

Le Romantisme
et après en France

Romanticism
and after in France

Volume 17

John McKeane and
Hannes Opelz (eds)

Blanchot Romantique
A Collection of Essays

Peter Lang

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The work of French writer and essayist Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003) is without doubt among the most challenging the twentieth century has to offer. Contemporary debate in literature, philosophy, and politics has yet to fully acknowledge its discreet but enduring impact. Arising from a conference that took place in Oxford in 2009, this book sets itself a simple, if daunting, task: that of measuring the impact and responding to the challenge of Blanchot's work by addressing its engagement with the Romantic legacy, in particular (but not only) that of the Jena Romantics. Drawing upon a wide range of philosophers and poets associated directly or indirectly with German Romanticism (Kant, Fichte, Goethe, Jean Paul, Novalis, the Schlegels, Hölderlin), the authors of this volume explore how Blanchot's fictional, critical, and fragmentary texts rewrite and rethink the Romantic demand in relation to questions of criticism and reflexivity, irony and subjectivity, narrative and genre, the sublime and the *neutre*, the Work and the fragment, quotation and translation. Reading Blanchot with or against key twentieth-century thinkers (Benjamin, Foucault, de Man), they also examine Romantic and post-Romantic notions of history, imagination, literary theory, melancholy, affect, love, revolution, community, and other central themes that Blanchot's writings deploy across the century from Jean-Paul Sartre to Jean-Luc Nancy. This book contains contributions in both English and French.

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Blanchot Romantique

Le Romantisme et après en France
Romanticism and after in France

Volume 17

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Peter Lang

Oxford · Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Wien

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Abbreviations

Unless indicated otherwise, all references to the writings of Maurice Blanchot will be given in the text, using the abbreviations listed alphabetically below. Abbreviations have also been given for frequently cited secondary sources. Place of publication for items in French is Paris, unless specified otherwise.

Works by Maurice Blanchot

- A *L'Amitié* (Gallimard, 1971).
AC *Après coup*, précédé par *Le Ressassement éternel* (Minuit, 1983).
AM *L'Arrêt de mort* (Gallimard, 1948), n. edn 1977 (s. L'Imaginaire).
CI *La Communauté inavouable* (Minuit, 1983).
CL *Chroniques littéraires du Journal des débats, avril 1941–août 1944*, ed. posth. by Christophe Bident (Gallimard, s. Les Cahiers de la NRF, 2007).
DH *Le Dernier homme (nouvelle version)* (Gallimard, 1977), n. edn 1992 (s. L'Imaginaire).
ED *L'Écriture du désastre* (Gallimard, 1980).
EI *L'Entretien infini* (Gallimard, 1969).
EL *L'Espace littéraire* (Gallimard, 1955), n. edn 1988 (s. Folio Essais).
EP *Écrits politiques: Guerre d'Algérie, Mai 68, etc. (1958–1993)*, ed. posth. (Lignes/Léo Scheer, 2003).
FJ *La Folie du jour* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973), n. edn 2002 (Gallimard).

- FP *Faux pas* (Gallimard, 1943), n. edn 1971.
- IM *L'Instant de ma mort* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994), n. edn 2002 (Gallimard).
- IQ *Les Intellectuels en question* (Fourbis, 1996), n. edn 2000 (Tours: Farrago).
- LS *Lautréamont et Sade* (Minuit, 1949), n. augm. edn 1963.
- LV *Le Livre à venir* (Gallimard, 1959), n. edn 2003 (s. Folio Essais).
- MV *Au moment voulu* (Gallimard, 1951), n. edn 1993 (s. L'Imaginaire).
- PAD *Le Pas au-delà* (Gallimard, 1973).
- PF *La Part du feu* (Gallimard, 1949), reprinted 2005.
- TO *Thomas l'Obscur (nouvelle version)* (Gallimard, 1950), n. edn 1992 (s. L'Imaginaire).
- VV *Une voix venue d'ailleurs* (Ulysse-fin de siècle, 1992), n. augm. edn 2002 (Gallimard, s. Folio Essais).

Other Works

- AL Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Absolu littéraire: théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Le Seuil, s. Poétique, 1978).
- KA XVIII Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. by Ernst Behler et al., 35 vols (Munich/Paderborn: Schöningh, 1958–), XVIII: *Philosophische Lehrjahre: 1796–1806* (1963).
- KS Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Schriften*, ed. by Wolf Dietrich Rasch (Munich: Hanser, 1964).
- SW I Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael Jennings et al., 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), I: 1913–1926 (1996).

Introduction: The Absolute, the Fragmentary

Pas au-delà – de la religion: de la Littérature et de la politique, et même de ce qu'on nomme si emphatiquement l'éthique.

— PHILIPPE LACQUE-LABARTHE, 'L'Agonie de la religion'¹

Opening ... an Epoch

Blanchot romantique? Our title could perhaps be greeted with surprise, and certainly with a question. On one level, its provocation must remain sterile, unless one abolishes all literary-historical perspective. On another level, Romanticism does seem to singularly resist such a perspective. Whilst it refers of course to a circumscribed period or atmosphere, Romanticism also stands for *the* demand – whether naïve, necessary, or both – that such circumscriptions be abandoned, in favour of an all-consuming, unreasonable, infinite or absolute mode of literary experience, whereby the poetic, the philosophical, and the political (if such substantives can register some of the broader stakes raised by our title) enter into an entirely new kind of relation. It is, in brief, the presence of this demand that this volume aims to measure: in Blanchot's work, in contemporary work on Blanchot, and as such, in what we know today as criticism, literary theory, the *roman*, the fragmentary, the *neutre*, the subject, community, affect, and revolu-

1 In *Revue des sciences humaines*, 253 (January–March 1999), 227–29 (p. 229).

tion – to mention only some of the major topics explored in the essays collected here.

