whereas de Man attempts a poststructuralist approach to Fichte’s self, he perhaps incorrectly interprets it as solely a property of language. Fichte’s self (Tathandlung [fact/act]) is suggested to not be “a static thing with fixed properties, but rather a self-producing process” - *simply* put, the Fichtean self posits itself absolutely, beyond and before utterance<sup>4</sup> (Bowman 2.c).

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<sup>4</sup> I have here intended to introduce Fichte’s subjectivism as a springboard into the concept of self-reflexivity, but, with respect to my readers, and my own lack of Fichtean expertise, do not intend to focus further on Fichte.

The sensation of standing “above” oneself became acutely important for many German Romanticists. To summarize an entire tradition of thought in a short paragraph, we begin with the concept of Idealism. German Idealism springs from the Kantian notion of transcendental Idealism: the schism between the phenomenological experience appearance of things (phenomenon) and their ontological existence as a thing in itself (noumenon) (Stang 6.1). This notion of a divide between the temporary and the absolute, the real and its ideal, was further radicalized by Hegel, Fichte and Schelling among others (McQuillan 3). For Schlegel the dichotomy between the real and its ideal is concretized as a divide between “language and stable meaning” (Comstock 450). Schlegel proposes the concept of a Real Language [Reelle Sprachen] – an ineffable, pure state of reason (ibid, 452). The idea of reaching this state of absolute meaning, through the power of reason can be referred to as the Idea. However, no text is ever able to capture such an inherently ineffable Idea. Alongside the idealized textual constructions such as the Byronic hero and the Sublime, this Idea is quickly realized as unachievable; reality always makes an entrance, and the Ideal appears forever unattainable. Romantic Irony is the state in which an author registers and signals its inability to express the ineffable Idea, and while doing so ironically comments on its failure while still attempting to express this Idea. It is a both-neither dynamic, wherein the author, as Colebrook puts it: “falls, enjoys the humour of the fall, laughs from on high at the falling buffoon, and remains implicated in the fall” (Colebrook 49). An astute reader will by now have noticed a similarity between Romantic Irony and metamodernism: both include this kind of both-neither dynamic; at once intending and ironicizing, in an ongoing oscillation between scepticism and sincerity, between the mundane and the sublime.

In an editorial piece from Vermuelen & Akkers online *webzine* “Notes on Metamodernism”, the term *New Romanticism* is used in discussion of the contemporary movement, framing it as a continuation of the Romantic tradition. The article initially suggests that one should seek to understand Romanticism as (seemingly transhistorical) sensibility, a “*sens* rather than as a system of thought, [...] an attitude more than an aesthetic regime” (New Romanticism para. 2). A brief definition of this sensibility is summarized as being about “the attempt to turn the finite into the infinite, whilst recognizing that it can never – and should never – be realized” (ibid). This tendency could be considered a key aspect of Roggenbuck’s writing: embodied through the use of mundane contemporary pop-cultural and



consumerist references in conjunction with, and in contrast to, sublime thematics. An overview of the suggested historical connection between modernity, postmodernity and New Romanticism (metamodernism) is provided in summary:

Modernity can be characterized by an anxiety to reconstruct the everyday in the name of this or that universalism. Postmodernity can be described as the neurosis to deconstruct it along the heterogenous lines of race, gender, and place. New Romanticism attempts to both- neither reconstruct and-nor deconstruct the commonplace. It seeks to come to terms with the commonplace as it is while at the same time imagining how it could be but never will be (ibid, para. 4).

The term New Romanticism may here be thought of as synonymous, or perhaps metonymic with metamodernism. We may now begin to identify a structural similarity between the movements. Moving on, we may try to delineate how Romantic Irony has historically been utilized, in order to identify which rhetorical and narratological devices allow its existence.

A key movement in Romantic Irony, as suggested by Schlegel, is that of the Parabasis; the aside or *aparté* – an “interruption of a discourse by a shift in rhetorical register” in which a speaker, character or narrator, breaks the fictional illusion and directs their speech toward the audience or reader (de Man 178). Another term used to describe this is *anacoluthon*, meaning a semantic disruption in speech (ibid). But this parabasis is not enough for Schlegel, he rather suggests that in certain poetry and philosophy there exists a virtually permanent Parabasis:

There are ancient and modern poems which breathe in their entirety, and in every detail, the divine breath of irony. In such poems, there lives a real transcendental buffoonery. Their interior is permeated by the mood [Stimmung] which surveys everything and rises infinitely above everything limited, even above the poet's own art, virtue, and genius; and their exterior form by the histrionic style of an ordinary good Italian buffo. (Schlegel 5-6)

