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Edited by Alison Stone

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The Question of Romanticism

Judith Norman and Alistair Welchman

1. What is Romanticism?

1.1 Beginning

'Romanticism' is one of the more hotly contested terms in the history of ideas. There is a singular lack of consensus as to its meaning, unity and historical extension and many attempts to fix the category of Romanticism very quickly become blurry. In his *Conversations with Eckermann*, Goethe says that the concept of Romanticism 'is now spread over the whole world and occasions so many quarrels and divisions' (Goethe [1836] 1984: 297) and this situation has not rectified itself in the 180 years since then. But the term was poorly defined from the start. Friedrich Schlegel, frequently claimed as the progenitor of European Romanticism, wrote to his brother August Wilhelm Schlegel, widely acknowledged as its most important populariser: 'I can hardly send you my explication of the word Romantic because it would take – 125 pages!' (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988: 6). In 1866 Alfred de Musset writes of the search for the meaning of Romanticism: 'No, my dear sir . . . you may try in vain to seize the butterfly's wing; the dust that colours it will be all you can hold in your fingers' (De Musset [1866] 1908: 209).

As a result, the great historian of ideas, Arthur Lovejoy, famously concludes that: 'the word "romantic" has come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing. It has ceased to perform the function of a verbal sign' (Lovejoy 1948: 232).¹ But his pessimistic advice has not stopped scholars from trying to define Romanticism. If anything, it has brought renewed vigour to the determination with which critics try to pinpoint the term. There are several approaches to take, for those who attempt to do so. One class of critics tries to enumerate the features shared by the authors and texts generally considered romantic. According to René Wellek's classic rebuttal of Lovejoy:

They [scholars of Romanticism] all see the implication of imagination, symbol, myth and organic nature and see it as part of the great endeavour to overcome the split between subject and object, the self and the world, the conscious and the unconscious. This is the central creed of the great romantic poets in England, Germany and France. It is a closely coherent body of thought and feeling. (Wellek 1963: 220)²

This description certainly includes a number of elements that many of the writers generally thought to be romantic have in common. But there is something unsatisfying about this

approach, which presupposes a sort of pre-theoretical grasp of Romanticism which it then tries to formulate. The theory rarely completely conforms to the pre-theoretical grasp. (Wellek admits that Byron fits poorly into his description.) Do these lists of empirical commonalities really indicate some underlying profound and essential identity and if so what? An alternative approach would try to identify the fundamental unity that informs Romanticism and gives rise to the empirical commonalities. But what would this essential feature be? The French Revolution? Manic depression? Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*? Attempts like this are sometimes problematically reductive and also fail to capture figures whom we might want to include: A.W. Schlegel was no depressive, Wordsworth was unmoved by Fichte and so on.

Both of these approaches take an external perspective on Romanticism, seeing it as the *object* of inquiry. An alternative approach, which we will pursue, looks at romantic *subjects* and Romanticism as a self-constituting category, rather than merely as an externally imposed one. In other words, we will take as basic neither an (empirical) array of candidate properties constituting Romanticism nor a supposed underlying (rationalist) essence from which properties can be derived, but rather we will focus on how the romantics themselves took up the idea of Romanticism and transformed it into a self-conscious movement. We will treat the question of Romanticism with respect to England but above all Germany. Although romantic movements arose and flourished elsewhere in Europe (and in France in particular), German and English Romanticism were uniquely theoretically sophisticated and philosophically nuanced.

The transformation of the idea of Romanticism into a movement is by no means easy to account for. When Friedrich Schlegel, in his essay *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, written in 1795 and published in 1797, made his own contribution to the long-standing quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, he described much of what would come to be associated with the romantic sensibility without either using the term or even liking modernity very much. His category of modernity was broad, including Dante and Shakespeare. He called their art 'interesting' and described it as subjective, opposing it to the objectivity of the ancients. He went on to characterise it as a fusion (or confusion) of genres, a tendency to combine philosophy with aesthetics, a valorisation of the striking and novel over the traditional and a desire to depict what is characteristic and individual rather than what is universal. Modern art rejects the aesthetic ideal of self-contained, harmonious beauty in favour of different ideals, such as the sublime, the interesting and even the ugly. It valorises striving over achievement, the imagination over reason. As Schlegel writes: 'if a faint hint of perfect beauty is found [in modern art], it is experienced not so much in serene enjoyment as in unsatisfied longing' (Schlegel [1797] 2001: 18).

This characterisation was not novel, nor was Schlegel's dislike of this modern tendency. It took an additional manoeuvre (which he had accomplished by 1797) for him to begin positively valorising the art of the moderns: a historicist recognition of the definitive end to classicism and of the fact that his nostalgia was no longer *just* nostalgia but was itself something distinctively modern. According to Arthur Lovejoy's classic study, it was Schiller who converted Schlegel to the modern ideal, which Schlegel only now christened 'romantic', making Schiller a sort of 'spiritual grandfather of German Romanticism' (Lovejoy 1948: 220).

The term 'romantic' had been used before; it was associated with the courtly romances of medieval literature, the legend of Roland and the Arthurian myths (as well as the tales they inspired) and thus denoted a tradition separate from that of classical antiquity, with particular affinities to the Middle Ages. The word gradually came to signify certain more

specific features of this literature such as its exoticism, its valorisation of amorous passions and excessive states of emotion and its stylistic departures from neo-classical form. What Schlegel does is to start using it as a broad characterisation of a distinctively modern sensibility.

The structure of this event deserves closer scrutiny: Schlegel was initially repelled by the restless dissatisfaction and incompleteness of modern art – its failure to emulate the naïve harmony of the ancients. But we could say that he came to a self-awareness of his own Romanticism by virtue of his very nostalgia, of his feeling of distance from the classical ideal. He later berated his own, earlier work on antiquity as lacking sufficient irony, which is to say (minimally) a lack of critical distance from his own nostalgic affect (Schlegel [1797] 1970: 144, #7).³ In other words, his 'Romanticism' was not constituted by nostalgia but by the realisation that his nostalgia is both itself distinctively modern and hence that it is not *about* the past but about the present. Incompleteness became emblematic of modernity and a certain ironic nostalgia became its sensibility. Both are brought together in the paradoxical notion of an intentional ruin or fragment, since this embodies the notion of a self-conscious nostalgia. Schlegel would later write 'Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written' (Schlegel [1798] 1970: 164, #24). And indeed this remark was published in one of the Schlegel brothers' collections of fragments, a literary form that they cultivated and that would become something of a signature style for the group that was beginning to gather around them in Jena in the late 1790s.

It was this group that would come to be retrospectively designated as the *Jena Frühromantiker*, the Early German Romantics. It included the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich Schlegel's wife, Dorothea (daughter of the Enlightenment philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, and aunt of the composer Felix Mendelssohn), and A. W. Schlegel's wife, Caroline, who would soon divorce him – amicably, it seems – for the philosopher Schelling, who was also associated with the group. Friedrich von Hardenberg was an active participant (writing under the assumed name of Novalis), as was the playwright Ludwig Tieck, the writer Wilhelm Wackenroder and the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. They were all young – when the group broke up around 1800 (and stopped publishing their journal, *Athenäum*), they were all under 40, mostly under 30 and Novalis and Wackenroder were already dead. A. W. Schlegel then went on to publicise the group's ideas in a series of lectures, first in Berlin (1801–4) and then in Vienna (1808–9, published in 1809–11). The Vienna lectures were translated almost immediately into several languages and proved to be the primary mechanism for the dissemination of the German romantic theories to the rest of Europe, both on their own as well as through the works of intermediary expositors such as Madame de Staël (whose children he tutored), Simon de Sismondi and Friedrich Bouterwek.