If there is a sense in which Romanticism may still be ‘notre *naïveté*’ (AL, 27; original emphasis), as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy argued in the late 1970s, perhaps it can be located in what Lacoue-Labarthe termed ‘la notion romantique (et spécifiquement romantique) de *mélange*’² (his emphasis). And if Romanticism implies – *specifically* – ‘[une] époque du mélange’,³ that epoch, by all accounts, is still wide open: it goes today under the name of ‘interdisciplinary studies.’ In an age in which the combination of different modes of thought and writing is sought more fervently than any single thought or writing, what Blanchot offers is not just a unique way of relating literature, philosophy, and politics, but also a way of keeping vigil over the very modalities of relation, over the irreducible distance or space separating/relating one form of discourse from/to another. Such a vigilance is, perhaps, precisely what Romanticism gains from an encounter with Blanchot. In any event, the question of how Romanticism and those in its wake seek to respond to this demand to draw together the literary, the philosophical, and the political, is one of the more enduring questions Blanchot’s writings would have us consider – and consider with the gravity of an almost ethical decision.

Such are, at least, some of the more general considerations that a Romantic experience of literature lays bare in the vicinity of Maurice Blanchot. That this experience owes much to a German tradition and that such a debt had to be negotiated alongside other contending traditions raises further questions, to which we shall have to return. But what can be sensed from the outset, regardless of cultural genealogies, is that Romanticism in Blanchot forces us to recognize that literature is not about producing ‘des œuvres belles, ni de répondre à un idéal esthétique’ but involves instead ‘une expérience qui intéresse le tout de la vie et le tout de l’être’ (PF, 153–54). In fact, it seems that through this recognition

2 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, ‘Présentation’, *Poétique*, 21 (1975), 1–2 (p. 1).

3 Ibid.

Romanticism marks the inaugural site of a mode of writing that does not only create but does so in view of a total Work (be it in the form of an impossible *roman* eroded by what Blanchot famously terms *désœuvrement*), and therefore that Romanticism is not just an island of gloriously uncontrolled inspiration amidst a history of art or literature, but rather the tectonic jolts of an experience mobilizing aesthetics, philosophy, politics, history, life, being, and perhaps much more than this: something, or better, *anything*, that cannot be named.

We continue to record today the aftershocks of this experience. Each of the fourteen chapters of this volume explores, in its own way, the implications of using Blanchot as a seismograph for Romantic, counter-Romantic or post-Romantic tremors. Accounts are given of Blanchot's approach to literary imagination, language, irony, self-reflexivity, and the sublime; they range from Jean Paul and Hölderlin to Blake and *Frühromantik* (the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, Schleiermacher, etc.). What's more, these writers and poets are set in relation to philosophical readings of reason and its critique, as they figure in, for example, Kant, Fichte, or Hegel.⁴ The chapters also propose counterpoints to Blanchot's thought, relating it to other key twentieth-century thinkers, from Walter Benjamin to Paul de Man, from Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. Moreover, the names, briefly though pointedly evoked in this volume, of Albert Béguin, Roger Ayrault, Antoine Berman, Jean-Marie Schaeffer, and Olivier Schefer are also a sign of what an encounter with – and, in some cases, a resistance to – a Romantic Blanchot might hold for specialist debates in France on German Romanticism. Finally, a crucial aspect of reading Romanticism over Blanchot's shoulder (and of reading Blanchot over Romanticism's shoulder) to which this volume aims to draw attention is Blanchot's own practice as a writer of novels, *récits*,

4 This latter characteristic is forcefully underlined by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy in *L'Absolu littéraire*: 'le lieu de naissance du romantisme [d'Iéna] se situait dans la philosophie' (AL, 374). This is also the line of enquiry taken up by Simon Critchley in his *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 85–138 (p. 88).

and fragmentary texts; it is addressed here with regard to both theme (the transformations of love in *L'Arrêt de mort* (1948) or the two versions of melancholy in *Au moment voulu* (1951), for instance) and genre (the relationship between the idyll and the novel, for example, or between the fragment and what Blanchot would call 'l'exigence fragmentaire'). This volume, then, not only proposes the Romantics as decisive interlocutors for Blanchot, ranking alongside better-known ones such as Kafka, Rilke, or Char; it also proposes that the various Romanticisms examined in this collection, by figuring prominently in the work of one of the past century's most indispensable writers, act as a source of what is challenging and important in modern literary studies.

We should not be led to believe, however, that Romanticism has become any more or any less relevant in the three decades since Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy published their seminal *L'Absolu littéraire: théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (1978), firmly under the sign of Blanchot.⁵ As Novalis once wrote, '[n]ature and insight into nature arise at the same time, just as antiquity and knowledge of antiquity; for one makes a great error if one believes that the ancients exist. Only now is antiquity starting to arise [...]. It is not actually given to us – it is not already there; rather, it must first be produced by us'.⁶ Our current paradox is perhaps this: to believe that the Romantics exist is to subsume one's own

5 Amongst other instances: 'Blanchot, et quelques autres [...] nous ont permis de lire les textes du romantisme' (AL, 421). Cf. also the 1975 special issue of *Poétique* entitled (with Victor Hugo's phrase) 'Littérature et philosophie mêlées'; Lacoue-Labarthe, its editor, opens with: 'Le programme que nous suivrons ici, il appartient en fait à Maurice Blanchot de l'avoir tracé'; 'L'Imprésentable', *Poétique*, 21 (1975), 53–95 (p. 53).