The character of the Buffo<sup>5</sup>, is further examined by de Man, and explained with the use of an interior and exterior appearance and being of the author. On the interior, the author assumes the mood of radical self-negation while on the exterior assuming the appearance of the Italian Buffo, “the aside to the audience, by means of which the illusion of the fiction is broken” – an almost obscene performative act. This process can be visualized as a virtual dialectic of approaching meaning, sublimity, or transcendence and a consequent negation of this movement. It appears as an insulated

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<sup>5</sup> Defined by Merriam Webster's Dictionary as: “A male singer of comic roles in opera.”

asynthetic dialectic, one which reaches no synthesis, as Schlegel puts it “that it should forever be becoming, and never be perfected” - (Schlegel 32). We will return to this concept, after first attempting to visualize an example of Romantic Irony at play.

Despite its asymptotic nature, writers continue to push towards the Idea. An almost prototypical example of Romantic Irony is that of Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* - a novel completely steeped in Romantic Irony. I will attempt to utilize Carlyle’s novel to help us understand the process of Romantic Irony. While at first glance, to compare the New Sincerity and Alt-lit movements with the famously millenarian prose stylings of Carlyle may seem to be a somewhat odd comparative gambit, the similarities the novel shares with contemporary metamodernist writing will hopefully become clear.

*Sartor Resartus* purports to present an annotated and commented account of the life and writings of a German philosopher called “Diogenes Teufelsdröckh” [God-born Devil-dung]. The novel is structured by an Editor, a fictional character who narrates the process of procuring and editing a manuscript by the acclaimed Teufelsdröckh, presenting his profound *Philosophy of Clothes*. Throughout the novel Teufelsdröckh’s *Philosophy of Clothes* is presented and subsequently both critiqued and ridiculed, while simultaneously being described as profoundly prophetic. The Editor describes in detail the painstaking process of working with Teufelsdröckh, receiving biographical material and manuscripts in the form of: “Six considerable PAPER-BAGS, carefully sealed, and marked successively [...] in the inside of which lie miscellaneous masses of Sheets, and oftener Shreds and Snips, written in Professor Teufelsdröckh’s scarce legible *cursive-schrift*” (Carlyle). This example displays a kind of *mise en abyme* wherein the source material is in direct correspondence with the chaotic structure of the novel. Nonetheless, the material is depicted as well ordered and “carefully sealed” – suggesting an awareness of the chaos from the author. This exemplifies the Romantic tendency *towards* meaning – while simultaneously revelling in its own chaotic and fragmentary nature. Carlyle as well uses this same process in a productive way. By writing a novel that is at once a glorification of German Idealism and a parody and critique of both its philosophers and its intended audience, he managed to both push German philosophy onto new audiences, while also parodying its mannerisms and tendencies. This brings us to the question: is Romantic Irony by necessity destructive? Can one attempt to find constructive aspects of it?

While de Man conceives of Romantic Irony as inherently de(con)structive, Cathy Comstock considers it a constructive operation, in her revaluative essay: “‘Transcendental Buffoonery’: Irony as Process in Schlegel’s ‘Über die Unverständlichkeit’”. Comstock begins by affirming that critics such as Peter Szondi tend to see “Schlegelian irony as promising a “recovered unity” in which the disturbing gap between the absolute and the relative will finally be closed” and subsequently contrasting this with Marshall Brown’s view of this recovered unity as a “a Utopian future that is unrealizable in fact, but toward which irony nonetheless tends” (Comstock 447). However, Comstock proposes that this is in direct opposition to Schlegel’s own statement that “irony is ‘absolutely necessary’ for its ability to arouse ‘a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative’” (ibid). Here Schlegel demonstrates a revelatory acceptance of the problems of Romantic Irony. In spite of this, Comstock discusses briefly de Man’s conception of the Ironic process as a dialectic with no synthesis. A synthesis appears non-existent. Romantic Irony seems to reach a halt through its perpetual self-negation. However, through a layer of abstraction, one could interpret this process as attaining a kind of meta-synthesis through recognition by the reader. By experiencing the constant oscillation between “creation and de-creation” a reader may - and this is perhaps hopelessly idealistic - a reader may revel in, and experience a sensation of coming closer to, a more essential reality; what Comstock, quoting Ann Mellor, describes as the “‘fertile chaos’ at the heart of existence”, leading not to the abyss of the ineffable but to an “unstructured openness” (448,449). Comstock later provides alternative views on the benefits of the Ironic process, which we shall return to after first designating whether this kind of Irony can at all still exist in contemporary poetic discourse.