In 1805, a second and similar group began to form, this time in Heidelberg, around Clemens Brentano (who had been in Jena and was familiar with the group there), Achim von Arnim, Josef Görres and Friedrich Creuzer. They were authors, classicists, orientalists and philosophers of mythology. Brentano and Arnim produced the significant anthology of German folksongs, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (1805–8) and their friends, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, also collected stories. This group incurred the personal and professional enmity of a group of more conservative thinkers and principally the classicist J. J. Voß, who attacked and parodied them in 1808, referring to both the Heidelberg and Jena groups as *Romantiker*. This was the first systematic use of the term in reference to contemporary writers (see: Eichner 1972; Wellek 1963) – the Jena group had used the term to refer to post-classical art in general and particularly literary models such as Cervantes and Shakespeare. It was in this

vituperative context that the group first acquired a label and a historical destiny as a unified movement.

Romanticism, then, had something like a double origin. As we saw, Schlegel achieved an implicit self-recognition of himself as romantic at the moment that he both named and valorised the concept and soon after that he was tagged with the label by those who still regarded it as a negative term. His own positive understanding of Romanticism extended back at least as far as Giovanni Boccaccio, while the critics' hostile but ultimately victorious category limited the scope of the term to the Jena and Heidelberg groups – in other words, those in whom the nostalgia had become self-conscious. Hegel famously preserves this duality: in his *Lectures on Fine Art* he labels the entirety of the post-classical, Christian world 'romantic' (retaining the resonance between Romanticism and Rome as the site of the disintegration of the classical form and the beginning of the Christian world) and sees the Romanticism of his contemporaries as only the end and logical (and shameful) conclusion of this broader movement.

1.2 *Returning*

Hegel was not the only one to see the contemporary romantic movement as a degraded repetition of specifically post-classical themes. In his frankly hostile account of the (German) romantic school, intended as a dampening corrective to Madame de Staël's more enthusiastic assessment, Heine writes that Romanticism:

was nothing other than the revival of the poetry of the Middle Ages as manifested in the songs, sculpture and architecture, in the art and life of that time. This poetry, however, had had its origin in Christianity; it was a passion flower rising from the blood of Christ . . . (Heine [1833] 1985: 3)

The romantic school, for Heine, was a secularised form of medieval Christianity, a return to both its themes and its styles. This notion of Romanticism as a secularisation of Christian themes was the subject of a highly acclaimed study by M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*. Although he certainly did not view Romanticism as a degradation, Abrams joins Heine in claiming that the 'characteristic concepts and patterns of Romantic philosophy and literature are a displaced and reconstituted theology' (Abrams 1973b: 65), the theology of Christianity. The specific theological element taken up and secularised by Romanticism is the narrative of a circuitous journey, a *Bildungsreise* (paradise lost and regained, the prodigal son) that attempts to recapture a lost unity or sense of identity. The distinctive contribution of Romanticism is to secularise this notion and make the journey a search for personal – or even social – fulfilment rather than a quest for God. 'Wo gehen wir denn hin?' Novalis asks in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (written in 1799–1800) – 'Where are we going?' 'Immer nach Hause' – we are always going home, trying to work our way out of our present alienation and return to the comfort and harmony we have lost.

Although Abrams's thesis takes in German Romanticism, its primary object is English Romanticism and so we must briefly consider the historical relationship between the two. There were some channels of influence from Germany to England, particularly in the figure of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who had been to Germany and studied with Schelling, whom he plagiarised shamelessly in his 1817 *Biographia Literaria*. But Coleridge did not have much success in transmitting his enthusiasm for these ideas: Wordsworth was certainly restrained and once announced, '[I have] never read a word of German metaphysics, thank Heaven!'

(quoted in Abrams 1973b: 278). Byron, for his part, was famously dismissive of the distinction between Romanticism and classicism. Indeed, although there was an early recognition of the novel and distinctive character of the English poets we now know as romantic, it was only much later, in literary histories from the 1860s and 1870s, that the term Romanticism gradually came to be applied to English authors (see Whalley 1972). On the whole, English Romanticism seems to have developed out of largely autonomous, or autochthonous, factors (see Butler 1981).

Why then have we come to classify the Jena and Heidelberg groups under the same heading as the English Lake Poets?⁴ Without using the term romantic, Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote that all the major poets derive:

from the new springs of thought and feeling, which the great events of our age have exposed to view, a similar tone of sentiment, imagery and expression. A certain similarity all the best writers of any particular age inevitably are marked with, from the spirit of that age acting on all. (Shelley [1819] 1964: 2: 127)

Looking beyond the mystification of the notion of a *Zeitgeist*, Shelley cites as a common cause 'the great events of our age'. By this he means, primarily, the French Revolution, which he had called 'the master theme of the epoch in which we live' (Shelley 1964: 1: 504). We will return to the master theme of the Revolution in Section 3, but here we will look more closely at his claim as to its effect, the 'similar tone of sentiment, imagery and expression'.

We have already indicated a candidate notion for a distinctively romantic sentiment, that of a sort of self-conscious nostalgia. Although lacking the element of self-consciousness (a problem we will return to shortly), Abrams's notion of a circular journey is in line with the notion of nostalgia, the expression of a desire to return to our point of origin (in terms of the historical past as well as childhood), tinged heavily with melancholy (Wordsworth writes: 'it is not now as it hath been of yore' in the poem 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', line 6). It accounts for many of the sentiments indicated by Friedrich Schlegel and now frequently seen as emblematic of Romanticism: a longing for wholeness, a craze for fragments and ruins, the theme of the wanderer, a penchant for millenarian fantasies of founding a 'new Jerusalem' or, in Shelley's case, 'another Athens' (in the poem *Hellas*). A range of romantic literature from Novalis's *Heinrich* to Wordsworth's *Prelude* retraces the clearly and often explicitly lapsarian idea that a prior age, generally identified as classical Greece, had enjoyed a sort of naïve, unreflective unity, a sense of wholeness or belonging that has since been lost. The present age, according to this scheme, is characterised by an overriding sense of alienation, expressed in various dichotomies, between freedom and necessity, subject and object, duty and inclination, mind and nature and so on. A. W. Schlegel announces in his Vienna lectures:

The Grecian ideal of human nature was perfect unison and proportion between all the powers, – a natural harmony. The moderns, on the contrary, have arrived at the consciousness of an internal discord which renders such an ideal impossible; and hence the endeavour of their poetry is to reconcile these two worlds between which we find ourselves divided and to blend them indissolubly together. (A. W. Schlegel [1808] 1879: 27)