6 Quoted in Walter Benjamin's appendix ('The Early Romantic Theory of Art and Goethe') to his doctoral thesis, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism' (1919), in SW I, 182. As Benjamin explains, Novalis's target was Goethe's 'doctrine of the canonical validity of Greek works' (SW I, 182). On the relations between Romanticism and classicism (Rome, Greece), see also AL, 11, 19–21, 381–82, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'L'Imprésentable', 61–62. See also, in the present volume, Gisèle Berkman's various inquiries, via the thought of Benjamin and Foucault, into

perspective under an understanding of history, of art, of the philosophy of these disciplines, that is rendered impertinent by a thinking first made available by the Romantics. But before we conclude with Blanchot that 'le romantisme [...] ouvre une époque; davantage, il est l'époque où toutes se révèlent' (EI, 522), it is perhaps worthwhile asking precisely the kind of questions such a conclusion would radically dislodge. For, dislodging them, we may begin to clear a path in the direction of what Blanchot called 'l'essence non-romantique du romantisme' (EI, 524).

Where Is Romanticism?

'Où est le romantisme?' (EI, 517), asks Blanchot in a text which is central to this volume, 'L'Athenæum', first published in August 1964 in the *Nouvelle Revue française* and subsequently collected in *L'Entretien infini* (1969). The question is worth asking, not just because of what Blanchot has to say about Romanticism's initial, excessive output in Jena, its lethargic decline in Vienna, but because it raises, more generally, the issue of whether on Blanchot's reading Romanticism belongs to a distinctive place and culture. Indeed, if, as Blanchot claims, '[les] premiers assauts romantiques' (518) came predominantly from a German tradition, and from the *Athenæum* in particular, one might be tempted to ask whether Romanticism in Blanchot is limited to that tradition and that review. Admittedly, Dove Cottage, for instance, is not easily located – if at all – on Blanchot's Romantic map;⁷ and aside from fleeting references to later English Romantics such as Byron,

the historicity of Romanticism, and Ian James's discussion of the political heritage of Romanticism between Novalis, Blanchot, and Nancy.

7 As far as we can tell, neither Wordsworth nor – perhaps more surprisingly (given his lasting engagement with German Romanticism) – Coleridge are mentioned in Blanchot's œuvre.

Shelley or Keats,⁸ a brief survey of Blanchot's incursions into Romantic territory would offer relatively little detail on Romantic activities taking place on the other side of the Channel.

Nevertheless, British Romanticism is not altogether absent from Blanchot's Romantic topography. It is, in effect, in connection with an early British Romantic – one of the very first Romantics *tout court* (in many ways, Blanchot's interest in Romanticism, as we shall observe later, is an interest in *beginnings*) – that this apparent absence is alleviated. As Ian Maclachlan reminds us in his contribution to this volume, Blanchot's engagement with William Blake and his characteristically Romantic conception of the imagination would be crucial in determining his own conception of the image and what will be termed, after – but already increasingly at odds with – Sartre, 'l'imaginaire'. Even so, despite the fact that he discusses key aspects of British Romanticism – and, one should add, particularly in relation to the imaginary or what he also often calls 'le merveilleux' or 'le fantastique', of American Romanticism –,⁹ Blanchot's Romantics, one is compelled to conclude, are not primarily British (or American).

Nor can they be found, for that matter, in France ... Unless, of course, the term can be restricted, reinscribed or delayed to fit a select number of individual poets and writers whom Blanchot, in what is perhaps his other decisive text on Romanticism (judging at least from how often it is cited in this volume), sets apart from 'la plupart des romantiques français'

8 See, for Byron, FP, 184; PF, 205; and LS, 65, 97; for Shelley, CL, 603; for Keats, EL, 238, n. 1.

9 We think, for instance, of his reading of Melville, his sporadic references to Poe or, more rarely, Hawthorne. On Melville, see FP, 273–77; 'L'Enchantement de Melville', *Paysage Dimanche*, 27 (16 December 1945), 3; LV, 15–17; ED, 175. On Poe, see CL, 195, 201, 203, 241–44, 564, 569, 601–02, 603; FP, 184–86, 260–61; PF, 251; 'Du merveilleux', *L'Arche*, 27–28 (May 1947), in *Maurice Blanchot: récits critiques*, ed. by Christophe Bident and Pierre Vilar (Tours/Paris: Farrago/Scheer, 2003), 33–45 (p. 33); EL, 349; LV, 322; and EI, 530; see also Sergey Zenkin's essay in this volume. On Hawthorne, see CL, 203; 'L'Enchantement de Melville', p. 3; 'Du merveilleux', p. 33; and LV, 211.

(CL, 549).¹⁰ Published in February 1944 in the *Journal des débats*, the text in question, whose title – ‘De Jean-Paul à Giraudoux’ – speaks to a Romanticism that, while rooted in a German tradition, clearly defies cultural boundaries, is worth quoting at length, if only because it is little known:¹¹

À l'aube du romantisme, Jean-Paul représente certains partis pris dont les romantiques français n'ont pas discerné la valeur, mais qui après eux ou en dehors d'eux ont pénétré profondément notre temps. Le principal est le caractère d'expérience reconnu à la littérature; la littérature devient une manifestation spirituelle; elle introduit celui qui la recherche dans un mode d'existence nouveau; elle est une sorte d'ascèse qui nous permet d'accéder à une vie plus authentique: en un mot, elle a pour l'écrivain une signification mystique. [...] Alors que, pour la plupart des romantiques français, l'art est subjectif parce qu'il révèle les mouvements intérieurs, exprime l'intimité personnelle, pour le romantisme ou le pré-romantisme des Hölderlin, des Jean-Paul, des Novalis, comme pour un Nerval ou un Rimbaud, l'art est subjectif parce qu'il met en cause ce que l'artiste a de plus profond, non plus seulement pour l'exprimer, mais pour le transformer. Pour nos romantiques, l'art garde une valeur psychologique, il est expression sincère, miroir fidèle; pour les romantiques étrangers, la littérature a

