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Blanchot's »Athenaeum«

Warum äußert sich das Höchste
jetzt so oft als falsche Tendenz?

Friedrich Schlegel, Ideen

Tendency, tendential, tendentious: What follows might well be inscribed within the semantic space that is contained between these three words. A tendency, the dictionary tells us, is »the fact or quality of tending to something, a constant disposition to move or act in some direction or towards some point, end or purpose; a leaning, an inclination, a bias.«¹ The more Germanic notion of *Tendenz* implies this sense of »drift or aim of a discourse« but also »the conscious or designed purpose of a story or a novel.«² In this sense, it is not far from an intrigue or a plot. If allowed to insist on two more directions emerging from this cluster of words, one might invoke »a political association with a larger party or movement«, and finally, in lieu of a punch-line to this set-up, mention the *Tendenziöse Witz* – that particular kind of joke which Freud tries to differ from innocent humor, as it is nothing other than a criticism disguised as a joke meant to make it socially acceptable. The following questions revolve around these words: Does all discourse that leans towards a result form a plot? What does it mean to speak of the »tendencies« of a past or a present critical movement? And finally, what happens when a tendentious joke gets past the reader unnoticed? These are just a few of the questions raised by the *Athenäum* fragment 216 on the greatest tendencies of the age. Beginning with this famous fragment, and its equally famous self-criticism, this essay shifts its focus to France in the 1970s, only to reflect back on an initial place in time: Jena, 1800. In a 1979 essay Tzvetan

1 »Tendency«. In: *Oxford English Dictionary*. Princeton, NJ, <http://www.oed.com> (04 March 2009).

2 Ibid.

168 Todorov accused Blanchot of falsely laying claim to the legacy of German Romanticism throughout his criticism and especially in his use of fragmentary writing. If one pays special attention to the lexicon of fragmentarity, tendency and neutrality, it becomes evident that not only had the operative terms of Todorov's attack already been aimed at Schlegel, they had also been ironically inscribed in his writing. Tracking these textual anticipations, echoes and repetitions offers a way to imagine the relationship between Schlegel's and Blanchot's fragmentary writing, without conflating the two. This line of inquiry suggests that writing which privileges the fragment has to deal with the inextricable relations between revolution, philosophy and literature, while criticism that invokes the tendencies of the age ends up being the object of its own *Witz*.

Schlegel's Tendentious Wit

Athenäum fragment 216 reads:

Die Französische Revolution, Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre und Goethes Meister sind die größten Tendenzen des Zeitalters. Wer an dieser Zusammenstellung Anstoß nimmt, wem keine Revolution wichtig scheinen kann, die nicht laut und materiell ist, der hat sich noch nicht auf den hohen weiten Standpunkt der Geschichte der Menschheit erhoben. Selbst in unsern dürftigen Kulturgeschichten, die meistens einer mit fortlaufendem Kommentar begleiteten Variantensammlung, wozu der klassische Text verloren ging, gleichen, spielt manches kleine Buch, von dem die lärmende Menge zu seiner Zeit nicht viel Notiz nahm, eine größere Rolle, als alles, was diese trieb.³

What exactly are we being given to read here, besides the startling constellation of the contemporary political moment, a philosophical doctrine, and a novel? Underwriting this ensemble is the not

³ *KFSA* 2, pp. 198 f.

so subtle insistence that breaks in the course of history are made possible not by the masses but by singular pieces of writing, »a little book« that remains unread by its contemporaries. But isn't all of this extrapolation already assuming too much? Isn't the most tendentious declaration of this fragment the very idea that there are such entities that could be named »the greatest tendencies of the age?« Friedrich Schlegel returns to this fragment in an 1800 essay, *Über die Unverständlichkeit*, which looks back to the project of *Athenäum* as a testing ground meant to gauge the possibility or impossibility of communication. The journal was meant for carrying out a variety of experiments either by those writing for it or else taking part in it as readers. Turning towards the obstructions irony poses to the possibility of communication, Schlegel exceptionally assumes both roles of reader and writer himself in order to gloss over the fragment: 169

Dieses Fragment schrieb ich in der redlichsten Absicht und fast ohne alle Ironie. Die Art, wie es mißverstanden worden, hat mich unaussprechlich überrascht, weil ich das Mißverständnis von einer ganz andern Seite erwartet hatte. Daß ich die Kunst für den Kern der Menschheit und die Französische Revolution für eine vortreffliche Allegorie auf das System des transzendentalen Idealismus halte, ist allerdings nur eine von meinen äußerst subjektiven Ansichten. Ich habe es ja aber schon so oft und in so verschiedenen Manieren zu erkennen gegeben, daß ich wohl hätte hoffen dürfen, der Leser würde sich endlich daran gewöhnt haben. Alles übrige ist nur Chiffersprache. (*KFSA* 2, p. 366.)