As Schlegel articulates it, the romantic project is to overcome these dichotomies and recover a unity, although hopefully on a higher plane (the fall was a fortunate one). This

desire informs a scientific programme as well, as the passage from Schlegel immediately above suggests. German romantic science and *Naturphilosophie* are strongly motivated by a rejection of Enlightenment mechanistic models of nature in favour of organic ones and a wish to re-enchant nature. Hence the interest in alchemy, medieval science and the esoteric doctrines of Jacob Boehme that the universe is driven by opposed forces, polarities of a quasi-sexual nature, which Schelling takes up and systematises in his philosophy of nature. Politically and with respect to the 'great events of the age', this conception of the problem and project of Romanticism can be associated with attitudes towards the French Revolution, which were in general characterised at first by a sense of hope for the establishment of genuinely liberatory social institutions. This then often evolved into a restitutionist longing to re-found the institutions (of the Middle Ages, for instance) which made possible certain types of human solidarity (Novalis's 1799 *Christentum oder Europa* is a model of this): for instance, a paternalistic monarchy, chivalric social code and a shared religion. The dream of liberation represents the progressive side of Romanticism and the restitutionist fantasy its reactionary side, but both shared a diagnosis of the present as somehow broken or deficient and a desire or even plan to recreate a sense of past unity that has been lost. This structure is not absent from Marx himself, who for this reason has been considered, in this one aspect at least, romantic.⁵

These romantic themes can be seen throughout the philosophy and literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In fact, the danger might lie in casting our net a bit too wide: Hegel and Marx both fall into this generic, circular model of alienation/reconciliation. In his *English Fragments* of 1828, Heine himself looks for a New Jerusalem in post-revolutionary Paris. Even Nietzsche has his share of classicist nostalgias and futural longings, as well as a theory of return. These are figures, it must be said, who revile Romanticism and yet Abrams has no trouble absorbing them into his conception of Romanticism which, in fact, he happily extends into the present day. In addition to the question of when Romanticism starts, we have the question of when – or even whether – it ends.

In their seminal text on the Jena romantics, the French philosophers Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy write:

[W]hat interests us in Romanticism is that we still belong to the era it opened up. The present period continues to deny precisely this belonging, which defines us (despite the inevitable divergence introduced by repetition). A veritable romantic unconscious is discernable today, in most of the central motifs of our 'modernity'. Not the least result of Romanticism's indefinable character is the way it has allowed this so-called modernity to use Romanticism as a foil, without ever recognising – or in order not to recognise – that it has done little more than rehash Romanticism's discoveries. (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988: 15)

We cannot recognise Romanticism and cannot have done with it; modernism is an (unconscious) return of Romanticism, which, according to Abrams at least, was already a return of Christian themes and specifically the theme of return. We seem to be in the grip of a genuine repetition compulsion. Abrams is pleased with what he sees as the ubiquity of romantic concerns in modernism – he embraces the romantic project and believes that it represents the best in us. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy also see romantic themes in the present, but unlike Abrams they see this as a 'genuine degeneration' – not the best but rather the worst of us. Romanticism is a 'fascination and a temptation' (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988: 16) that we have to understand in order to resist.

We have quite a few questions on the table, about the scope, content and even desirability of Romanticism. To begin to address them, we need to look much more critically at the theme of return; specifically, we need to return to the notion of critical self-consciousness that Abrams omitted. We will see that what begins (conceptually) as an already complicatedly self-conscious but clearly empirical conception of nostalgia for a lost past quickly assumes the Kantian character of a return to a transcendental rather than empirical ground. On this account, which will occupy us in Section 2, the past is a cipher for a return to the *subject* as the locus of logical rather than chronological priority in transcendental constitution. This moment of romantic thought elaborates an underlying Kantian framework centred in particular on the concepts of the transcendental imagination and the genius. But as we will see, the Kantianism of the romantics extends further than to an account of the (romantic) subject. The romantics are also *critical* of the epistemic optimism of the classical idealists (Fichte and Hegel) and emphasise instead the extent to which the lost subject to which Romanticism returns is impossible to recover. Finally, we will also consider the extent to which the romantics begin to break apart the notion of the subject of return entirely by exploring other potential transcendental operators that bypass the subject, most notably language.

But however compelling and critical the romantic notions of return might be, it is perhaps odd that this compulsion to return to origins should arise at a historical moment of unprecedented interest in the future, the time of the French Revolution. We will end by suggesting, in Section 3, some points of connection between Romanticism and this master theme.

2. Backwards or Forwards?

2.1 Kant

The concept of return does not necessarily involve going backwards and wanting to retrieve what was past; it can be conservative and melancholic, but it can also be radical and self-critical, an affirmation of distance from the point of departure, or even the discovery of uncanny origins. One cannot simply return to the primitive harmony, as Hölderlin's *Hyperion* testifies. Accordingly, Romanticism is at times radical and at times conservative; it generated (and celebrated) a considerable amount of reactionary nostalgia, but it was also the site for crafting some of the more perceptive tools for taking this nostalgia apart.

In Section 1, we saw that Friedrich Schlegel discovered the nature of Romanticism by looking critically at his own nostalgia for classical antiquity. More strongly, he began to claim that the idea of Greece was patently fantasy construction: 'To believe in the Greeks is only another fashion of the age' he writes in one of his fragments (Schlegel 1970: 201, #277). A.W. Schlegel writes that 'up to now everyone has managed to find in the ancients what he needed or wished for: especially himself' (Schlegel 1970: 181, #151). Romantic nostalgia is not so concerned with the past, its putative object, as it is with itself: the longing for the past becomes a mirror for discovering one's self. We see this in the probable ending of Novalis's unfinished *Novices at Sais* of 1798–9 – a young initiate into the mysteries of Isis tears the veil from the statue of the goddess to achieve enlightenment – and sees only himself. This is the romantic *Weg nach Innen*, the path inward, and the romantics' own consensus as to the essential nature of their own literary ideal, that it was subjective as opposed to classical objectivity. The past (or, in another tendency of Romanticism, the

exotic) functions as a self-conscious projection by which the subject comes to understand primarily *itself*.

But we must take this further and conceive the idea of projection transcendently rather than in terms of empirical psychology. Indeed, the theme of the return to the subject brings Romanticism into close proximity with problems current in the philosophy of the time and specifically with Kant. The first *Critique* is an investigation of how experience is conditioned by structures of subjectivity and how the nature of the subject of experience can only be found through an investigation into the nature of the experience it conditions. 'The conditions of the possibility of experience in general are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience', Kant writes (Kant [1781/1787] 1998: A158/B197) and the nature of subjectivity is essentially bound up with (and discoverable through) the objects it conditions. But Kant famously goes further and finds that the self that is discovered is a peculiarly empty one – a formal category, the condition for unified experience and nothing more. And as we shall see, German Romanticism follows his lead.