10 At the expense, then, of earlier – and perhaps more traditional – French Romantic poets like Lamartine, Hugo, or Musset. For Blanchot's ambivalent though (perhaps unexpectedly) positive assessment of Lamartine, see his ‘Situation de Lamartine’, in FP, 175–79, as well as occasional references in CL, 142–43, 255, 353, 375, 395. For rare references to Hugo (often coupled with Lamartine), see FP, 98, 176, 237; CL, 48, 90, 142–43, 255, 352; LV, 160; and VV, 131. Musset, for his part, is hardly mentioned at all; see CL, 352, 456, 458. As for Romantic or pre-Romantic French prose writers such as Rousseau or Chateaubriand, discussions of their work are, on the whole, equally scarce (with the exception of Sade, of course, about whom we shall have more to say in a moment). On Rousseau, see in particular ‘Cette affaire infernale’, in CL, 227–32 and ‘Rousseau’, in LV, 59–69; see also CL, 477, 658; FP, 301; PF, 241; and EI, 3, 540. For Blanchot's reading of Chateaubriand, see ‘Le Secret de Chateaubriand’, in CL, 595–98, as well as brief references in CL, 142; PF, 239; LV, 277; EI, 328; and A, 150; see also Sergey Zenkin's contribution to this volume.

11 Christophe Bident's recent volume (see CL) collecting the *chroniques littéraires* Blanchot published in the *Journal des débats* from April 1941 to August 1944 (Bident's edition excludes the articles already collected in *Faux pas*) has largely contributed to bringing Blanchot's earlier readings of Romanticism into focus.

une valeur d'engagement: elle n'exprime pas, elle bouleverse; elle est à la fois moyen de connaissance et pouvoir de métamorphose; vivre, écrire, c'est un même acte. La poésie est une expérience magique. (CL, 549)

For a Nerval or a Rimbaud.¹² Readers familiar with Blanchot would have doubtless added Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Proust or Gide.¹³ Contemporaries such as Bataille or Michaux, as Christophe Bident points out in his chapter (p. 85), could also be included in this disparate community. Not to mention Blanchot himself. Yet is it appropriate to speak here, even loosely, of community? Setting aside, for now, the main issue at stake in the extract cited above – the question of literary *expérience* ('le caractère d'expérience'), of how such an experience absorbs, disrupts, and transforms the writer's existence – one might wonder whether, in the context of a profoundly subjective – if desubjectifying – experience of literature, Blanchot would have accepted such a term. To put in blunt and downright brutal terms: is Romanticism, as the quoted passage seems to imply, something that pertains to the singular, almost mystical experience of an individual writer or poet, exposing him/her to what Blanchot would famously describe, in *L'Espace littéraire* (1955), as a 'solitude essentielle'? Or does it necessarily entail, on the contrary (though it is perhaps less a contradiction than an occasion for contemplating a deeper, double exigency combining conflicting demands), a collective, impersonal venture,

- 12 Nearly the same constellation of names (relating German Romanticism to one or more of the following French poets: Nerval, Lautréamont, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé) had already appeared in a number of Blanchot's articles published in the *Journal des débats*; see, for example, his June 1939 review of Kléber Haedens's *Gérard de Nerval ou la sagesse romantique* (1939): 'Un essai sur Gérard de Nerval', *Journal des débats*, 22 June 1939, 2, as well as his May 1942 article 'Réflexions sur la jeune poésie' and his July 1942 piece on Lamartine mentioned earlier (both collected in *Faux pas*): FP, 149–53 (p. 149), 175–79 (p. 176). See also FP, 339 and CL, 125.
- 13 For a passage cast in almost exactly the same terms as the one quoted above but in which the French counterpart is not Giraudoux but Gide (we shall come to it later on), see Blanchot's November 1942 article on *Les Nourritures terrestres* (1897), in FP, 337–42 (p. 339).

as, for example, Blanchot's interpretation of the *Athenaeum* in the 1960s and, contemporaneous with that interpretation, his own project for the *Revue internationale* would suggest?¹⁴

The question is perhaps never posed as such by Blanchot but it emerges in – if only in the margin of – his later reading of Romanticism, when he states, for instance, in a footnote to his 1964 essay on Jena Romanticism, that 'Hölderlin n'appartient pas au romantisme, il ne fait pas partie d'une constellation' (EI, 518, n. 1).¹⁵ A tension would seem to surface here between, on the one hand, Blanchot's earlier reading of Romanticism in which Hölderlin can be happily grouped together with Novalis under the heading of 'romantisme' or 'pré-romantisme' in order to affirm a deeply personal – though never psychological, sentimental or simply expressive – experience of literature radically calling into question 'ce que l'artiste a de plus profond' and as such deemed common to a selection of German (pre-)Romantic and French (post-)Romantic ('après eux') poets and writers spread across the eighteenth, nineteenth, and (following the direction of Blanchot's title: 'De Jean-Paul à Giraudoux') twentieth centuries; and, on the other hand, his later reading of Romanticism in which Hölderlin is distinctly removed from any Romantic constellations, a reading which not only reinforces Romanticism *as* the exigency of a constellation, of a distinctive group or movement – namely, the collective undertaking that produced the *Athenaeum* – but also confines its manifestation to the 'deux années, de 1798 à 1800' (EI, 520) in which the celebrated review appeared.

¹⁴ On the (failed) project of the *Revue*, undertaken in the wake of the 'Déclaration des 121' on the right to insubordination in the Algerian War and elaborated together with a host of other contemporary literary figures (including Dionys Mascolo, Robert Antelme, Louis-René des Forêts, Maurice Nadeau, Roland Barthes, Michel Butor, Michel Leiris, Marguerite Duras, Elio Vittorini, Italo Calvino, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Alberto Moravia, Francesco Leonetti, Hans Enzensberger, Uwe Johnson, and Günter Grass), see EP, 45–69. We shall return to this project toward the end of the introduction.