One example of this kind of constructive irony may be delineated in the poem “Attack my dad with a bunch of candles” by Steve Roggenbuck (Appendix A). In order to spare some ink, I suggest my reader insert an imaginary “[sic]” in every following quotation. This poem displays several kinds of ironies and discontinuities of form, embodying many of the characteristics of post-internet poetry and metamodernism as suggested by Sellers as well as Vermuelen & Akker. What I am most interested in with this poem is a narratological reading, looking at how the narrator or speaker interacts with its readers, and oscillates between sincerity and

absurdity, in a constant movement between creation and destruction that can be likened with the “eternal agility” of Romantic Irony (Schlegel 133).

From the first two lines: “theres a sick fuck named glen. / glen likes eattng pulp from juicers” (appendix A, 1-2), most readers will quickly identify some kind of ironic tone; the mention of juicers serves as a contemporary reference and appears to downplay the gravity of the poem, and the misspellings allude to an informal register. In the following line the narrator is implicated into the same diegesis as Glen: “its werid I don’t trust him”(3). The narrator has now suggested that it speaks from within the diegesis (intradiegetically) and also, through the present tense, that they exist at the same time. The narrator continues to both narrate and comment on the text as if it were occurring in front of him: “any how, glen / has a problem he love’s the moon sexualy, / romatically, / whatever he want’s to have it babys. / oooooo” (4-9) [my emphasis] – this kind of aside, or parabasis, sets its narrator in the seat of an audience. Metacommentary of this nature continues throughout the rest of the poem. The narrator at times comments or responds to the text, and at other times directly addresses the audience. What is compelling about this is that the story, in spite of its blatantly absurd content and structure, creates a sense of mimesis, of the events actually unfolding, becoming a fascinating narratological artifact through its meta-interplay. It is as if Roggenbuck has attempted to peel off the layers of narrative illusion to reveal what exists under them.

As the narrator continues to chronicle the story of Glen, incongruities and absurd events appear, pushing the limits of believability: a dead clown falls from a passing helicopter, and suddenly, for “unrelated reasons”, a bison charges at glen, making Pippin use his “wristwatch to stop time”. By now, any hope of *true* mimesis has been shattered. These seemingly haphazard deus ex machina occurrences are strewn together for comedic effect but seem to serve another purpose as well. The narrator, who has by now been implicated as intradiegetic, takes a step out of the narrative to comment: “what!! / HOW? ??? / i dont know!!! / i reallyy don’t know , but stay with me!!!! / this has to get resolved somehow!!!!” siding with the readers confused perspective and suddenly suggesting that the narrative must have a logical conclusion. However, a kind of bathetic affect is induced with the following and final line: “the end!!”

As the narrator approaches the conclusion of the poem, and simultaneously comments on the imperative of the poem having an ending, it is subverted in a

moment's notice. The text becomes an ongoing bathos, a continual parabasis. This process of self-deconstruction appears structurally similar to that of Romantic Irony. Of course, concerning this text, what is being approached is perhaps not overtly a kind of transcendental Idea(l), but instead perhaps the promise of a logical story, not so much a metanarrative as just any narrative at all. The diffuse interactions between reality, text, and audience is in many ways reminiscent of the aforementioned Romantic tendency of puncturing the fictional illusion to display the construction, and subsequent destruction, of the text itself in front of the reader.

In a sense, Roggenbuck's narrator functions as a condensed imitation of the Editor in *Sartor Resartus*, both furthering and conveying its philosophical message while simultaneously questioning and negating it. One explanation for this kind of intratextual self-critique may be found in Lee C.R Baker's Maieutic Theory of the Carlylean editor. The Maieutic<sup>6</sup> theory conceives of the Editor's role as one of a "midwife", who softens the blows of Teufelsdröckh's philosophical preachings (Baker 220). The Editor is however at times in clear opposition to Teufeldröckh's arguments, similarly to Roggenbuck's narrator's self-contradiction. As Jerry Allen Dibble suggests, in their essay on the structure of *Sartor*, the reader has a strong presence in Carlyle's fictional world, and is often directly addressed by the Editor, and the same can be said about Roggenbuck's narrator (Dibble 294). Keeping this in mind, a dialectic process can be modelled to describe the philosopher-editor-reader relationship. Firstly, Teufelsdröckh (or Roggenbuck) proposes a thesis, secondly the Editor (or Roggenbuck's self-critiquing side) provides its antithesis, and lastly the reader is invited to form a synthesis. The reader may ingest both sides of the argument, and perhaps seeing weaknesses in both, can reach a middle ground between them. What makes the process so convincing is that the reader is left with the feeling of having reached their own unique conclusion, even though this conclusion may have been intended by the author. By including a self-critique, an author may make their argument almost self-sufficient. Whether or not Carlyle manages to convey The Philosophy of Clothes, or Roggenbuck manages to convey a logical or mimetic narrative, their methods promote a Socratic, iterative approach to interpreting literature and philosophy. By dismantling its own basis of argumentation, Roggenbuck's poem, similarly to *Sartor Resartus*, could be considered to create a