We see a related movement in English Romanticism, which has its own thematic of projection and pursues its own *Weg nach Innen*. For instance, Coleridge argues for the essential 'subjectivity' of Shakespeare's works – that the figure of the artist himself is indelibly present in all his language and descriptions. It is not a personal subjectivity that Shakespeare expresses, Coleridge argues, it is an impersonal, quasi-divine subjectivity – but a subjectivity none the less. But more essentially, we see in the texts of English Romanticism nostalgia reaching the point where the object becomes merely a cipher for understanding the subject. There are passages where, as Paul De Man writes, the romantic 'vision almost seems to become a real landscape' (De Man 1984: 7). On the one hand, this pathetic 'fallacy' can be referred to the familiar, reassuring blending of psychology and landscape, or imagination and perception, and can thus be read as a typically romantic attempt to overcome the dichotomy between subjective and objective. But as with German Romanticism, this apparently unsophisticated projective structure is actually self-consciously critical. Poetic language is taking over the landscape, contesting, as De Man puts it, the ontological primacy of the sensible object. Perhaps (as critics have argued with respect to Wordsworth) poetic language even wins this contest and dispenses with the object entirely.⁶

Affinities with Kant are palpable here (we speak of affinities to avoid the difficult question of influence). In the third *Critique*, Kant discusses aesthetic experience as a site for the reconciliation of subject (the faculty of understanding) and object (or at least the intuition of the object). But he conceives of this reconciliation as merely subjective, a feeling rather than an experience. He is particularly insistent that the feeling of the sublime is merely subjective – we cannot discuss sublimity in nature, but only our feelings of sublimity in response to experiences of nature. This theory was of great interest and importance to Coleridge (and, through him, to Wordsworth; see Modiano 1983), who used it to emphasise the subjective character of the distinctively romantic affect.

The romantic tendency to emphasise the subject of creative production is popularly associated with the idea of genius and it is certainly true that romanticism brings in a distinctive conception of the artistic consciousness in particular and the mind in general, a conception that stresses creativity and activity over passivity and receptivity. Romanticism takes seriously the *poesis* of the poem. Wordsworth famously stated in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) that 'All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (19). This emphasis on the subject of artistic production weakens and even displaces a mimetic conception of art: the work is essentially an expression of artistic

powers rather than an image of nature. The mind, accordingly comes to be seen as a lamp – or even fountain, wind-harp or plant – rather than a mirror (see Abrams [1953] 1973a). As we pointed out before, the romantic conception of subjectivity tended to be based on transcendental philosophy rather than empirical psychology and one issue that makes Romanticism the adversary of the Enlightenment is their quite divergent theories of mind. The romantics reject the Lockean notion of a passive mind that receives impressions in favour of a Kantian notion that stresses the spontaneity and creative powers of the understanding and, above all, the imagination.

Kant's notion of the imagination was of inestimable significance for the development of romantic theories of creativity. Of particular importance was the distinction between transcendental and empirical imagination, which Coleridge recast as the distinction between imagination and fancy. Imagination for Coleridge is organic (vital), while fancy is mechanical (a conception derived from eighteenth-century empiricist theories of imagination). Coleridge developed this theory in the context of a critical analysis of Wordsworth, as a way of accounting for Wordsworth's distinctive poetic achievement. Fancy merely reproduces the contents of memory in a variety of different arrangements; the imagination, in contrast, is productive of genuine novelties. As such, it is modelled on divine production: 'The primary imagination I hold . . . as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM' (Coleridge [1817] 1975: 167). John Keats even stated (with reference to *Paradise Lost*) that: 'The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found it truth' (Keats [1817] 2009: 102).

2.2 Hegel

Kant's conception of the transcendental imagination can be and has been pushed in the direction of intellectual intuition, the notion of a creative intelligence whose thoughts are productive of reality. Kant strictly denied that such a faculty was possible for humans: for Kant, our intuition is receptive and not spontaneous. But the idealists found enough encouragement in the critical corpus to resuscitate the (essentially pre-critical, theological) idea. Fichte and the early (romantic) Schelling revised Kant's notion of the transcendental unity of apperception into the transcendental ego, no longer the highest condition of knowledge but in fact its author, wielding intellectual intuitions to generate (in Fichte's case at least) not only the form but also the substance of experience.

The theme of the artist as second creator is expressed here in the idea of the artist as transcendental ego, creating its own little reality through intellectual or (as Schelling often glosses it in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* of 1800) aesthetic intuitions. The operation of this faculty is certainly well described by Keats in the quote above: the contents of Adam's dream becoming reality. As such, the prominence of the figure of the author in Romanticism bears a clear relation to the development of idealist theories of the role of the transcendental ego. This is the basis of Hegel's critique of the Jena romantics in his *Lectures on Fine Art* (delivered in 1820–1). He claims that they elided the figure of the genius/author with that of the transcendental ego, conceiving of the genius as an over-inflated ego, a monster of self-will capable of creating reality as he wishes it to be. This, Hegel believes, accounts for the bizarre dreamscapes of some of the romantic novels and fairytales, the liberties with form and chronology. Most significantly, in Hegel's mind, this explains the romantics' signature device of irony, the effect of mockery and self-distance from a reality that the author knows to be a figment of his caprice.

Hegel's distinctive interpretation of the nature of genius and irony was well suited to the

dialectical position that German Romanticism was assigned within his system, as the limit case of the modern emphasis on subjectivity in art, the empowerment of the subject and its divorce from the rapidly atrophying object. But his reading of the romantics was highly misleading. He overemphasised Fichte's influence on the movement, a piece of mischief that it has taken scholars generations to undo. The fact is that the Jena romantics did not share the post-Kantian German idealists' confidence about the attainment of absolute knowledge.⁷ Rather, they remained with Kant on what Hegel would call the perspective of reflection and most specifically with respect to what Kant considered limitations to self-knowledge. Their interest in subjectivity did not entail a commitment to the possibility of transparent (or even dialectically mediated) self-cognition. Rather, part of what we might consider the pathos of Romanticism was bound up with the impossibility of just such knowledge, with the rejection of the Cartesian *cogito* (see Norman 2000; 2007) and hence with the thought that 'the self is no longer the master in its own house', as Manfred Frank puts it (Frank 2004: 173).

Frank has documented how the romantics were in contact with former students of Reinhold, who shared an anti-foundationalist critique of Fichte's system. They were sceptical not only about the epistemic availability of first principles but also about their reality. In place of something like an idealist intellectual intuition or direct positing of the self-identical subject (or subject/object) as an absolute ground, the Jena romantics affirmed the infinite approximation of the ground. Nor was the ground considered real, if elusive. Rather, they considered it something like a Kantian Idea, playing a heuristic or merely regulative role in systematising knowledge. Frank shows that in the absence of philosophical demonstration, Novalis, at least, thought that we needed to assume an inventive attitude towards the ground, treating it as not merely heuristic but down-right fictional (Frank 2004: 51 and 174). Indeed, as Novalis writes: 'if the character of the given problem is irresolution, then we resolve it when portraying its irresolution [as such]' (Novalis 1960–88: 3: 376). It is no wonder that we find Hamlet put forward by the Schlegels as emblematic of modernity.

This marks a subtle but significant distinction between English and German Romanticism – German Romanticism develops its own philosophical path in contrast to post-Kantian idealism. The philosophical basis of German Romanticism is distinct from that of idealism and the two represent competing programmes in the landscape of post-Kantian German philosophy. English Romanticism, in contrast, did not define itself in relation to this idealism and more readily absorbed (or resembled, since questions of influence are difficult here) trends in idealist thought. Accordingly, we do see shades of German idealism in English Romanticism – Byron's narcissism has been rightly considered Fichtean and the idea of the imagination in Coleridge (and, as we saw, Keats) can take on overtones of a Schellingean intellectual intuition. But we should not over-emphasise the philosophical influences on English Romanticism. Its poetic achievements stand on their own and the elements of philosophical scaffolding can be disregarded by readers uninterested in this issue.