Thus the fragment was an »extremely subjective opinion« that we, its readers, are expected to »get used to« due to its repeated invocation by Schlegel. This conflation of revolution, transcendental philosophy, and art is to be understood, then, as a tendency in Schlegel's thought and to seek any deeper connections would be

170 »mere cipher language« (»nur Chiffersprache«). This may not be as simple or as trivial as it sounds. He continues:

Die Poesie und der Idealismus sind die Centra der deutschen Kunst und Bildung; das weiß ja ein jeder. Aber wer es weiß, kann nicht oft genug daran erinnert werden, daß er es weiß. Alle höchsten Wahrheiten jeder Art sind durchaus trivial, und eben darum ist nichts notwendiger als sie immer neu, und womöglich immer paradoxer auszudrücken, damit es nicht vergessen wird, daß sie noch da sind, und daß sie nie eigentlich ganz ausgesprochen werden können. (Ibid.)

This knowledge concerning the focal points (»Zentra«) of German art ascribed to everybody is of a very strange kind: not only is it trivial, but demands to be repeated forever in new forms, in order to remind those – or »everybody« – who supposedly possess it that not only does it still exist but that it has never and will never be entirely expressed. There would be much to say about these demands, but not before heeding the rest of what Schlegel claims is left to be misunderstood in the fragment, which deserves to be quoted at some length:

Etwas andres freilich ist noch in dem Fragment, welches allerdings mißverstanden werden konnte. Es liegt in dem Wort Tendenzen, und da fängt nun auch schon die Ironie an. Es kann dieses nemlich so verstanden werden, als hielte ich die Wissenschaftslehre zum Beispiel auch nur für eine Tendenz, für einen vorläufigen Versuch wie Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft, den ich selbst etwa besser auszuführen und endlich zu beenden gesonnen sei, oder als wollte ich, um es in der Kunstsprache, welche für diese Vorstellungsart die gewöhnliche und auch die schicklichste ist, zu sagen, mich auf Fichtes Schultern stellen, wie dieser auf Reinholds Schultern, Reinhold auf Kants Schultern, dieser auf Leibnizens Schultern steht, und so ins Unendliche fort bis zur ursprünglichen Schulter. – Ich wußte das recht gut, aber ich dachte, ich wollte es doch einmal versuchen, ob mir wohl

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jemand einen solchen schlechten Gedanken andichten werde. Niemand scheint es bemerkt zu haben. Warum soll ich Mißverständnisse darbieten, wenn niemand sie ergreifen will? Ich lasse demnach die Ironie fahren und erkläre gerade heraus, das Wort bedeute in dem Dialekt der Fragmente, alles sei nur noch Tendenz, das Zeitalter sei das Zeitalter der Tendenzen. Ob ich nun der Meinung sei, alle diese Tendenzen würden durch mich selbst in Richtigkeit und zum Beschluß gebracht werden [...] oder niemals; das bleibt der Weisheit des Lesers, für welche diese Frage recht eigentlich gehört, anheim gestellt. (*KFSA* 2, p. 366 f.)

Arriving so soon at the heels of the knowledge attributed to the common reader, this passage delivers a fatal blow to what »everybody« is supposed to know about German art. For the *Athenäum* fragment 216 was not so much the identification of »the greatest tendencies of the age,« as it was a criticism of the idea that there could be such a thing lurking beneath the phenomenal world. Given the importance accorded to this fragment by scholars in efforts to situate early Romanticism in relation to Fichteian Idealism, it is perhaps easy to forget that Schlegel, especially in his *Athenäum* years, was elaborating a *Grundsatzkritik* against Fichte, one which took the systematic ambitions of the philosopher's thought as its privileged target.⁴ Thus, in a roughly contemporaneous letter from June 9th, 1800, A. W. Schlegel declared to Schleiermacher that Fichte must find other collaborators since their respective conceptual projects had definitively parted ways, to the extent that the Schlegels were striving for unity through fragmentarity, and had once and for all cast aside a systematic approach to both form and content:

Fichte kann billigerweise nichts übel nehmen, unser Plan ist gänzlich von dem seinigen verschieden, er geht auf das Sys-

4 Ayon Roy has recently argued that the Jena lectures on Transcendental philosophy »place Schlegel between Hegel and Fichte« on the debate concerning irony and the underlying »epistemology of intuition« (*Anschauung*). Cf. Ayon Roy: »Hegel contra Schlegel; Kierkegaard contra de Man«. In: *PMLA* 124.1 (2009), pp. 107-126.

172 tematische in Inhalt und Form, wir finden es nicht möglich viele Dinge fürs erste anders als fragmentarisch in die Welt zu bringen, und suchen nur Einheit dem Geist und Streben nach. Er kann seinen Plan immer noch ausführen, nur haben wir ihm deutlich genug zu verstehen gegeben, daß er dazu andre Mitarbeiter suchen muß als uns.⁵

If according to the critical hypothesis, Romanticism >completes< Idealism, while opening up the ongoing history of this completion, it is important to note that this completion also takes the form of rupture and interruption. The nature of such completion is made doubly problematic since, in such a reading, the fragment does not exclusively emphasize the fracture that produced it: »At the very least, it designates [...] the edges of the fracture as an autonomous form rather than formlessness or the deformity of the break.«⁶ And yet looking back from *Über die Unverständlichkeit*, as well as passages from Schlegel's correspondence, the fault lines become slightly more evident. In hindsight, the trinity of revolution, philosophy and literature are the posse that stumbles into a particularly cruel kind of critical joke, a joke played on criticism, one whose true name we now know: the *Tendenziöse Witz*.⁷

5 A. W. Schlegel an Schleiermacher, 9. Juni 1800. In: *Aus Schleiermachers Leben in Briefen*. Wilhelm Dilthey, ed. Berlin 1971, vol. III., p. 184.