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<sup>6</sup> Pertaining to the Socratic mode of enquiry. From Greek *maieutikos*, from *maieuesthai* 'act as a midwife', from *maia* 'midwife' (OED "Maieutic").

more nuanced and self-sufficient argument. However, in Roggenbuck's case, modeling a dialectic mode of argumentation is a lot more contentious. The pivot between arguments occurs continually, in oscillation, and these two arguments rarely seem to be in clear opposition to each other, but are rather in simultaneous contradiction and agreement, in a both-neither condition. The reader is at once invited to occupy and consider overlapping positions of the realities of the narrative.

But moving beyond narratological analysis, what can be said about the poem as – a poem? It is easy to disregard its poetic qualities, considering the informal language and seeming rebelliousness vis-à-vis formal poetic tradition, but Roggenbuck does not write in a vacuum. Visually, the text appears as a poem, but can or should it be read using traditional poetic vocabulary? If we return then to the first two lines, a hard alliteration and half-rhyme may be noted in the words “sick fuck”. Furthermore, the first lines contain a repetition of sibilants: “theres a sick” and “juicers”. Following this one could begin to notice a kind of anadiplosis in the repetition of the name “glen”(1-2). On lines 10 through 12 another repetition appears in the words “hot ass”, “broke ass”, and “im broke 4 u”, but this time framed as a part of a “love letter” to the moon. This passage could be read as mimicking a clichéd poetic tradition in love letter writing; a tendency which Roggenbuck seems to constantly problematize, at once ironicizing his own use of language whilst also using it to convey poetic and philosophical truths. The only clear rhyme in the poem can be found on lines 22-24: “they shoot at glen with bb guns and he run's / around / screaming ‘don'ttt!’” [my emphasis]. Here one could as well delineate an alliterated enjambment between lines 22 and 23. Enjambment is one of the more common poetic devices in Roggenbuck's writing: sentences spill over several lines in varying order, but when read out loud he adopts a more informal register, rarely intoning the caesura which may seem apparent in its written form.

The divergence between the written form and Roggenbuck's live recitation seems to point to a discrepancy, a *différance* if you will, between text and meaning. Almost every apostrophe is misused in Roggenbuck's writing: “shine *you're* hot ass light down”, “its *there* favorite game” (Appendix A, 12, 25). These misspellings, as well as the frequent contractions “get it 2gether”, “im broke 4 U” (ibid, 16, 19) – are however purely orthographic, and remain concealed when recited aloud. What can be made of this rift between written and verbal form?

One could attempt to read this incongruity as symptomatic of a rift between the virtual simulacra of identity created in social media and the physical reality beyond (or behind) it. Prathna Lor uses the term “digital realism” to give name to “a process of literary production that obscures the lines between life and writing” in both Roggenbuck’s work and social media in general (153). Identifying this rift in Roggenbuck’s persona and writing, Lor, quoting Goldsmith, explains that: “Roggenbuck ‘harnesses the casual affect and jagged stylistics of social media’ [...] thus advocat[ing] for a form of poetry that turns away from conventional avenues of literary production in favor of new media poetics that borrow extensively from social media” (Lor 155-156). This “low poetics” exists in a paradoxical state, at once attempting to distance itself from conventional literary production, by both ironicizing its own form whilst also, simultaneously, to some extent appropriating traditional poetic devices and terminology. This paradoxical state is perhaps best embodied in a short untitled poem from Roggenbuck’s debut collection of poems “i am like october when i am dead”:

i dont care about reading a poem  
 who do you think i am, robert frost?  
 i have never been in the woods and i hate walking (1)

Lor reads the poem as embracing a kind of “of literary failure” which “disavows literary conventions” suggesting that its straightforwardness and sincerity is what constitutes its poetic quality (Lor 158). While the poem suggests an opposition to conventional poetry, it is still, simply put, a poem in a book of poetry. Lor points out that Roggenbuck attempts “to infuse poetry into every aspect of digital production as a democratizing force” which nonetheless “perpetuate[s] a logic of exceptionalism and the cult of celebrity” (Lor 154).