German Romanticism is quite different in this regard. It takes a subtle, complicated and significant set of philosophical positions and these are the inspiring force behind its productions. The theory matters and it matters that their conception of subjectivity is in greater proximity to Kant's notion of the transcendental unity of apperception than it is to Fichte's transcendental ego. Kant's apperceptive unity was hollow, a mere form of subjectivity. So, while Romanticism does involve a return to the subject, this is neither triumphal nor reassuring, not the proper object for a tidy nostalgic fantasy of a comfortable

homecoming. Rather, in German Romanticism at least, the subject is often missing, dead, or deeply depressed. Tieck's plays explore what he calls 'the vast emptiness, the terrible chaos' at the heart of the subject (quoted in Lokke 2005: 146). Far from an affirmation of the self-present cogito, his *Weg nach Innen* resembles the path of Freudian psychoanalysis, to a fractured, displaced subject. (Nor was this conception absent from English Romanticism: introspection often reveals demons, as in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. Keats too writes that the poet 'has no Identity . . . he has no self': Keats [1818] 2009: 295. We even see this in French romantic poetry, where, as one commentator writes, 'the subject of these works is obsessed by its incompleteness, which takes the specific form of loss': Strauss 2005: 193.)

It is instructive, in this context, to look at how the Jena romantics criticised and appropriated Fichte. We noted earlier that, for Kant, subjectivity is only apparent in the object it conditions: the unity of the subject is only evident in the unity of the object. But the same can be said of literature when the subject of a text (that is, the author) is conceived as being merely an object in a text. With obvious and explicit reference to the method of Kantian critique, Schlegel sees this as the task of literary criticism. 'The true task and inner essence of criticism', Schlegel wrote in 'On the Essence of Criticism', 'is to characterize' (Schlegel [1804] 1958–: 3: 60) – which means to provide a character sketch of the author, to make the author into a character. But this is a project not only for literature but also for philosophy: criticism of philosophy consists of characterising the philosopher. Indeed, Schlegel has designs on Fichte, as he makes clear:

[T]o use the jargon that is most usual and appropriate to this kind of conception, [I will] place myself on Fichte's shoulders, just as he placed himself on Reinhold's shoulders, Reinhold on Kant's shoulders, Kant on Leibniz's and so on infinitely back to the prime shoulder. (Schlegel [1797] 1970: 264)

Schlegel intends to criticise Fichte as Fichte criticises Kant and by effecting a similarly transcendental move. Kant showed that experience is in fact conditioned by a set of subjective structures; Fichte showed that the structures were conditioned by a transcendental subject and Schlegel will show that the transcendental subject is conditioned – by Fichte. The *Wissenschaftslehre* is 'as rhetorical as Fichte himself . . . with regard to individuality, it is a Fichtean presentation of the Fichtean spirit in Fichtean letters' (Schlegel 1958–: 18: 33). A double fictionalisation is in effect. The transcendental ego is exposed as a character of Fichte's (an invention, as Novalis had pointed out) and Fichte himself is exposed as 'rhetorical' – becoming, perhaps, a character of Schlegel's.⁸ The author is indelibly inscribed within the text.

2.3 Linguistic Turns

The notion of unintended textual consequences is of great importance here. Indeed, if the author is inside the text rather than behind it, we might pose the question of who is in control. One characteristically romantic answer points to the role of the unconscious in textual production. Again the locus for this conception is Kant, who writes:

[T]he author of a product for which he is indebted to his genius does not know himself how he has come by his ideas; and he has not the power to devise the like at pleasure or in accordance with a plan. (Kant [1790] 1987: 174–6, §46)

In line with this conception, Friedrich Schlegel writes that 'a poem is only a product of nature which wants to become a work of art' (Schlegel [1797] 1970: 145, #21). But the notion of unconscious creation was not a consensus view within Romanticism. A. W. Schlegel, Coleridge and Schelling all emphasise the cooperation of conscious and unconscious productive forces in the creative process. And A. W. Schlegel criticises Kant for not giving more scope to conscious processes in creativity.

However, this notion of conscious control was not necessarily in the service of a theory of the individual artist. In fact, we see in German Romanticism an interesting and subtle set of theories of collective authorship, in which it is not nature but a social collectivity that is the ultimate locus of creativity. Schlegel describes 'antiquity' as a 'genius', the collective author of ancient texts (Schlegel [1797] 1970: 197, #248). Or the productive social collective could be a small community – *The Athenaeum* explored the concept of 'symphilosophy' as a mutual endeavour among a small group of friends, the plan of constituting a secret alliance. Authorship is, on this model, quite strictly a collective act, not an individual one. The idea of the productive social collective could also be used in the service of nationalism, as with the romantic fixation on folk arts, folksong, or even fairy tales, as the collective expression of a people, a *Volk*. (We must note at once that this is not nationalism in a chauvinistic sense – the romantics supported a resurgence of all regional traditions without claiming the superiority of their own – a point on which Herder, for one, sharply criticised the Enlightenment. In this sense, the romantics might be considered the first multiculturalists; see Blechman 1999: 9.)

Schlegel suggests, however, a distinctive response to the question of who is in control of his texts:

[In my writings] I wanted to demonstrate that words often understand themselves better than do those who use them . . . there must be a connection or some sort of secret brotherhood among philosophical words that, like a host of spirits too soon aroused, bring everything into confusion in their writings and exert the invisible power of the World Spirit on even those who try to deny it . . . (Schlegel 1970: 260)

Language has a mind of its own and will lead the supposed author along lines he or she hardly intended to follow. For instance, Schlegel wrote of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* that: 'surprised by the tendency of its genre, the work became suddenly much greater than its first intention' (Schlegel 1958–: 2: 346–7). Here it is the structure of the *genre* that is doing the work: in this case, it is not the unconscious that is in control, but language itself.

Novalis thematised this in an essay called *Monologue*: 'One can only marvel at the ridiculous mistake that people make when they think that they speak for the sake of things. The particular quality of language, the fact that it is concerned only with itself, is known to no one . . .' As the monologue progresses, it becomes progressively self-reflective (or progressively conscious of its inherent self-reflexivity): 'What if I were compelled to speak? What if this urge to speak were the mark of the inspiration of language, the working of language within me? . . . Could this in the end, without my knowing or believing, be poetry?' (Novalis 1997: 83).

This introduces a conception of language as an autonomous and self-expressive rather than representational or communicative structure. We have already seen what De Man describes as the tendency of poetic language to displace the primacy of the object in English Romanticism. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault pinpoints the early nineteenth century as the moment when 'words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide

a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things . . . language may sometimes arise for its own sake in an act of writing that designates nothing other than itself' (Foucault 1970: 304). Wilhelm von Humboldt would write that language is a world of its own, distinct from reality or subjective intention. This conception is a significant factor in the development of modern hermeneutics: if the author is not the ultimate (or even proximate) locus for the intelligibility of the work of art (and neither is nature, as we saw earlier), then a new interpretative science is necessary to tell us what it means. As Friedrich Schlegel writes: 'the question of what the author intends can be settled; not, however, the question of what the work is' (Schlegel 1958–: 18: 318).