6 Jean-Luc Nancy/Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: *L'Absolu Littéraire*. Paris 1978, p. 62. (Unless indicated, all translations are my own.)

7 As Samuel Weber has argued in *The Legend of Freud*, insofar as jokes – like tendencies – involve condensation and displacement, Freud's attempts at articulating a theory of the joke are not without consequences for the constitution of any theory whatsoever that seeks to bring together disparate objects: »Having distinguished the major types of >tendencies< – obscene, hostile, sophisticated and skeptical – Freud once again sees himself confronted by the question of the character of jokes, of their organic unity: >If it is correct to say that pleasure provided by jokes depends on the one hand on their technique, and on the other hand on their tendency what common point of view will enable such different sources of pleasure to be brought together?< And we might ask further, will that >bringing together<, that *Vereinigung* be merely witty, or based on true understanding? Will it be a good theory, or merely a good joke? The theory of the joke, or a joke (on) theory.« Cf. Samuel Weber: *The Legend of Freud*. Stanford 2000, p. 129.

In a 1979 essay, *Reflections on Literature in Contemporary France*, Tzvetan Todorov took on Roland Barthes and Maurice Blanchot as the paradigmatic figures for contemporary conceptions of literature. Focusing on the use of the word »contemporary« in his title, Todorov writes:

Chronological objectivity is misleading, for at any given point in time, fragments of the past and future can be seen to coexist with the present. In order to clarify this more difficult meaning of the word *contemporary*, I am forced to review briefly the ideological context of the postwar years, so that I may then show how the various individual positions which seem to me to characterize most clearly our own present thinking are related to this ideological context.⁸

And yet immediately after this warning against the lure of finding false homologies in the present, he goes on to make the totalizing declaration that »the global context of the postwar years, in the area of aesthetics and literature, is that of Romanticism.«⁹ Romantic aesthetics are »summarized« in five points, which in turn yield five characteristic features: »production, intransitivity, coherence, syntheticism and the expression of the unspeakable.«¹⁰ The rest of

8 Tzvetan Todorov: »Reflections on Literature in Contemporary France«. Trans. Bruno Braunrot. In: *New Literary History* 10 (1979), pp. 511-531, p. 531.

9 Ibid., p. 511.

10 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 511-512: »Romantic aesthetics can be summarized in the following five points: (1) preference is given to the process of creation at the expense of the final product; (2) utilitarian and external functions are rejected, and art becomes defined in terms of »intransitivity« of its material (poetry, for instance, is language valued for its own sake); (3) the absence of external functions is compensated by the intensity of the internal system: the work of art is highly structured and is characterized by its coherence (»its organic form«); (4) art affects a fusion of opposites: form and content, idea and matter, inspiration and intention, etc. and (5) poetry and art express what they alone are capable of expressing: poetic ideas cannot be translated into everyday language; thus they admit of an infinity of interpretations.«

174 Todorov's essay is spent finding traces of these seminal features throughout the writings of Barthes and Blanchot, focusing especially on their parallel, yet independent theorizations of the »neuter« or the »neutral« (»le neutre«). The last page takes a striking turn by accusing Blanchot of falsely laying claim to the influence of German romanticism on his fragmentary philosophy. For Todorov, a recently converted opponent of theories he had championed in the sixties, Blanchot's claims to the romantic legacy, as well as the importance laid on »the necessity of recognizing the alterity of the other«, were thinly veiled attempts at hiding a cultural »egocentrism.« His final judgment declares:

These pages are inhabited by the same, such as it has been constructed by the Western European consciousness for nearly two centuries. And Blanchot's *oeuvre* no longer seems to be the diagnostic of a literature and a culture, but rather its symptom: it is like what it describes, and there is no place in it for what is *foreign* to it.¹¹

What is noteworthy here is how exactly Todorov constructs the case against Blanchot, which leads him to such a severe judgment. For he oscillates between claiming that Blanchot is merely repeating the clichés of Romanticism on the one hand, and that he is not faithful enough to this tendency on the other. Indeed, throughout his essay, Todorov cites fragments and phrases written by Blanchot and condemns them by writing that they might as well have been written by a »Friedrich Schlegel or a Solger.«¹² The overall effect could be attributed to the genre that German calls *Rechthaberei*, namely showing you are right by showing how someone else is wrong. Be that as it may, what, if anything, allows Todorov to claim

¹¹ Ibid., p. 523 (translation modified).