It is as if Roggenbuck’s writing exists in two registers simultaneously: one which utilizes internet linguistics, referentiality, failure and misspellings to speak to the problems of communication and lack of meaning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the other which alludes to conventional poetic tropes in order to approach more universal philosophical truths. A condensed example may be found in the following lines from the poem “*i had a nightmare in which zac efron talked into a pizza to communicate to his dead lover*”:

keanu reeves walks into the room.  
 he is holding a memory card from an n64..

he says  
 “when i was 22 years old, i saved my game  
 on 007 Golden eye at the exact moment  
 before my character got killed by the small  
 but ruthless villain Oddjob. whenever i need  
 a reminder that human life is fleeting, that  
 everything is temporary and most of the  
 processes at work in the universe are  
 beyond my control, i load this game.” (Roggenbuck, "Calculating" 6)

The blending of *high* and *low* culture; between video games and existentialism, between the commonplace and the sublime, a simultaneous use of both registers, could be considered a seminal trope of both Romantic Irony and metamodernism. Keanu Reeves, Nintendo 64's and James Bond share a page with existential worry and cosmic dread. As de Man notes when reading Schlegel's *Lucinde*, the same use of two registers exists in a chapter called “Eine reflexion”, wherein the text reads as both a philosophical treatise as well as a “reflection on the very physical questions involved in sexual intercourse” (de Man 168). De Man somewhat ironically describes this as a threat to interpretation:

It's not just that there is a philosophical code and then another code describing sexual activities. These two codes are radically incompatible with each other. They interrupt, they disrupt, each other in such a fundamental way that this very possibility of disruption represents a threat to all assumptions one has about what a text should be. (ibid 169)

This same use of two registers can be parenthetically noted in the entirety of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, as almost every page is saturated with a blend of transcendental philosophy and scatological jokes. But while Carlyle can be said to use scatological humour in conjunction with philosophical lingo to democratize philosophical discourse, Roggenbuck uses internet-lingo in conjunction with poetic themes in order to democratize poetic discourse, literary production, and, in extension: literary scholarship.

Beyond the use of colloquial internet linguistics, Roggenbuck engages in themes of capitalism and consumerism through references to specific products and sales jargon, and through the insertion of poetics into the “banal sphere” of online commerce (Lor 156). Lor instantiates this in the following quote:

[O]ne of the earliest posts to Internet Poetry consists of a video of Roggenbuck reading a poem by Michael Inscoc posted as an Amazon product review called “What is the thing that keeps me from



accelerating to 60 or 70 mph and then letting go of the handlebars”  
 [...] The poem has no direct correlation to the Amazon product. (Lor  
 156)

Roggenbuck's paradoxical attitude towards merging poetics with the seemingly unpoetic sphere of commerce can perhaps best be summarized by a quote from Roggenbuck's video essay and poetic manifesto '*AN INTERNET BARD AT LAST!!!*' (2013) *ARS POETICA*: "I'm interested in marketing, but I'm mainly interested in marketing the moon. Do you love the light of the moon sir? And if you don't, can I convince you?" (3:36-3:47). Roggenbuck borrows consumerist terminology in order to subvert and sublimate it into the poetic. This action reverberates with the desire of both metamodernism and Romanticism to address the failure of permanent meaning (in a sense a literary failure). By embracing the failure of turning the mundane into the significant, this failure in itself becomes significant, becoming a vehicle for making the insignificant significant through recognition of the impossibility of making it wholly significant. While sounding paradoxical, this is exactly what Roggenbuck does, and it is presumably one of the many factors that appeal to his reader base.