¹⁵ On Hölderlin's non-Romanticism, see also LV, 315, as well as Blanchot's letter to Vadim Kozovoï, 26 August 1983, in *Lettres à Vadim Kozovoï*, ed. by Denis Aucouturier (Houilles: Manucius, 2009), p. 106.

This is not the place to address the debate around Hölderlin's ambiguous position within or vis-à-vis Romanticism.¹⁶ Nor can we answer, at least at this stage of our enquiry, the question of whether, in Blanchot's view, a writerly community is possible or desirable and if so, under what circumstances. What we can say, however, is that Romanticism, after exposing a subjective experience of literature upsetting subjectivity, made such a question paramount – and all the more so when writers and poets find themselves (as was the case in the wake of the French Revolution and as would be the case again in the early 1960s) at what Blanchot termed 'un [...] moment extrême du temps' (EP, 50). (To be sure, one of the key objectives of the *Revue internationale* was, at least from Blanchot's perspective, an attempt to answer precisely that question.) That Blanchot's conception of '[une] écriture plurielle, possibilité d'écrire en commun' (EI, 526) or what he also referred to, responding to contemporary political demands, as 'un communisme d'écriture' (EP, 97), would eventually be paired – under the pressure of fragmentary, anonymous, and unavowable exigencies – with a disabling of traditional configurations (literary or otherwise) of community and that such a disabling engages not just literary experience, criticism, and theory but operates, as Ian James's and Martin Crowley's contributions make clear, at the level of the political, the ethical, the ontological, and even the technological, are considerations that Romanticism, through

16 As Michael Holland notes (pp. 114–16), a similar ambiguity arises, albeit in a different context, in relation to Jean Paul. One should add, in passing, that whilst Holland's piece is among the first to concentrate on Blanchot's relation to Jean Paul, much critical attention has been given to Blanchot's readings of Hölderlin (particularly in relation to Heidegger's readings of Hölderlin), which is also one of the reasons Hölderlin figures only intermittently in this volume. On Blanchot and Hölderlin, see, among others, Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 77–91; Robert Savage, 'Between Hölderlin and Heidegger: The "Sacred" Speech of Maurice Blanchot', in *After Blanchot: Literature, Criticism, Philosophy*, ed. by Leslie Hill, Brian Nelson and Dimitris Vardoulakis (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 149–67; and Mark Hewson, 'Two essays by Blanchot on Hölderlin', *Colloquy*, 10 (November 2005) <<http://colloquy.monash.edu.au/issue010/>> (accessed 7 July 2010).

the *Athenæum*, through Blanchot's reading of it, and through the reading of that reading in the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, has bequeathed to us. This opens up a unique genealogy of modern literature and, perhaps more importantly, of literature as a mode of modern *thought*, as 'la passion de penser' (EI, 518), or more precisely, anticipating a line of thought drawn out by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, to which we shall return, as 'le [...] vertige d'approfondissement théorique' (518).

From the perspective of these broader considerations, understanding Blanchot's position on Romanticism can go beyond the local, partial interest or game of influences it might seem. Such an understanding would not only touch his views on various models of community, whether bound together by work or worklessness, thus allowing us, for instance, to measure, as we shall do later, the degree and kind of political activity permitted to a writer *as a writer*. It would also allow us to think along fundamental lines about the definition of literature as something reaching well beyond itself, open to or mingled with its other, whether it be 'life' ('vivre, écrire, c'est un même acte') or something – *anything* – else: the political and the philosophical certainly, but also (to offer examples that would deserve attention in a discussion of Blanchot and Romanticism but cannot be explored within the space of this introduction) biography, death, madness, orality, affect, etc.¹⁷ If, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy remark, 'c'est [...] seulement dans l'ombre portée du romantisme que notre modernité aura pu inventer de rapporter à la littérature même les accidents censés être les plus extérieurs

17 This new-found availability of life to art, or what those with a more critical perspective saw perhaps as a desperation of art in its search for new material, led the authors of the *Athenæum* to write: 'Romantic poetry [...] embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest systems of art, containing within themselves still further systems, to the sigh, the kiss that the poetizing child breathes forth in artless song'; *Athenæum* Fragment 116, in Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by Peter Firchow, foreword by Rodolphe Gasché (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 31. This attention to life is glossed by Blanchot as: 'la reprise de la poésie, non seulement par la vie, mais même par la biographie, par conséquent le désir de vivre romantiquement' (EI, 524).

de son histoire: à commencer, par exemple, par la mort de Novalis ou par la folie de Hölderlin' (AL, 390), literature and the arts after Romanticism can no longer be defined merely in terms of place or culture; casting their nets ever more widely, they would entail something of the order of an absolute, introducing 'un mode d'existence nouveau'.

When Is Romanticism?

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. To return to the idea of '[une] possibilité d'écrire en commun' introduced above, the question of Romanticism as a collective effort seems nonetheless to have been a distinctly German one for Blanchot. Certainly, there are references in Blanchot's earlier, war-time criticism to '[le] groupe turbulent des Jeune France dont Théophile Gautier et Gérard de Nerval sont restés les maîtres' (CL, 255). But only Nerval appears frequently in Blanchot's work, not the group; and appears not so much as a master *of* or *within* Jeune France than as 'un artiste unique dans un monde de solitude et d'orgueil, où il a été conduit non par l'arbitraire, mais par la pureté de son art'.¹⁸ Besides, Blanchot is rather sceptical of Jeune France, criticizing it, for instance, for its banal, superficial provocations, its bohemian, farcical character, its futile upheavals. Despite these shortcomings, however, he does see in it a moment in which literature is associated 'à quelque chose qui la dépasse' (CL, 255), a point at which poetry 'se met en cause et ouvre à l'homme un prodigieux abîme où tout lui devient impossible, même la poésie' (256) – an abyss, of course, which the best part of Blanchot's writings can be said to pursue: the void – or, to speak in a language that would pervade so much of his subsequent work: death, absence, the (*other*) night – in which literature affirms itself by withdrawing or renouncing itself and becomes a reality, so to speak, by abolishing the