¹² To confound these two theorists of irony would have startled contemporaries who considered they held irreconcilable positions. Hegel famously used the opportunity to commemorate his Berlin colleague to deflate Schlegel's theory of irony in his article, »Solgers nachgelassene Schriften und Briefwechsel«. In: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Werke*. Bd. 11: *Berliner Schriften 1818-1831*. Frankfurt a. M. 1986, pp. 205-274.

that Blanchot is a »symptom« of ethnocentric criticism is that no matter what the topic at hand, the critical discourse Blanchot produces is always enunciated in the idiom of Romanticism: fragments, oxymora and paradoxes on the aporetic intransitivity of poetic language, which is ultimately a search for its own origins. Here Blanchot is being accused of nothing less than not being able to read. What he does instead is incessantly declare »the intimacy and violence of contrary movements which are never reconciled and cancelled out without destroying the work as work.«¹³ For Todorov, »it is evident that the tireless repetition of the same idea is precisely designed to fill Blanchot's book with this same interminable quest for the essence of literature.«¹⁴ To belabor the point, what is being held up as the >tendency< of contemporary literature is the bias to-

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13 Maurice Blanchot: *L'Espace Littéraire*. Paris 1955, p. 235; cited in Todorov: »Reflections on Literature in Contemporary France« (see footnote 8), p. 515.

14 Todorov: »Reflections on Literature in Contemporary France« (see footnote 8), p. 516. Another way of reformulating Todorov's accusation might recall the distinction between fragmentary and systematic writers that Isaiah Berlin uses at the beginning of his essay »The Hedgehog and the Fox«. In: *Russian Thinkers*. 2nd ed., New York 2008, p. 22: »There is a line among the fragments of the Greek poet Archilochus which says: >The fox knows many things, but the Hedgehog knows one big thing.< Scholars have differed about the correct interpretation of these dark words, which may mean no more than the fox, for all his cunning, is defeated by the hedgehog's one defence. But taken fragmentarily, the words can be made to yield a sense in which they mark one of the deepest differences which divide writers [...] in general. For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to one single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think or feel – a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance – and on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected if at all, only in some *de facto* way, for some psychological or physiological cause related to no moral or aesthetic principal [...]. The first kind of intellectual and artistic personality belongs to the hedgehogs, the second to the foxes [...].« Todorov, it seems, is accusing Blanchot of being a hedgehog – a thinker who has one great idea – but that idea turns out to be the fragment. This conflation of the fox and the hedgehog should not surprise readers of Schlegel who recall his identification of the fragment with the hedgehog itself: »Ein Fragment muss gleich einem kleinen Kunstwerke von der umgebenden Welt ganz abgesondert und in sich selbst vollendet sein wie ein Igel.« (*KFSA* 2, p. 197.)

176 wards the non-generic, the neuter, worklessness (*désœuvrement*) and the fragment; towards a privileging of process over product, towards a dialectics without synthesis; all of which are inscribed into the quest for the origin of the work of art. But this is what is being identified as a cliché of Romanticism, of a certain Romantic elevation of the sketch or the fragment above the completed work. All accusations of cultural >egocentrism< are hinged upon the observation, that while mimicking the essential jargon of Romanticism, Blanchot does not ever fully acknowledge its influence, speaking instead of »the non-Romantic essence of Romanticism« and declaring that the changes taking place today, in the post-war era, are »obviously more important [than those of 1789], a change toward which all previous historical transformations converge in an attempt to hasten the breakdown of history.«¹⁵ But this, as Schlegel might say, is where the ironies begin. For what Todorov assumes is that there was something called >Romanticism< in the first place, a doctrine whose essence was self-identical.¹⁶ For Blanchot, we are left with various images of Romanticism, because its different features can be isolated and chosen as significant traits. In his reading, the features most often retained are the desire for revolt, the refusal of tradition, the call for novelty, the consciousness of being modern, as well as being pure subjectivities without nation. On the other hand, features that could equally well be attributed to the Romantics but that are most often cast aside as being incidental include the taste for religion, the concern for the past and nationalist penchants. For Blanchot this opposition of features should determine how we deal with such a movement:

More important than any of these features as such is their opposition, the necessity of contradiction – what Brentano calls *die Geteiltheit* – and romanticism, characterized thus as the exigency or the experience of contradictions only con-

15 Todorov: »Reflections on Literature in Contemporary France« (see footnote 8), pp. 518–519.

16 It has often been noted that Schlegel himself wrote to his brother, A. W. Schlegel, »I cannot send you my definition of the word Romantic – for it is 125 pages long.« Friedrich Schlegel an A. W. Schlegel, 1. Dezember 1797; *KFSa* 24, p. 53.

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firms its vocation of disorder, a threat for some, a promise for others and for others still, an impotent threat, a sterile promise.¹⁷

This »dividedness« is itself variable depending on whether one chooses to define romanticism by its premises or its results, its beginnings or its endings.¹⁸ This is why the arrogance that Todorov identifies in Blanchot's privileging the present in his conception of literary history is nothing of the sort. For the >present< is not identical with the moment Blanchot is writing, but rather is a deictic now of writing as such, a »Jetzt-Zeit« to borrow Benjamin's term, which is never simply reducible to the present, let alone capable of being opposed to the past. Suspending any qualms one might have with Todorov's own methodology, one has to question what is at stake in his accusation of neutralizing tendencies inherited from Romanticism. Todorov gives his reader a clue in the form of a reminder that the neuter for Blanchot has to do not only with the non-general and the non-generic but also the non-particular. Neither subjective nor objective, it »presupposes an altogether different type of relation.« The neuter conceived of as such, is akin to the Nietzschean drive to ruin the category of the universal. As (Todorov quoting Blanchot quoting) Nietzsche writes:

I think it most important that we get rid of the Whole, of the One [...] we must shatter the universe into fragments and free ourselves from our reverent obsession with the Whole.¹⁹

17 Maurice Blanchot: »L'Athenaeum«. In: M.B.: *L'Entretien Infini*. Paris 1969, pp. 515-517, p. 516.

18 Ibid.

19 Maurice Blanchot: »Réflexions sur le nihilisme«. In: M.B.: *L'Entretien Infini*. Paris 1969, pp. 201-255: p. 229; also cited in Todorov: »Reflections on Literature in Contemporary France« (see footnote 8), p. 521. There is no reference given by either Todorov or Blanchot for this Nietzsche quotation. Similar formulations can be found expressed in the *Nachgelassene Fragmente*.

178 Although in Blanchot's view it is with Nietzsche that the »fragmentary work« gives way to the »fragmentary imperative«, such a sentiment is not entirely alien to Schlegel's early work and indeed it is arguable that it too should be associated with a larger philological project to neutralize if not destroy belief systems.²⁰ At this point, it is perhaps worth recalling the many stages that Schlegel's own notoriously protean career went through: from the neo-classical philological phase he shared with Goethe, through *Athenäum* and beyond, onto his Parisian and Viennese years. In that first analytic phrase, Schlegel the philologist already saw a relation between the fragment and the classic, especially insofar as his own explicit goal became to reduce the classical text to its constituent fragments, a kind of reverse philological operation inspired by F. A. Wolf, Joachim Wohleben, and Robert Wood's deconstruction of Homeric authority. It is this Schlegel for whom the part was more whole than the whole. As a philologist, Schlegel continues to use the fragment as a »Theoriebautechnik.«²¹ As Nikolaus Wegmann argues, writing in fragments becomes a means, to get around the mere restatement or one-sided resolution of paradoxes. Instead the fragment becomes a tool designed to elevate binaries – philosophy and philology, art and science, the formal and the material, *Kritik* and *Hermeneutik*, the spirit and the letter – into a calculated opposition, bringing them to an aporia. Although this gesture is repeated often enough in Schlegel's philological notebooks for one to identify something like a »philological imperative«, the critical goals of this imperative remain undetermined.²² What is nonetheless evident is that the philological drive or imperative being theorized here is in stark opposition to the universals that ground pre-critical notions of philology:

20 Christopher Strathman: *Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative: Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot*. Buffalo 2005, p. 163.

21 I borrow this reading of Schlegel from Nikolaus Wegmann: »Was heißt einen ›klassischen Text‹ lesen? Philologische Selbstreflexion zwischen Wissenschaft und Bildung«. In: *Wissenschaftsgeschichte der Germanistik im 19. Jahrhundert*. Jürgen Fohrmann and Wilhelm Voßkamp, eds. Stuttgart 1994, pp. 334-450.

22 Ibid., p. 375.

Schlegel macht nun die Kritik an einer Philologie, die ihre Einheit und Rationalität an äußeren Kriterien ausrichtet und entsprechend sich in ihrer Selbstdefinition auf Wert- und Substratbegriffe wie »Nation«, »Antike« oder »Volksgeist« verläßt, zur *Leitlinie* der eigenen Konzeption.²³

Rather than grounding itself on implicit notions of value, the activity of reading is what constitutes the philological object for Schlegel. For him, one can only read out of boredom or philology, and this is the difference between reading and reading something (*lesen* und *etwas lesen*.) But reading out of a philological drive, or reading something, could also mean to read something into the text, to make something out of the fragment. The threat of cyclical or repetitive reading is indelibly bound up with the very possibility of there being literature and literary classics. If the classical, for Schlegel is what must be studied repetitively, as it is never fully understood, then the fragment becomes a lever meant to interrupt such hermeneutic circularity. The fragment is the hiatus that allows one to move from the repetition implied by reflection towards presentation. In light of this excessively hasty sketch of Schlegel's own praxis of reading, one could see why critics suggest that classicism and romanticism be considered the results of an analogous textual operation.²⁴ The empty repetition of this operation, this praxis of reading, is what is being disputed by Todorov as an invalid heritage of German romanticism.

Infinite transmission

A year before Todorov published his article, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe did nothing less than attempt to explode the tarnished French image of the whole of German Romanticism

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 387: »Der Philologische Textbezug ist demnach eine *Praxis des Lesens*, die sowohl den *Geist* als auch den *Buchstaben* realisiert, die sowohl das Philosophisch-Spekulative des (Texts-)Sinns wie die unhintergehbare Buchstäblichkeit des Textes in *einem* Kalkül zur Anwendung bringt.«

180 into its constituent fragments. In large part, they did so by translating and commenting fragments by the Schlegels, Novalis, Hölderlin and Schelling. But should their book of fragments belie the idea of fragmentarity itself, in their reading they placed the emphasis on Jena and *Athenäum* not so much as a tendency, a movement, or a corpus, but rather the ironic reception, and dissemination of the category of the »romantic« itself:

The word and the concept »romantic« are indeed transmitted to the »Romantics« and their originality does not consist in inventing »Romanticism« but on the contrary on the one hand in recuperating from this term their own incapacity to name and conceive of what they are inventing, and on the other (one can suspect this of Friedrich Schlegel in any case) in dissimulating a »project« that exceeds, from every point of view what this term transmits.²⁵

Thus *Athenäum* becomes another name for the self-invention of literature, of theory as literature, and of literature as the bearer of its own theory; which inaugurates a crisis in aesthetic judgment, a disruption of the law of genre. The extent of the novelty is captured in Schlegel's famous phrase in his essay on Goethe's *Meister*:

Denn dieses schlechthin neue und einzige Buch, welches man nur aus sich selbst verstehen lernen kann, nach einem aus Gewohnheit und Glauben, aus zufälligen Erfahrungen und willkürlichen Forderungen zusammengesetzten und entstandnen Gattungsbegriff beurteilen; das ist, als wenn ein Kind Mond und Gestirne mit der Hand greifen und in sein Schächtelchen packen will.²⁶

This transcendence of transcendent criteria amounts to hermeneutic immanence, implying both that each work of art »necessarily

²⁵ Nancy/Lacoue-Labarthe: *L'Absolu Littéraire* (see footnote 6), p. 111.

²⁶ Friedrich Schlegel: »Ueber Goethe's *Meister*«. In: *KFSA* 2, pp. 126-146: p. 133.

and minimally exemplifies what it is to be a work of art, «²⁷ and per- 181
 haps, more incisively that no work of art can do so entirely. The
 radicalism of this aesthetic infinity and incompleteness should not
 be underestimated, for it ruins the possibility of our having any sta-
 ble image of Romanticism as a whole. And this incessantly variant
 potential for destruction and construction is also the interest of the
 Schlegelian fragment. It is not so much that we would be mistaken
 in grouping and thematizing the content of these fragments in
 terms of their reflection upon the infinity and indefinability of artis-
 tic process, or the transcendence of transcendence, or even the
 ironic inversion of *doxa* into paradox, but rather that whatever di-
 gested ›meaning‹ could be obtained through such a reading would
 have little relation to the fragments themselves, constituted as
 much by their virtual relations with one another, as by the blanks
 they leave on the page. Not to be grasped generically, the *Athenäum*
 fragments should be read in their tending towards a genre – *Gat-
 tung* – that itself remains forever out of reach.

In the *Brief über den Roman*, Schlegel specifies that the difference
 between the ancient and the moderns is one that should be local-
 ized in the elemental and non-generic nature of the Romantic. The
 Romantic is a trace-element of poetry, which may be more or less
 dominant, but never entirely absent. Unlike the novel, which, for
 Schlegel, hatefully tries to establish itself as a separate genre, *Ro-
 mantische Poesie* is an infinite conversation. *Athenäum* Fragment
 116, traditionally taken as closest thing to a Schlegelian manifesto
 famously declares:

Die romantische Poesie ist unter den Künsten was der Witz
 der Philosophie, und die Gesellschaft, Umgang, Freund-
 schaft und Liebe im Leben ist. Andre Dichtarten sind fertig,
 und können nun vollständig zergliedert werden. Die roman-
 tische Dichtart ist noch im Werden; ja das ist ihr eigentliches
 Wesen, daß sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann. Sie

27 Jay M. Bernstein: *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*. Cambridge 2003,
 p. xxxi-xxxii.

182 kann durch keine Theorie erschöpft werden, und nur eine divinatorische Kritik dürfte es wagen, ihr Ideal charakterisieren zu wollen. Sie allein ist unendlich, wie sie allein frei ist, und das als ihr erstes Gesetz anerkennt, daß die Willkür des Dichters kein Gesetz über sich leide. Die romantische Dichtart ist die einzige, die mehr als Art, und gleichsam die Dichtkunst selbst ist: denn in einem gewissen Sinn ist oder soll alle Poesie romantisch sein.²⁸

If romantic poetry is neither finished, nor fully analyzable, it cannot be fully understood either. To call poetry romantic would mean to point towards this ineradicable part of incomprehensibility, elemental to all poetry, to *poiesis* itself. And yet there is a law that is being transmitted here: a law that the will of the poet tolerates no law above itself. But before this leads to images of the solitary genius exulting in nature and literary creation, note that nothing is determined about the content of the poet's will. This is an empty transmission whose content changes along with each instance of writing; which amounts to saying that as long as any writer anywhere tends to write under the dictum »the will of the poet tolerates no law above itself,« we have not left the romantic moment and cannot speak of it in terms of a heritage – false or otherwise.

One could argue that the relation of *Athenäum* to its future too was predicated by Schlegel. *On Incomprehensibility* treats incomprehensibility itself not so much as an anathema, but a chaos preceding all works, the guarantor of art, life and happiness itself: »Und ist sie selbst, diese unendliche Welt nicht durch den Verstand aus der Unverständlichkeit oder dem Chaos gebildet?« (*KFSA* 2, p. 370.) For those who are still threatened by the impenetrability of *Athenäum*, Schlegel offers succor in the notion that the constellation of revolution, transcendental philosophy and the novel, itself superseded by the age of tendencies, will soon be outstripped by a new century:

²⁸ *KFSA* 2, p. 183.