We may now step into another one of Roggenbuck's texts, which similarly touches on topics of consumerism and commerce, and thereafter attempt to examine his own statements on its incongruities. The poem in question is titled "i want to have sex with will smith watching" (appendix B). It begins with a conversation between Micheal [sic] and his dog Merle, with Micheal saying "hi merle, your looking hot as heck today good dog : ) !!!" and pouring "a hot cup of coffe" into his bed sheets (1-5). Subsequently Micheal thinks "there is no point to stay calm about life, [...] there is absolutly no reason. just go buckwild most of the time hehe" (8-10). The reader has here been introduced to an absurd scenario which appears to embrace its absurdity and chaos. Further background is provided in a flashback explaining "[the] back story of how this happend" (12-13). To summarize: Merle (the dog) is shopping at a 100% gluten-free grocery store and is approached by a Wizard (who turns out to be a mugger) holding a gun. Micheal then steps out from behind a tall pile of bread brandishing a sword and claiming that he is "gods child" – and then "a gamma ray burst, coming from light / years away happens to hit the earth directly / and suddenly everything is on fire and / everyone is screaming and / within 1 minute everyone on earth is dead / the end" (31-37). How does one begin to deconstruct this? The mentions of a gluten-free grocery store and non-GMO rice bread hint at a desire for

healthier more ecologically aware consumption, whilst simultaneously being presented with the corporate sales jargon of “100% glutenfree” – pointing to a rift between ecological awareness and capitalist consumption. However, no clear judgment is made, and the topic is further subverted when one realizes that the consumer is in fact a dog. This could be considered typical of how the political ambiguously seeps into his writing, and he appears to revel in this kind of ambiguity.

One of Roggenbuck’s more common tropes is the celebration of stale aphorisms such as “YOLO” and “Carpe Diem” – simultaneously both celebrated for their existentialist tidings and smirkingly ironized for their clichéd usage. While this echoes both Schlegel’s and Carlyle’s approach to philosophy, it appears to also bare resemblance to metamodernist tendencies. In an influential editorial post by Jesse Thorn from 2006, entitled “A Manifesto for The New Sincerity”, an explanation to the seemingly ambiguous tendencies of Roggenbuck’s predecessors is offered: “Think of it as irony and sincerity combined like Voltron, to form a new movement of astonishing power” (Thorn). The explanation is further cemented by way of using Evel Knievel as an illustrative metaphor:

There's no way to appreciate Evel Knievel literally. Evel is the kind of man who defies even fiction, because the reality is too over the top. Here is a man in a red-white-and-blue leather jumpsuit, driving some kind of rocket car. A man who achieved fame and fortune jumping over things. [...] But by the same token, he isn't to be taken ironically, either. The fact of the matter is that Evel is, in a word, awesome. His jumpsuit looks great. His stunts were amazing. (Thorn)

What this example illustrates is the force of a seemingly *sincere* use of irony, which in spite of its self-negation manages to “look awesome” and push onto new ground. The same may apply to Roggenbuck’s writing: any too literal interpretation reaches a halt, but instead, approaching it as an expression of a three-sided mode of discourse, or perhaps sensibility, may lead to interpretation of the text as that which Schlegel termed an “unstructured openness”.

Returning then to the poem we may attempt to read contradictions and incongruities as symptoms of tensions, at times political and at other times purely narratological. Sellers suggests that the political seeps into contemporary poetry in a “holistic way” and this perspective allows for nuanced and ambiguous view on the instrumentalization of Roggenbuck’s poem. For instance, the wizard, who turns out to be a mugger, could be viewed as representative of the clash between the Real and its

Ideal; the Fictional clashing with the realities of life in late capitalism – perhaps representing the impossible project of mythology in late capitalism. And the mention of gluten-free grocery stores serves as a nuanced and unconcerned tangent on the importance of - and potential issues that come with - ecological awareness and its relation to capitalism.

Finally, the ending of the poem - in which it turns out everyone dies in a flashback - hints at Roggenbuck's celebration of incongruity and incomprehensibility. Roggenbuck jokingly comments, during a reading of the poem from 2015, that "the titles don't have anything to do with the texts .... Or do they? [...] It's an open text, we can read this how we like, in fact do whatever you please with this book, its very... optional, that you do anything particular thing with this book" (Roggenbuck, "Steve Roggenbuck at The New Museum" 9:53-10:14). Further he discusses the chronological problems of the text claiming that:

Scholars are going bonkers over this text [...] one thing is that everybody on earth dies, in a flashback. Now this creates a very confusing situation. How do we get to the present if everyone died in the past? This is very confusing but that's what scholars like [...] they're like: *wait, I don't know I cannot read this text correctly.* (He goes on, straining to withhold his laughter) And this is really great for scholars [...] Its one of their favorite texts currently. But another big thing that really dazzles these scholars [...] the dog pun: "Merle said without any *paws* at all". [...] that's what really scares scholars they really go nuts. (ibid, 10:14-11:30).