18 Maurice Blanchot, 'Un essai sur Gérard de Nerval', p. 2.

real. And yet it is not, Blanchot seems to suggest, the ‘romantisme intégral’ (255) of the Jeune France venture that was able to draw effectively all the consequences of being ‘au-delà de ses limites’ (256). In their frenzied agitation, the ‘lycanthropes’ or ‘hommes-loups’, as they were called, revealed (only) ‘des causes plus sérieuses dont les mouvements littéraires prendront quelques années après nettement conscience’ (255). In effect, as a literary movement, it was less in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries that ‘true’ Romanticism could be found in France – that is to say, true to the (self-)negating demand it carries (or ought to carry) – than in the twentieth: more exactly, in surrealism.

‘[C]ette tendance que les surréalistes se sont plu à redécouvrir’ (CL, 256), this propensity that not only negates the world but ‘se détruit lui-même’ (256) and thus directs its movement ‘vers quelque chose qui est comme rien’ (256), this legacy whereby ‘c’est vraiment le langage qui s’ouvre’ (259) and, in that opening, confers upon the poetic a remarkable force of liberation, a self-conscious, efficacious ‘outrance’ (256), would be confirmed, decades later, by Blanchot’s reading of the Jena Romantics: ‘le surréalisme se reconnaît dans ces grandes figures poétiques et reconnaît en elles ce qu’il découvre à nouveau par lui-même: la poésie, puissance de liberté absolue’ (EI, 515). Indeed, to respond to this freedom, Blanchot maintains in his 1964 article, to abide by this ‘principe de liberté absolue’ (521) – itself governed by ‘le principe de destruction qui est son centre’ (522) – was one of the *revolutionary* exigencies of the ‘parole créatrice’ (521) affirmed in Jena Romanticism. We shall return in a moment to this ‘parole’, to this freedom in/of literary language, and, more generally, to literature’s relation to the political and in particular the political as revolution. Suffice it to say, at this stage, that if ‘l’avenir’ Blanchot evokes at the end of his essay on the *Athenæum* may be construed in terms of a collective task, this future belonged also intimately to surrealism.

From this perspective, Romanticism extends well beyond a given period or movement marked out by historians, well beyond ‘le romantisme empirique’, to borrow Gisèle Berkman’s expression (p. 65); it transcends its empirical manifestation, forever haunting those coming in its wake. In a

sense, what Blanchot says of surrealism in a well-known essay collected in *La Part du feu* (1949) could just as well be said of Romanticism:

Personne n'appartient plus à ce mouvement, et tout le monde sent qu'il aurait pu en faire partie. Il y a dans toute personne qui écrit une vocation surréaliste qui s'avoue, qui avorte, apparaît quelquefois usurpée, mais qui, même fausse, exprime un effort et un besoin sincères. Le surréalisme s'est évanoui? C'est qu'il n'est plus ici ou là: il est partout. C'est un fantôme, une brillante hantise. (PF, 90)

The comparison with surrealism can be explored further,¹⁹ of course, but what such an exploration would show, among other things, is that the question 'when is Romanticism?', as Blanchot's war-time parallels between German (pre-)Romantic and French (post-)Romantic poets had already indicated, suffers from the same displacements as the question 'where is Romanticism?' with which we began. The question, then, is how Romanticism, outside mere considerations of influence, exceeds the 'where' and the 'when'; in other words, we need to investigate the conditions of this excess and get a clearer sense of how this excessive (transcendental, displacing, haunting) movement takes place by exacerbating or interrupting historical or cultural contingency.

Admittedly, though, Blanchot's reading of Romanticism, particularly from the 1960s onwards, does privilege, as suggested earlier, a place (Jena) and a period (1798–1800). This is not to say that his reading of German Romanticism is limited to the leading figures behind the *Athenaeum* (the Schlegels, Novalis, Schleiermacher, et al.). We have already noted the importance of Romantic 'outsiders' like Hölderlin or Jean Paul. What's more, Blanchot refers – albeit, often, only briefly – to a host of other German Romantic poets and writers, from *Sturm und Drang* to *Spätromantik* – Hamann, Goethe, Schiller, Tieck, Wackenroder, Hoffmann, Brentano,

19 For example, around the question of language and/as the subject, compare what Blanchot says of Jena Romanticism in *L'Entretien infini* (EI, 524) with his account of surrealism in *La Part du feu* (PF, 93).

Solger, Arnim, Heine, Mörike, Waiblinger, etc.²⁰ –, not to mention a number of thinkers associated, directly or indirectly, with Romantic beginnings or legacies, such as Kant, Lessing, Herder, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, or Nietzsche. Blanchot's concentration on the *Athenaeum* did not prevent him, moreover, from drawing further comparisons between German Romanticism and (post-Romantic) French literary experiences – not just the experience of surrealism mentioned above but also, as Jake Wadham reminds us in his contribution (pp. 183–85), that of Paul Valéry, whom Blanchot once described as 'le plus romantique des hommes' (AC, 87). Finally, if Blanchot's engagement with Jena Romanticism in the 1960s was much more than an engagement with Jena Romanticism, it is also because it announced both a development in his own practice of writing as it underwent, from *L'Attente l'oubli* (1962) onwards, a distinctly fragmentary turn, and, from a theoretical-philosophical viewpoint, further reflections, in a much later work like *L'Écriture du désastre* (1980), on the fragment and the fragmentary, system and dialectics, subjectivity and death, language and ontology.²¹

20 Of this preliminary list, it is worth singling out Goethe, an early and fairly constant – if discreet – point of reference in Blanchot's work. On Goethe, see Holland's chapter in this volume. See also, for example, Maurice Blanchot, 'Journal d'un intellectuel en chômage', par Denis de Rougemont, *L'Insurgé*, 32 (18 August 1937), 4; CL, 220–26; FP, 306–10, 311–17; PF, 51, 65, 205; LS, 96, 113; 'Le Compagnon de route', *L'Observateur*, 11 (22 June 1950), 17; EL, 57, 97, 284, 286; LV, 18, 41, 45, 47, 135–36, 141–44, 239, 265; EI, 410, 473, 516, 518; A, 68, 73; ED, 183; AC, 92; as well as Blanchot's letters to Vadim Kozovoï, 7 August 1981, 26 July 1982, 24 November 1982, and 25 February 1984, in *Lettres à Vadim Kozovoï*, pp. 52, 78, 90–91, and 116, respectively.