It is interesting but somewhat counter-intuitive to regard language as a formal system without reference to anything extrinsic – but it is hardly unusual or startling to say the same thing about music. Music accordingly came to be seen not only as the basis for language (a return to Vico's idea that we sang before we spoke) but also as a model for thought and reason. Schlegel speaks of 'a certain tendency of pure instrumental music toward philosophy' (Schlegel [1797] 1970: 239, #444). And we frequently find in romantic texts language being referred to in musical terms. Music's (previously problematically) non-mimetic character now became its mark of superiority and elevated it to a supreme position in the system of the arts.

In fact romantic music theory typically held that music was the dominant element in song and opera, with the lyrics of songs relegated to the role of merely repeating and embellishing the music. In Schumann's *Lieder* for instance, the piano has an autonomous and in many ways more musically interesting role than the voice (see Rosen 1995: 68). And the idea continues into late Romanticism as well. Nietzsche notes that Schopenhauer's arguments in favour of the priority of music eventually convinced Wagner to put aside his conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an ideal synthesis of the arts, to give music the lead role. Accordingly, in the (post-Schopenhauerian) Wagnerian music drama, the music speaks an independent and primary language that is only echoed by the speech and action on stage. Wagner's attitude towards this shift in thinking was characteristically romantic too. As he describes it, it was (Nietzsche notwithstanding) factors intrinsic to the music drama itself that brought music to the fore – Schopenhauer's theory was just the outward stimulus forcing him to recognise this ineluctable fact. Thus, Wagner wrote of his earlier theory: 'I didn't dare to say that it was music which produced drama, although inside myself I knew it' (quoted in Magee 1983: 351). We can say of Wagner's *Tristan* what Schlegel said of Goethe's *Meister*, that it was 'surprised by the tendency of its genre'.

It is perhaps surprising for music to be held up as a model for thought precisely because it is devoid of extrinsic meaning. But, to the extent that the romantics embraced the non-referential nature of language, they called for literature to be meaningless. Or rather, as philosophers such as Maurice Blanchot, Foucault, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy claim, this conception of the meaninglessness of language – the notion that language is concerned only with itself – marks the beginning of what we know of as literature. We can refer this again to the transcendental function of language.⁹ According to an argument familiar to all transcendental philosophers, we cannot describe a transcendental condition in terms of what it conditions (the category of causation cannot itself be involved in a causal sequence, etc.). Consequently, language as a condition for meaning is itself devoid of meaning: the ground for sense must itself be nonsensical. As the philosopher Winfried Menninghaus writes in his study of the romantic fairytale: 'Nonsense is a way in which "the non-hermeneutical" . . . still appears within the horizon of the hermeneutical field' (Menninghaus 1999: 8). The appearance of nonsense in a text, then, fulfils Schlegel's criterion for

proper critical philosophy as the intimate unity of a determining structure, in this case language, together with the sense it determines (see Norman 2009).

Accordingly, Novalis calls for

tales, without logic, nevertheless with associations, like dreams. Poems – simply sounding well and filled with beautiful words – but also without any sense or logic – at most single stanzas intelligible – they must be like mere broken pieces of the most varied things. At best, true poetry can have . . . an indirect effect like music, etc. (Novalis 1960–88: 3: 572)

The romantics were particularly attracted to the genre of the fairy tale, considering it to be a model of meaninglessness in this sense (see Novalis 1960–88: 3: 438, 449; Schlegel 1958–: 16: 475; Menninghaus 1999). They praised its disconnected dream logic, its ability to explore the confusion of liminal states of consciousness. But beyond the fairy tale we see in German romantic literature a persistent valorisation of chaos, confusion, chance and caprice, on the level of language, style and plot. The art of meaninglessness extended to the visual arts, with Constable's landscapes criticised for 'meaning nothing' – having a paucity of reference (quoted in Rosen 1995: 75). The landscape is supposed to speak for itself. Indeed, the romantic playwright Ludwig Tieck formulates his literary ideal in painterly terms, praising paintings that 'delight' solely by their 'dazzling colours without coherence' (quoted in Menninghaus 1999: 37).

2.4 Irony

This is already a form of proto-modernism: we are in the neighbourhood of Archibald MacLeish's modernist dictum from his *Ars Poetica* that 'A poem should not mean / but be' (lines 23–4) – and the transition from narrative painting to pure landscapes to painterly abstraction is a fairly clear one. We will take up the question of the proximity of romantic theory to modernism (and even post-modernism) shortly, but we need to look first at the stylistic device on which the romantics might most reasonably stake their claims to modernity (should they wish to do so): their emblematic trope of irony. While (also characteristically) never defining just what irony is, Friedrich Schlegel wrote in his *Dialogue on Poetry*:

Every poem should be genuinely romantic and every [poem] should be didactic in that broader sense of the word that designates the tendency toward a deep, infinite meaning. Additionally, we make this demand everywhere, without necessarily using this name. Even in very popular genres – the theater, for example – we demand irony; we demand that the events, the people, in short, the whole game of life actually be taken up and presented as a game as well. (Schlegel 1958–: 2: 323)

Irony persistently blocks the referential function of language (or perhaps demonstrates language at work blocking our attempts to make it referential) – it undermines whatever serious (meaning-bearing) work language is supposed to be doing and turns everything into a game. We see this in many of the literary works of Jena Romanticism: an insistent irony that does not let you forget that the text is fiction. For instance, a character in Brentano's *Godwi* of 1801 tells the narrator: 'there is the pond into which I fall on page 266' (Brentano 1995). In a scene from Tieck's *The World Turned Upside Down* (*Die verkehrte Welt*) of 1798, the character of the innkeeper says:

Few guests stay with me now and, if this keeps up, in the end, I'll just have to take down my sign. – Ah, yes, once things were good: there was scarcely a play then without an inn and its innkeeper. I still can recall the hundreds of plays in which the greatest intrigues were prepared right in this very room . . . (Tieck 1996: I, iv)

The play is taken up and presented as a play and, as with language, refusing to countenance the illusion that it refers to anything beyond itself. Of course this sort of self-referential device is hardly distinctive of the period that we call Romanticism, but one of the ways that the Jena authors are distinguished from earlier models is that, as the critic Peter Szondi notes about Tieck, the *actor* is not 'stepping out of his role' (a standard comic device at least since Aristophanes) – rather, the *character* is asserting its self-consciousness as a character (Szondi 1986: 72). The character knows itself as such – it becomes self-conscious of its fictional status.

This in fact brings us to the heart of the German romantic philosophy of literature: the idea of a literature that contains a moment of critical self-consciousness. Schlegel famously writes, the 'theory of the novel would itself have to be a novel' (Schlegel 1958–: 2: 337). Like Tieck's innkeeper, the novel will know itself as such and reflect on what it can and should be as a work of art. The fairy tale reveals its own meaning as nonsense, the naked presence of language working its perverse arabesque. Moreover, this points back to the romantic 'death of the author' as discussed earlier – the work is spawning its own intrinsic level of theory (this is precisely the 'tendency' of the novelistic genre that took Goethe by surprise). In this sense, the work even can do without the author – although the properly 'characterised' author could always join the fun within the text itself (as in the romantic's beloved *Tristram Shandy*).