Ein anderer Trostgrund gegen die anerkannte Unverständlichkeit des Athenäums liegt schon in der Anerkennung selbst, weil uns eben diese auch belehrte, das Übel werde vorübergehend sein. Die neue Zeit kündigt sich an als eine schnellfüßige, sohlenbeflügelte [...]. Dann nimmt das neunzehnte Jahrhundert in der Tat seinen Anfang, und dann wird auch jenes kleine Rätsel von der Unverständlichkeit des Athenäums gelöst sein. Welche Katastrophe! Dann wird es Leser geben die lesen können. Im neunzehnten Jahrhundert wird jeder die Fragmente mit vielem Behagen und Vergnügen in den Verdauungsstunden genießen können, und auch zu den härtesten unverdaulichsten keinen Nußknacker bedürfen. (*KFSA* 2, p. 370 f.)

Nothing of the sort is possible, of course, unless the fragments are themselves rendered palatable, unless the enigma is given a form that lends itself to solution. This remains impossible until and unless the fragments of *Athenäum* are renamed ›Romanticism,‹ and treated tendentially, rather than read. For if *Athenäum* has a project, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy insist, it is not of ›inaugurating a crisis in literature, but a general crisis and critique (social, moral, religious, and political: all these aspects can be found in the fragments) of which literature will be the privileged space of expression.«²⁹ This privileged literary space is where Blanchot takes up Schlegel's mantle, declaring the catastrophe, the disaster, latent not only in comprehension and reading, but in the act of writing literature. Indeed, in *L'Écriture du Désastre*, he criticizes Schlegel for not following through with the implications of his own discovery thoroughly enough:

The demand, the extreme demand of the fragmentary is at first obeyed lazily, as though it were a matter of stopping at fragments, sketches, studies: preparations or rejected ver-

29 Nancy/Lacoue-Labarthe: *L'Absolu littéraire* (see footnote 6), p. 4.

Blanchot's »Athenaeum«

184 sions of what is not yet a work. That the demand traverses, overturns, ruins the work because the work (totality, perfection, achievement) is the unity which is satisfied with itself – this is what Friedrich Schlegel sensed, but it is also what finally escaped him, though in such a way that one cannot reproach him with this misunderstanding which he helped and still helps us to discern in the very movement we share with him. The fragmentary imperative, linked to the disaster; this is surely what we must learn to think, without, perhaps ever knowing it.³⁰

Blanchot often comments upon the etymology of disaster as an astral change. It is as such a change of constellation, rather than in terms of neutralizing the tendencies of the so-called romantic age, that I propose we read what Blanchot takes from *Athenäum*. There are enough references to Jena and Schlegel scattered throughout Blanchot's writings for readers to be aware that this is a textual constellation to which his thinking returns. The main focus of a more sustained investigation could turn to the text bearing the title of Schlegel's review that was published in *L'Entretien Infini*, and proved to be a key text for Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe.³¹ Ironically enough, this is where Blanchot declares that Schlegel is the symbol of the vicissitudes of both Romanticism and its reception, not unlike the way Todorov has declared him to be the symptom of Western Eurocentric modernity.³²

For Blanchot, the Romantic character is attractive precisely to the degree that it »lacks all character;« it is »nothing other than the impossibility of being whatsoever that is determined, fixed, hard – hence the frivolity, the gaiety, the petulance, the madness: finally the *bizarrie* ...«.³³ Indeed, one of the enduring questions Blanchot has about Schlegel, could apply to his own bizarre career as a writer:

30 Maurice Blanchot: *L'Écriture du Désastre*. Paris 1980, pp. 98-99; *Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Nebraska 1995, p. 60.

31 Maurice Blanchot: »L'Athenaeum« (see footnote 17), pp. 515-527.

32 Ibid., p. 516.

33 Ibid., p. 525.

Who is the real one? Is the later Schlegel the truth of the former? Does the struggle against the banal bourgeois only engender a bourgeois who is exalted, then weary, and finally contribute to an exaltation of the bourgeoisie? Where is Romanticism? In Jena or Vienna?³⁴

Once more this political plasticity reminds us that the poet's will, placed above any law, as transmitted by *Athenäum* is above all the transmission of an infinitely paradoxical conception of writing, rather than anything resembling a political or poetical dogma. Much has and is being written about the range of tendencies captured by the phrase ›political romanticism,‹ from Schlegel's later essays in *Europa* to Carl Schmitt. What looking at the relations between Blanchot and *Athenäum* in depth might add to this understanding is this distinct conception of the matter attested to by the first sentence of his essay: »Romanticism in Germany and secondarily in France was essentially a political matter [...].« Blanchot insists that the legacy of a literary movement is necessarily political, a truth he illustrates by reminding the reader that German Romanticism was laid claim to by the most retrograde regimes of Friedrich-Wilhelm IV in 1840, as well as the literary theorists of Nazism. And yet it was also explained, defended and renewed by Dilthey and Ricarda Huch, while being attacked by Lukács, who could only spare Marx's favorite, E.T.A. Hoffmann. In France, Blanchot notes, German Romanticism was doubly rejected by the extreme right: since it was German and since it was Romantic. Only after the Surrealists recuperated Hölderlin, Novalis and Jean-Paul's conception of poetry as the absolute potentiality of and for liberty did this reception change. Henri Lefebvre and Albert Béguin's investigations into the Romantic roots of Marxism reminded French readers that there was »a new conception of art and literature that prepared ›other changes;‹ all oriented towards a refusal of traditional forms of political organization.« What French Marxism and Surrealism saw in Romanticism was the potential of the literary manifesto, as well as the manifestation of literature: »Art and literature seem to have