21 See, for instance, Blanchot's discussions, in *L'Écriture du désastre*, of F. Schlegel (ED, 18, 94, 98–99, 101, 166, 205), A. W. Schlegel (170), Schelling (181), Schleiermacher (18), Novalis (18, 55, 56), Fichte (55), and Heidegger (168–71).

What Is Romanticism?

So if, from now on, when we refer to Romanticism we mean, for the most part, Early German Romanticism, and in particular the *Athenäum*, this interest in Romanticism's 'premier âge' (EI, 519) cannot be reduced to an interest in 'un moment important de l'histoire de l'art' (522) or 'une simple école littéraire' (522) or even '[un] art poétique' (518). If what goes under the name of 'Romanticism' thus excepts itself from notions of æsthetics and art history (and not just art history but, as we shall see, History *tout court*), what, then, is Romanticism? As is the case with Blanchot's well-known treatment of the question 'what is literature?' (which, after all, is also the question being posed when we ask: 'what is Romanticism?'), the endless answers such a question generates are an indication that something there stubbornly resists the closure of an answer and intends to remain radically open.²² But what makes Romanticism so unique in this interrogative scheme is the fact that, for the first time, the 'what is' question can be asked from *within* the domain of literature – and not simply from the outside: philosophy, politics, history, or any other discourse that would seek to subsume its object under its authority. And this is because literature now has a being (or so it seems) accessible to questioning. Art is no longer – or only – the work of representation (*mimesis*); in its Romantic demand, it becomes nothing less than the power *to be*: 'le pouvoir, pour l'œuvre, d'être et non plus de représenter' (EI, 518).

How did (Romantic) literature acquire this ontological status? The short answer is given in the opening paragraph (quoted above) of Blanchot's 1964 essay: 'la poésie, puissance de liberté absolue' (EI, 515). More exactly, this freedom, Blanchot argues, lies in Romanticism's self-reflexive power to reveal itself *to itself* – 'force d'autorévélation' (520), as he puts it. '[S]e manifester, s'annoncer, en un mot se communiquer' (521) corresponds to '[un] acte inépuisable qui institue et constitue l'être de la littérature' (521).

22 See, for example, EI, 279.

That this ontological institution or constitution is itself based on nothingness and infinite, affirmative negation was the conclusion reached in a discussion of language via Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel and Mallarmé in *La Part du feu*, the 1949 collection in which Blanchot had declared that 'rien trouve son être dans la parole et l'être de la parole n'est rien' (PF, 314). Producing an *other* world – what he referred to as 'l'irréalité' (330) or 'la réalité du langage' (319) – out of the conceptual annihilation of worldhood, of the real, literature, Blanchot had shown, is the experience of the nothingness, the nonexistence, the absence, the image, of whatever object it names. There is no room here to deploy Blanchot's complex theorization of literary language and its image, of the ways in which the order of both *mimesis* and *poiesis* can be reversed in a movement of *désœuvrement*.²³ Suffice it to say that, for Blanchot, the *Athenaeum* expressed this movement *avant la lettre*, revealing what he describes as 'l'essence non romantique du romantisme' (EI, 524) and laying bare the other, intransitive share of language – 'la nuit du langage' (524),²⁴ that is to say, '[le] langage devenu indisponible', as Jacques Rancière puts it, '[l'] image qui ne fait pas voir'.²⁵

23 On Blanchot's 'unworking' of *mimesis* and *poiesis*, see Ian Maclachlan's and Maebh Long's chapters in this volume.

24 '[T]outes les questions' of 'la nuit du langage' are densely summarized in his essay on Jena Romanticism: 'écrire, c'est faire œuvre de parole, mais [...] cette œuvre est désœuvrement; [...] parler poétiquement, c'est rendre possible une parole non transitive qui n'a pas pour tâche de dire les choses (de disparaître dans ce qu'elle signifie), mais de (se) dire en (se) laissant dire, sans toutefois faire d'elle-même le nouvel objet de ce langage sans objet' (EI, 524). Benjamin, too, speaks of literary language in terms of that which is 'unmediatable'; in fact, he employs a term also frequently used by Blanchot: 'magical'; see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Avant-propos' (1986), in Walter Benjamin, *Le Concept de critique esthétique dans le romantisme allemand*, trans. by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Anne-Marie Lang (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), pp. 10–13 (p. 12). A translation of this 'Avant-propos' by David Ferris, entitled 'Introduction to Walter Benjamin's *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*', is included in *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, ed. by Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 11–12 (p. 12).