2.5 Some Recent Appropriations

Needless to say, twentieth-century philosophers have found the romantic conceptions of language and literature both prescient and congenial to their own ideas. De Man writes:

There is a machine there, a text machine, an implacable determination and a total arbitrariness, *unbedingter Willkür* . . . which inhabits words on the level of the play of the signifier, which undoes any narrative consistency of lines and which undoes the reflexive and the dialectical model, both of which are, as you know, the basis of any narration . . . (De Man 1996: 181)

According to De Man, romantic wordplay (and in particular irony) play a deconstructive role, undermining any consistent narrative. Deconstructive critics like to cite Friedrich Schlegel's famous adage: 'it is equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to combine the two' (Schlegel 1970: 167, #53). Although deconstructive readings usefully foreground the notion of language as a transcendental operator, it would be misleading to push Romanticism too far in this direction: Romanticism had an expansive tendency and a creative optimism foreign to deconstruction. The romantics were concerned not with what they were tearing down but with what they were building up, their projects and poetry. The romantics refer texts to the conditions of their possibility by characterising the author, letting language come to the fore and so on, but this is no deflationary technique. They did not dwell on the simultaneous inevitability and impossibility of the traditional narrative form. They wanted to explore alternatives: to write fairy tales and poetry and play with their 'dazzling colours'.

It remains the case, however, as the deconstructive critic will be quick to point out, that the Jena romantics generally failed to do so, often quite spectacularly. Most of their works remained fragmentary. Intentionally or not, their projects were never completed and many of them even died young; all in all, they left an infamous legacy of the partial and incomplete. Maurice Blanchot takes up this theme and suggests that perhaps Romanticism isn't simply unfulfilled, but rather introduces a new mode of fulfilment: 'the works' power to be and no longer to represent . . .' (Blanchot 1993: 353). The project of Romanticism, for Blanchot, is pure self-assertion, a pure act of self-conscious declaration of independence of literature, the 'theoretical wing of the French Revolution'. Blanchot writes:

[T]o write is to make (of) speech a work, but that this work is an unworking . . . to speak poetically is to make possible a non-transitive speech whose task is not to say things (not to disappear in what it signifies), but to say (itself) in letting (itself) say . . . (Blanchot 1993: 357)

In other words and strictly in keeping with themes that we have discussed above, language is the subject and language is in control. It does not speak for the sake of anything but itself. Blanchot considers this 'the work of the absence of (the) work; a poetry affirmed in the purity of the poetic act . . .' (Blanchot 1993: 353) The presentation of language itself and by itself is the revelation of the now rather impersonal act of *poesis* and all this abstracted from content or meaning. Again, we return to the theme: Romanticism is the presentation of transcendental subjectivity and nothing other than this presentation, according to Blanchot, but the subject is simply language itself.

3. Revolutions

The notion of the literary text which the romantics developed appears remarkably self-absorbed and does not seem to leave much room or role for an audience or readership. And in fact we see in many romantic pronouncements a mixture of indifference and contempt for the audience, or at least a sense that it is superfluous, as J. S. Mill wrote: 'All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy' (Mill [1833] 1897: 205). And Keats declared his independence too: 'I never wrote one single Line of Poetry with the least Shadow of public thought' (Keats [1818] 2009: 138).

In fact, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century are marked by a dramatic change in the nature and significance of the audience for the arts. This is perhaps most striking in the case of music, where the system of patronage (by the Church or court) was coming to an end; musicians were left to compose for a much more impersonal public. But the same transition was taking place in all the arts, where the growing importance of the marketplace was helping to create a new social role for artists and intellectuals as salesmen for their manuscripts, paintings and compositions (see Löwy and Sayre 2001: 48). This change in social function was registered in the art itself, as the artist became much more lonely and isolated a figure. One historian writes of British Romanticism that

the new conditions, an art marketed rather than an art commissioned, also imposed upon the artist-intellectual the symptoms of disorientation. The necessity to communicate with a large public to which no individual could relate created large problems, of form and tone, and also imposed peculiar strains such as alienation and 'modern literary *Angst*'. (Butler 1981: 71)

But the situation in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century was even more problematic, because the reading public barely existed. The narrow size of even the potential pool of readers was further reduced because the German aristocracy still preferred to read French writers – the market for German books was perhaps a twelfth the size of that for books in French (Brunschwig 1974: 140). Whether or not the romantic authors desired an audience, they did not have one.

But the romantic malaise went deeper than this. As one historian writes about the situation in late eighteenth-century Prussia:

Thus, wherever he turns, the middle-class young man graduating from the university cannot find what he is seeking. He cannot always make a career in the civil service; and the state of society is not such as to enable him to earn a living purely as an intellectual. The consequence is that the ranks of the dissatisfied swell; petty officials, theological candidates, tutors, briefless barristers, doctors with no practice and writers with no readers come to the bitter conclusion that society has not furnished them with a place worthy of their deserts. (Brunschwig 1974: 146)

So the romantics had no effective outlet for their ambitions. This suggests a new angle on Romanticism, as a sort of *ressentiment* (or, minimally, frustration) in the face of an unpropitious social situation. No less an expert than the French romantic Chateaubriand claims that the ideas characteristic of Romanticism derive from the 'irritation of the stifled passions fermenting all together'. As he writes: 'our imagination is rich, abundant and full of wonders; but our existence is poor, insipid and destitute of charms' (Chateaubriand [1802] 1856: 296–7). Nor have critics hesitated to link these stifled passions to feelings about the French Revolution. Political conditions in England and Germany were simply not favourable to revolution; for instance, there was no unified polity in Germany. Reinhold, accordingly, commented that: 'Germany, of all European countries, is most inclined to revolutions of the spirit, least inclined to political revolutions' (quoted in Abrams 1973: 349). Henri Brunschwig reconstructs Reinhold's observation according to the logic of *ressentiment*: 'Excluded from active life much against their will, [the romantics] take refuge in literature' (Brunschwig 1974: 163) – and even there they are denied a means of effective expression. Romanticism on this reading is the privatisation of revolution, an involuntary retreat into a dream of illusory self-realisation after the possibility of real transformation has been rendered impossible.

The diagnosis of Romanticism as *ressentiment* was taken up, perhaps most famously, by Nietzsche. He echoed Goethe in declaring that Romanticism was 'sick', in contrast with 'healthy' classicism (although Goethe was thinking about French Romanticism). What Nietzsche had in mind was that the lack of rigour and resolution in Romanticism – the sentimentality and appeal to affect – had an attraction for and affinity with bodies in a state of decline or decadence. Not being capable of acts of genuine strength and intellectual rigour, romantics valorise inaction and fuzzy-headed sentiment.