With a divine breath of irony Roggenbuck both critiques the chaotic structure of his text, at the same time managing to illuminate its suggested relevance in scholarly studies. Here one may see that there is no need to judge whether Roggenbuck is being *sincere* or not, that either way his point is somewhat valid. This passage serves as symptomatic of Roggenbuck's paradoxical position towards literary scholarship, and in extension it functions as a handbook to comprehending his texts.

Going beyond structural<sup>7</sup> similarities between metamodernism and Romantic Irony, two approaches seem apparent for explaining the survival or resurgence of Romantic Irony, or something in its likeness. These paratextual explanations will here be suggested but not further investigated. The first route may be to examine potential historical (expressive) links between Roggenbuck and Romantic sensibilities, transcendental philosophy and Idealism. Roggenbuck has openly proclaimed his

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<sup>7</sup> i.e: thematic, rhetorical, narratological and tropological and textual aspects.

interest in, and idolization of, Walt Whitman<sup>8</sup> – having published a “Mixtape” of Whitman’s Poetry, as well as frequently mentioning him in his readings. Roggenbuck describes his admiration of Whitman, claiming “Walt Whitman made me appreciate my life more actively [...] Walt makes you step back and say, the world is wonderful. This whole thing is wonderful” (Roggenbuck, "AN INTERNET BARD"). Here, an explicit historical link of influence appears present, but could Romantic Irony exist without it?

One possible approach may be to, through an appropriation of Freud’s conception of melancholia, conceptualize the Romantic Idea as still covertly influencing contemporary authors. As Romantic Ideals fade, a longing for them still exists, and as this Idea is inherently ineffable (other than by the negative theology of “The Idea”), no clear object can be identified and mourned. Therefore, a Freudian reading would suggest that the libidinal energy directed towards an ineffable transcendental truth has been repressed into the literary subconscious of writers, creating an identification with the lost object, and thus leading to a melancholic state of longing (Freud 245). In Roggenbuck’s case, this explanation does not seem all too far-fetched at least when one considers his interactions with Whitman and potentially other authors influenced by Romantic ideals and transcendental philosophy. Perhaps we are reaching a more constructive perspective on irony due to this melancholic Romantic residue in the critical consciousness. Similarly, the editorial article from Notes on Metamodernism attempts an explanation for the void in contemporary discourse which Romantic sensibilities may potentially be speaking to:

Our answer is that Romanticism provides them with the vocabulary and iconography to express a dissatisfaction about a present that is increasingly uninhabitable, and a desire for a future whose blueprint has yet to be drawn. ("New Romanticism" para. 6)

While its terminology remains muddled the metamodern attitude is here to stay. Its use of ambiguity and self-negation, of what appears as a kind of wholehearted, or sincere irony, resonates with the sensibilities and rhetorical utilizations of Romantic Irony, and with the outlook of millennial generations.

Roggenbuck’s celebration of ambiguity tends to both complicate and nuance hermeneutic interpretation, but through the process of doing so produces a poignant illustration of the paradoxical nature of existence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His ironic blend

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<sup>8</sup> A poet floating in-between Transcendentalism, Idealism and Realism.

of internet linguistics, and conventional poetic tradition, hints at a desire for democratization of literary production and consumption, which strives to challenge and subvert while also to some extent furthering conventional literary tradition.

As to the relation with Romantic Irony, some links remain unresolved. Further studies may want to look deeper into the influence of Walt Whitman on Roggenbuck. And in extension one would then have to discern whether Whitman can be considered representative of Idealism and Romantic Irony. Another missing angle may be the suggested avenue of affective readings and analysing the modes of confession in Roggenbuck's writing and its relation to internet identity from a more medium-specific angle. There is a larger issue with discussing metamodernism in terms of subjectivism, as metamodernist works are in many ways a product of digital literary production therefore in constant dialogue with the medium itself. Considering this, the concept of a clear subject is more and more in free play, and further studies may want to focus more heavily on the medium-specificity of these works. I have attempted to broach these concepts with the hopes of providing a broader picture of Roggenbuck's work and its relevance to both meta-modernism and Romantic Irony.

I have not intended to proclaim the novelty of metamodernism but rather to discuss its likeness to Romantic Irony. The emergence of metamodernism (and its tendencies towards Romantic Irony) can be considered a necessary continuation of Postmodernity, as a reactionary longing for sincerity in a world where the prospects of intent and wholeheartedness appear near impossible. One approach to this suggests that the pursuit of Internet Identity creates an unattainable ideal which will necessarily be undercut, as life makes its entrance - warts and all - creating a constant disappointment which must inevitably be handled and celebrated with irony.