25 Jacques Rancière, *La Parole muette: essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 1998), p. 98.

(It is, of course, this intransitivity or unavailability of language and the non-representational images it brings forth, in other words, ‘la réalité propre de l’irréel’ (EI, 477), that bursts through and interrupts, so to speak, Blanchot’s own fiction.)²⁶

Political Romanticism: ‘un très curieux échange’

Before addressing some of the ways in which Romanticism responds to this ‘langage sans objet’ (EI, 524), to this ‘parole non transitive’ (524), to the vacant, unworked plenitude of literature’s self-declarative ‘being’, before considering how this response boils down for Blanchot to the observation that ‘la parole est sujet’ (524), that ‘la vérité créatrice [se concentre] dans la liberté du sujet’ (525), it is worthwhile pausing here at one of the distinctive strategies employed by Blanchot – it would be no exaggeration to say that much of the originality of his literary-critical discourse depends on it – to account for the absolute freedom of literature and/as the (Romantic) subject, for what he also calls its ‘plus dangereux sens’ (520). Bluntly put, the strategy consists in drawing from the political – and in particular from the political *as* revolution – a new language to conceive of the literary. In truth, the political stakes of Romanticism are announced at the outset of Blanchot’s *Athenaeum* article, the opening line of which reads: ‘Le romantisme, en Allemagne et secondairement en France, a été un enjeu politique’ (515). Whilst Blanchot begins with a discussion of the splintered reception of Romanticism in Germany and in France, tracing appropriations and rejections of its legacy on both the left and right end of the political spectrum and eventually leading him to characterize Romanticism as

26 On Blanchot’s fiction and the image as a reflexive break or breaking through, see Holland’s and Zenkin’s contributions.

'l'exigence ou l'expérience des contradictions' (516),²⁷ his inaugural statement also introduces the wider problematic of the relationship between literary and political activity. If Romanticism, in the mode of self-revelation and -manifestation, is capable of opening up an epoch, if, as 'avènement de la conscience poétique' (EI, 522), it becomes something other than productive *poiesis* or reproductive *mimesis*, it is because it has recognized in the sphere of politics an event that coincides perfectly with its own: revolutionary action. Not, then, a *historical* event but the self-declarative, self-conscious event that *interrupts* and thus (un)makes history – the history of politics and the history of art, but also the history of History, so to speak.

A crucial passage at the heart of Blanchot's essay brings us closer to this revolutionary demand:

La littérature (j'entends l'ensemble des formes d'expression, c'est-à-dire aussi forces de dissolution) prend tout à coup conscience d'elle-même, se manifeste et, dans cette manifestation, n'a pas d'autre tâche que de se déclarer. En somme, la littérature annonce qu'elle prend le pouvoir. [...] Il n'est pas besoin d'insister sur ce qui est bien connu: c'est la Révolution française qui a donné aux romantiques allemands cette forme nouvelle que constitue l'exigence déclarative, l'éclat du manifeste. Il y a entre les deux mouvements, le 'politique' et le 'littéraire', un très curieux échange. Les révolutionnaires français, quand ils écrivent, écrivent ou croient écrire ainsi que des classiques et, tout pénétrés du respect des modèles d'autrefois, ils ne veulent nullement porter atteinte aux formes traditionnelles. Mais ce n'est pas aux orateurs révolutionnaires que les romantiques vont demander des leçons de style, c'est à la Révolution en personne, à ce langage fait Histoire, lequel se signifie par des événements qui sont des déclarations: la Terreur, on le sait bien, ne fut pas seulement terrible à cause des exécutions, elle le fut parce qu'elle se revendiqua elle-même sous cette forme majuscule, en faisant de la terreur la mesure de l'histoire et le logos des temps modernes. L'échafaud, les ennemis du peuple présentés au peuple, les têtes qu'on coupe uniquement pour les montrer, l'évidence – l'emphase – de la mort nulle, constituent non pas des faits historiques, mais un nouveau langage: cela parle et cela est resté parlant.

27 Readers of this volume will have an opportunity to consider the ways in which Blanchot's assessment of the (political) reception of Romanticism opens onto questions of community (see James's contribution), history (Berkman), and work (Wadham).

Lorsque l'*Athenaeum* publie cette annonce: 'Tu ne gaspilleras pas ta foi ni ton amour dans les choses politiques, mais tu te réserveras pour le domaine divin de la science et de l'art' [...], cette revue ne songe nullement à rejeter les conquêtes de la liberté [...], mais au contraire à donner à l'acte révolutionnaire toute sa force de décision en l'établissant au plus près de son origine: là où il est savoir, parole créatrice et, dans ce savoir et cette parole, principe de liberté absolue. (EI, 520–21)

Such lines would require far more patience than can be offered here. Not merely because of what they might say, more generally, about Blanchot's conception and experience of politics, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because of what they have to say about his conception and experience of literature. Examining, for instance, the trope of the guillotine ('l'échafaud, [...] les têtes qu'on coupe'), not an isolated one in Blanchot,²⁸ would lead us to a long – and much needed – discussion of the place of violence in his thought as a whole, which, whilst it certainly has important implications for Romanticism (the image of the beheaded revolutionary is, of course, an eminently Romantic image), would exceed the scope of an introduction. To keep to our task and to remain within the detail of the *relationship* established above between the literary and the political, it is worth noting that there is no sense that Blanchot is concerned, when discussing the revolutionary element at play in literature, with the empirical field of political realities, whether this involves a mutually exclusive relation between literature and politics (perhaps best exemplified by Hölderlin who, as Blanchot is wont to recall,²⁹ fearing that the Revolution was imperilled, contemplates dropping his pen altogether to fully take on the political struggle) or a scheme *identifying* language, political action, and responsibility (as is the case, for example, in Sartrean *engagement*). On the contrary, Blanchot is careful – and this care is already apparent in his pre-war critical writings, most notably in his 1937 article 'De la révolution à la littérature'³⁰ – to

28 It is found on at least three other occasions in his work; see Maurice Blanchot, 'Du merveilleux', p. 44; PF, 310; and LS, 186.

29 See EL, 282 and ED, 191.

30 See Hannes Opelz, 'The Political Share of Literature: Maurice Blanchot, 1931–1937', *Paragraph*, 33:1 (March 2010), 70–89.