34 Ibid., p. 517.

186 nothing else to do than to manifest themselves and become capable of manifestation; what this reduction to manifestation implies is that literature must lay claim to everything.³⁵

The conversion that Blanchot's political career made in inverse relation to Schlegel, moving from a non-conformist ultra-conservative nationalism to an internationalism of the left, is made even more intriguing when we consider the non-programmatic conception of politics he shares with the experiment of *Athenäum*. It is arguable that what Blanchot sees in *Athenäum* informs not only his literary critical and poetic use of fragmentary writing – from 1962 onwards this would increasingly dominate his production – but also underwrote the collective and anonymous conception of authorship behind his extensive post-war political commitments, from the »Declaration of the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War,« written anonymously and signed collectively, to the many tracts, posters and bulletins he wrote during the May '68 movements. Most significantly, it was in his elaboration of a review – the *Revue Internationale* – along with French, German, Italian and English intellectuals that Blanchot conceived of a fragmentary rubric entitled the »Course of Things« which would collect information of every genre, without commentary, placing the burden of political judgment squarely with the new reader that it posited. The necessity of this new review, which would be neither »political« nor »cultural,« was articulated in terms of a new direction, namely total critique. As he wrote to Sartre:

I believe rather in a review of *total critique*, critique where literature would be understood in its own meaning [...] where scientific discoveries, often poorly explained, would be put to the test of holistic critique, where all the structures of our world, all the forms of existence of this world, would come in the same movement of examination, of research and of contestation, a review where the word critique would once again find its meaning as well, which is to be global.³⁶

³⁵ Ibid., p. 521.

³⁶ Maurice Blanchot: *Ecrits politiques*. Paris 2007, pp. 97-98 (*Political Writings*. Trans. Zakir Paul. New York 2010).

One of the formal innovations of the review was that local events 187 were only to be analysed by writers coming from a different nation and language.³⁷ By doing so, what the *International Review* sought to provide was a space where the event would not be subsumed under pre-existing categories, but rather exposed to the exercise of judgment, one which would ideally refuse the form and authority of political analyses penned by famous intellectuals, opting instead for the anonymous authority of the fragment. In this sense, the review relied on a distinct sense of politics, one that opposes analysis in favour of judgment.

Rather than concluding here, I would like to linger with a little fragment from a letter the Norwegian philosopher of science Henrik Steffens wrote to Schelling concerning the Schlegels in that fateful year, 1800. This excerpt goes a long way to suggest that the nexus of questions concerning tendencies and tendentiousness with which we began, has indeed been eating away at the very possibility of criticism for longer than anyone would like to recall. Steffens writes:

Sie wissen es, daß ich von jeher mit den Schlegels wenig sympathisierte. – Ihr Mangel an eigentlicher Wissenschaft war mir immer zuwider, und Friedrich Schlegels philosophierende Poesie ohne lebendige Gestalt und seine poetisierende Philosophie ohne tiefen Gehalt ist allerdings ein Produkt, in welchem sich die hohe Tendenz des Zeitalters durchdrungen, aber wahrlich auch neutralisiert hat. Daß Sie sich bald von diesen Menschen trennen würden, sah ich längst voraus. Ich trete auf die Seite der wahren Wissenschaft, die mehr ist als immer wiederkehrende, auf neue Art ausgeschmückte Bizarrie.³⁸

³⁷ Thus the *Spiegel* affair, would be analyzed by the French or the Italians, while the Germans would comment upon De Gaulle's return to power and the war in Algeria.

³⁸ Heinrich Steffens an Schelling, 1800. In: Friedrich Schlegel: *Fragmente*. Friedrich von der Leyen, ed. Jena/Leipzig 1904, p. 163.

188 Whether there is any »more,« namely a true Science more than an »eternally recurring, newly ornamented bizarreness«, which does not »neutralize« the »tendencies of an age«, is, as I hope to have suggested, itself an eternally recurring question that haunts literature in protean forms.³⁹ All of which is, perhaps, just another way to translate the following tendentious *Witz*: »Mit der Ironie ist durchaus nicht zu scherzen. Sie kann unglaublich lange nachwirken.« (KFSA 2, p. 370.)

39 Further attempts to try and articulate the poetic necessity of such bizarreness in Schlegel would have to deal with *Athenäum* fragment 429 that relates it to *Bildung* and freedom: »[...] Es gibt eine Bizarrerie der Begeisterung, die sich mit der höchsten Bildung und Freiheit verträgt, und das Tragische nicht bloß verstärkt, sondern verschönert und gleichsam vergöttlicht; wie in Goethes *Braut von Korinth*, die Epoche in der Geschichte der Poesie macht.« (KFSA 2, p. 250 f.)