Vermeulen and Akker provide an illustrative metaphor to explain the situation (after first excusing themselves for using a banal example). They describe metamodernism's search for *truth* (or sincerity) as a donkey chasing a carrot, which is always beyond its reach:

[P]recisely because it never manages to eat its carrot, it never ends its chase, setting foot in moral realms the modern donkey (having eaten its carrot elsewhere) will never encounter, entering political domains the postmodern donkey (having abandoned the chase) will never come across. (Vermeulen and Akker 5)

While both metamodernism and Romantic irony function by a seeming constant negation and deferral of meaning, one can by experiencing - in Schlegel's words - the

truly “transcendental buffoonery” of the action, approach a more essential chaotic quality of existence (6, Fragment 42). While both movements might at first glance appear contained to the affect of a literary grimace, they nonetheless manage to push into new political, existential and philosophical domains, and by their ambiguous position to meaning, express complex truths which are otherwise ineffable in a postmodern context.

## Appendix A.

*“Attack My Dad With A Bunch of Candles”**Poem By Steve Roggenbuck*

1 theres a sick fuck named glen.  
2 glen likes eatting pulp from juicers  
3 its werid i dont trust him.  
4 any how, glen  
5 has a problem  
6 he love's the moon sexualy,  
7 romaticaly, whatever  
8 he want's to have it babys.  
9 oooooo  
10 glen writes love letter to the moon all the time  
11 they say  
12 “shine you're hot ass light..  
13 down  
14 on my broke ass  
15 hehe..  
16 im broke 4 U.”  
17 wow  
18 come on glen  
19 get it 2gether, are u seroius.  
20 anyway one day glen's pals connor and pippin  
21 come over to play.  
22 they shoot at glen with bb guns and he run's  
23 around  
24 saying “don'ttt !!”  
25 its there favorite game..  
26 at night they sit around a fire, saying there  
27 deepest secrets on life...  
28  
29 pippin says “i have a pet baby!!  
30 i got a baby human  
31 that i use as a pet in my home”..  
32 wow...  
33 unexpected..  
34 kind of dark..  
35 connor says.. “i lov getting whacked with  
36 bamboo paddles,  
37 on my neck!!!”  
38 before anyone can fully

39 react to that,  
40 a dead clown falls out of a  
41 passing helicopter  
42 and lands very near to glen and pippin.  
43 “AHHHH !!” glen turns around and  
44 immediately says “i need to go buy tortilla  
45 chips NOW!”  
46 then suddenly for  
47 unrelated reasons a bison appears,  
48 charging directly at glen!!  
49 “AHHHH!!” glen shouts again.  
50 but then Pippin uses his wristwatch to stop time,  
51 saving glen !!!!!  
52 whatttt !!!  
53 what!!  
54 HOW?  
55 ???  
56 i dont know!!!  
57 i reallyy don’t know , but stay with me!!!!  
58 this has to get resolved somehow!!!  
59 the end!!



## Appendix B.

*“i want to have sex with will smith watching”*

*Poem by Steve Roggenbuck*

1 “hi merle, your looking hot as heck today good dog :) !!!”  
2 that is what michael said today when he woke up  
3 in life to see his cute and sexy dog merle  
4 bare it all on national tv !! what a nice day to be  
5 alive, michal pours a hot cup of coffe into his  
6 bed sheets. “there is no point to stay calm about life,”  
7 michael thinks now,  
8 “there is absolutly no reason.  
9 just go buckwild most of the time  
10 hehe.”  
11 that is michael’s thought process now.  
12 but there is a back story of how  
13 this happend.  
14 well  
15 merle was at a 100% gluten-free grocery store  
16 once to buy loafs of non-GMO rice bread.  
17 a wizard approached merle with a gun and said  
18 “choose youer destiny”  
19 merle said without any pause at all,  
20 “i wish to be a stripper on cable TV.”  
21 the wizard says “that’s not wat i meant,  
22 also i’m not a wizard, i’m just a guy who’s  
23 robbing u.”  
24 but than  
25 michael stepped out from behind a tall pile  
26 of bread,  
27 holding a sword...  
28 “wait one secound” michael says, attemping to  
29 save merle’s lief.  
30 the robber says “who in heck r u?”  
31 michael says “i’m gods child”  
32 and then a gamma ray burst, coming from light  
33 years away, happens to hit the earth directly  
34 and suddenly everything is on fire and  
35 everyone is screaming and  
36 within 1 minute everyone on earth is dead  
37 the end

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