The romantics make no secret of their interest in and (at least initially) sympathy for the French Revolution, 'the master theme of the epoch in which we live', as we have seen Shelley say. Wordsworth had wanted to lead the Girondin faction in Paris in 1792 and harboured explicitly revolutionary goals for poetry (Hindle 1999: 69); and, although only Caroline Schlegel among the Germans was directly involved in revolutionary political activities, the Early German Romantics embraced a republican ideal and wanted to radically rethink literary conventions and social norms – the role of the author and

the status of women. Nor did the romantics hesitate to connect and compare their ideas with the great events in Paris. Hazlitt writes of the Lake Poets:

[T]his school of poetry had its origin in the French Revolution, or rather in those sentiments and opinions which produced that revolution; and which sentiments and opinions were indirectly imported into this country in translations from the German about that period. (Hazlitt [1818] 1970: 215)¹⁰

For his part, Friedrich Schlegel famously declares that the three 'tendencies' of the age are Fichte, the French Revolution and Goethe and continues:

Whoever is offended by this juxtaposition, whoever cannot take any revolution seriously that isn't noisy and materialistic, hasn't yet achieved a lofty, broad perspective on the history of mankind. Even in our shabby histories of civilization . . . many a little book, almost unnoticed by the noisy rabble at the time, plays a greater role than anything they did. (Schlegel [1797] 1970: 190, #216)

So books, even if they are unnoticed when written, can be more important than revolutionary deeds. German idealism took this notion as central, as we clearly see from the elevated historical role Hegel gives to philosophy, in addition to Schelling's pronouncements on the subject in 1804:

The golden age . . . is to be sought, not by an endless and restless progress and external activity, but rather by a return to that point from which each of us has set out – to the inner identity with the Absolute . . . This will not be a gradual progress, it will be the true revolution, the idea of which is utterly different from that which has been called by that name. (Schelling 1856–61: 6: 564)

Again, the true revolution will be in ideas and not deeds.

This certainly elevates the role of intellectuals – or perhaps radically overestimates it, according to Marx, now very distant from Romanticism when he insists in the *German Ideology* that 'liberation is a historical and not a mental act' (Marx and Engels 1976: 44). There is, of course, no reason (even on Marx's terms) why it cannot be both, but there is still a question of priority and the passages above establish pretty clearly where the romantics stand. Jerome McGann comments critically on this notion in his seminal study *The Romantic Ideology*:

The idea that poetry, or even consciousness, can set one free of the ruins of history and culture is the grand illusion of every Romantic poet. This idea continues as one of the most important shibboleths of our culture, especially – and naturally – at its higher levels. (McGann 1983: 91)

We are back to the theme of Romanticism as a spectre haunting our modern consciousness. According to McGann, we are still in Romanticism's trap, to the extent that we believe in the transformative power of consciousness and locate solutions to human problems in a realm of ideas.

McGann's position is a helpful corrective to a tendency in some of the scholarship to accept the romantics' own insistent self-mythologising. But at the same time it is too facile to dismiss Romanticism as ideological. Culture might be ideology, but it is not *merely*

ideology.¹¹ So what are we to do? One approach is to understand the material factors as such as distinct from Romanticism proper; they have an impact, but only insofar as they are taken up by the movement (and this taking up can be in the manner of repression). The French Revolution can and did occasion a wildly disparate set of responses and so cannot be considered to play any decisive role in determining the specific and interesting nexus of ideas and impulses that we know as Romanticism. Moreover, the changing social relations of patronage and the lack of an audience cannot be said to determine the existence or nature of Romanticism. Rather, these factors are occasions – they open up the space – for a new intellectual and artistic relationship between the writer and the public. So there are more nuanced ways of viewing the relation between romantic culture and its material base than simply one of ideology. Nor do we need to accept McGann's contention about the ideological function of romantic thought. Rather than viewing the dominant impulse of Romanticism as an impotent retreat from active life into the narcissism of interiority, we might, perhaps, view it rather as a productive and inventive set of protests against the depredations of an increasingly alienating society. The nostalgia for homecoming and wholeness, the project of re-enchantment, imply (at the very least) a criticism of a reality that is alienating. The romantic resistance was not necessarily of an exclusively progressive nature – Romanticism has reactionary impulses as well, looking to the Middle Ages as much as (if not more than) to the future for signs of how to solve the problems of the present, the increasingly apparent horrors of capitalist modernity.¹² But much more radically, as we have been arguing throughout this paper, romantic nostalgia is no simple escapism, but is in fact highly complicated and self-critical. It is a call to self-examination and the self that is discovered – when one is discovered – is hardly reassuring. More likely it is ironic, decentred, impersonal, transcendently inaccessible, a conclusion that undermines any reassuring ideology of the well-centred individual as a subjective locus of control. Romanticism often refuses to portray a fantastic solution to alienation because it refuses to portray any solution at all. Marx, at times, seems more utopian than Schlegel.

Whether or not our modernity is recognisably romantic, we undeniably are still working through a set of problems that Romanticism was the first to raise – not least the identity of Romanticism itself. Perhaps Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy were right to say: '[L]iterature, as its own infinite questioning and as the perpetual positing of its own question, dates from Romanticism and as Romanticism. And therefore . . . the romantic question, the question of Romanticism, does not and cannot have an answer' (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988: 83). But Schlegel, characteristically, merely deferred the moment of truth: designating his age not the Age of Romanticism but rather the 'Age of Tendencies', he wrote:

As to whether or not I am of the opinion that all these tendencies are going to be corrected and resolved by me, or maybe by my brother or by Tieck, or by someone else from our group, or only some son of ours, or grandson, great-grandson, grandson twenty-seven times removed, or only at the last judgment, or never: that I leave to the wisdom of the reader, to whom this question really belongs. (Schlegel 1970: 264)

And it still does.

Notes

1. Lovejoy doesn't reject the term completely; he pluralises it and urges us to recognise the existence of multiple romantic movements.

2. Michael Ferber (2005: 6) usefully summarises the history of lists of characteristics proposed for a definition of Romanticism.
3. When applicable, references to Schlegel include fragment number (indicated #) after page number.
4. The Lake Poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge and Robert Southey) were first identified as a group in a vituperative context as well, by a contemporary critic, Francis Jeffrey, who branded them revolutionary dissidents (for discussion, see Hindle 1999: 66).
5. Marx relies theoretically both on a contrast with the medieval era (in which exploitation is present but directly visible) and with a notional era of primitive communism. See Löwy and Sayre 2001: 95; Welchman 1995.
6. See, for instance, Michael Riffaterre's analysis of Wordsworth's *Yew-trees* (Riffaterre 1981).
7. However, see Dalia Nassar's contribution in Chapter 2, for an alternative reading of the relationship which emphasises the continuity between Romanticism and idealism.
8. O'Brien sees the *Fichte-Studien* as the 'decisive point . . . in the history of German Romanticism: the point at which Romanticism turns away from idealistic philosophy, or more precisely, turns back upon it in order to analyze it as language and ultimately, as a fiction' (O'Brien 1995: 78).
9. This is in line with the ideas of the *Sturm und Drang* philosopher Johann Georg Hamann (considered by Isaiah Berlin to be the progenitor of German Romanticism: Berlin 2000). Hamann had already attempted a linguistic interpretation of Kant, considering the categories of the understanding from Kant's first *Critique* to be essentially categories of language.
10. Indeed, this is a leading and perhaps one of the more plausible theories of the unity of Romanticism: it is not the case the Germany spread its theories abroad (a theory that has little empirical support) but rather that comparable social conditions in different countries (and specifically comparable responses to the French Revolution) produced a similar sort of literature. See Butler 1981: 74.
11. Recent scholarship has challenged McGann's thesis; see Malpas 2000.
12. Löwy and Sayre (2001) argue that Romanticism is essentially a critique of capitalism.

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