

A Question of Tomorrow: Blanchot, Surrealism and the Time of the Fragment

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Abstract

This article offers a close critical reading of Blanchot's essay on Surrealism, 'Tomorrow at Stake,' raising a series of questions concerning the *time* of 'Surrealist experience' and its relation to those temporal structures inscribed within the concepts of modernity, the avant-garde, and (art) history itself. It is argued, through a posited connection to Romantic conceptions of the fragment, that those 'reflexes of the future' which for Surrealism determine the value of the present, may be understood, philosophically, in relation to *diverse* conceptions of the 'openness' of the question, in turn suggesting a more complex understanding of Surrealism's 'avant-garde' character.

Finally, the future belongs in its entirety to romanticism because romanticism alone founds it
(Maurice Blanchot)¹

The late Maurice Blanchot, that most enigmatic of twentieth-century critics and theorists, friend of Bataille and Lévinas, inspiration to Derrida, Foucault and Barthes, among others, is perhaps best known for his 'philosophical' readings of modern writers such as Hölderlin, Mallarmé and Kafka, as well as for his 'literary' meditations on thinkers like Hegel, Heidegger and Lévinas. Rather less well-known is the fact that he wrote two, surprisingly admiring, essays on André Breton and Surrealism that could be said to indicate a somewhat elusive debt to what he himself terms 'the deciding role [Surrealism] played in French literature.'² The first of these pieces, 'Reflections on Surrealism,' is to be found in *The Work of Fire*, a collection of review essays from literary journals, first published in France in 1949. The second, written some twenty years later, (and upon which I shall be concentrating in what follows), is entitled 'Tomorrow at Stake,' and appears as the penultimate chapter of what is perhaps Blanchot's most important (and intimidatingly monolithic) work, *The Infinite Conversation*. Despite the two decades that separate them, both open with a common concern. In what sense has Surrealism, Blanchot asks in the 1940s, and again in the 1960s, 'become historical'?³

It is this question, far more complex than it might first appear, that I would like to take as my starting point for the essay that follows. For it is, I will argue, a question which, as Blanchot phrases it, brings into focus a series of accompanying questions concerning the *time* of Surrealism and Surrealist experience itself – as what he terms 'a pure practice of existence...in a determinate temporal modality' – and its relation to the temporal structures inscribed within our customary conceptions of modernity, of modernism, of the avant-garde and, indeed, of (art) history itself. '[T]he history of surrealism,' Blanchot writes in 'Tomorrow at Stake,' 'is only of scholarly interest, particularly if the conception of history is not modified by its subject' (407). What, then, might such a modification involve, and what might it reveal about the stakes of Surrealism in general?



At the risk of moving too quickly, and of assuming too much, I want to pose this question by exploring the relationship between the time of Surrealism and that of the avant-garde. Now, in saying this, I must make clear that I am emphatically *not* referring to 'the avant-garde' as a conventionally received art-historical category – designating, say, the attack on the material institutions of art - but rather as a general *concept* through which particular movements or works articulate themselves or come to be articulated. It is the tension between this abstract 'conceptual' sense and the positioning of the avant-garde within the time of art history that, I think, Blanchot's comment on the historical character of Surrealism serves to indicate, and which has much wider implications for attempts to 'historicise' the work of the avant-garde in general. As such, reconsidering the relation of Surrealism to modernism or the avant-garde should not involve simply another minor rewriting of typological categorisations derived (usually with considerable simplification) from the likes of Clement Greenberg or Peter Bürger, but should invite us to reconsider the nature of the very concepts of modernism and the avant-garde themselves.

This goes, too, for the obvious connections which hold between the concepts of avant-garde and *modernity*. For beyond the apparently simple historical locatability of something called the 'avant-garde' within the disputed limits of a socio-historical periodisation conventionally marked by the name 'modernity,' the more fundamental issue, that any consideration of such a conjuncture must take account of, is that, as Calinescu puts it, both the concepts of modernity and that of an avant-garde 'reflect' 'intellectual attitudes that are [themselves] directly related to the problem of time.'⁴ As Peter Osborne has recently argued, more than being simply chronologically-locatable historical periods or forms, or even empirical phenomena which merely engage in identifiable ways with questions of time or history (as Calinescu might still be taken to suggest), terms like 'avant-garde' and 'modernism' also have particular open structures of historical temporality implicit 'within' them *as concepts* relating to the possible character of cultural experience, and which are inseparable from more general questions concerning the nature of historical *time* (including, crucially, the time of art history).⁵

I should say, at this point, that Blanchot himself never uses the actual term 'avant-garde,' in this sense or any other, but I want to suggest that, understood in this expansive conceptual form, it can be seen to be implicitly *in question* in the very title of Blanchot's essay, 'Tomorrow at Stake,' and in the attempt to think the temporal modality of *experience* appropriate to what he terms the 'surrealist affirmation.' It is this temporal modality that is captured, in all its generality, in Breton's famous assertion that: 'The work of art is valuable only insofar as it is vibrated by the reflexes of the future.'⁶ For what is at stake here – where precisely tomorrow is at stake – must be understood to concern the conditions of a certain openness to possibility in the present's *relation* to the future (given the inaccessibility of the future *as future* itself), involving, in turn, a more general question of how to conceive of the three classical, phenomenological dimensions of time – past, present and future – and their interrelation and organisation as a means to positioning the present of modernity; a question which is also precisely a question of how to think the cultural present *historically*. The specificity of the concept of an avant-garde, as it emerges from the mid-nineteenth-century intensification of modernity as a form of historical consciousness (most famously registered by Baudelaire), could thus be seen to



derive from the particular primacy it gives to the future – to tomorrow – in its construction of the present.⁷ Nonetheless, if the avant-garde is to be thought – as a general concept with certain historical conditions of emergence – in these terms, it is still the case that, far from presenting us with any univocal ‘programme,’ it embraces in fact a whole range of equivocal, and often conflicting, understandings of how such an affirmation of the future is itself to be conceived and manifested in specific, concrete cultural forms and practices. It is, therefore, in terms of the resulting politics of *conflicting* temporalities that Surrealism’s particular place within the history of modernism and the avant-garde should be reconsidered, in such a way as to ‘modify’ – as Blanchot demands – our conception of this history itself.

Rethinking the Romantic Precedent

It is in the light of these theoretical presuppositions that I want to approach Blanchot’s specific reading of Surrealism. There is, however, one final precondition for doing so; one that takes us into a more familiar area of Blanchot’s writing: his work on romanticism. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that Blanchot’s interest in Surrealism cannot be appreciated *unless* one approaches it in relation to his engagement with the writings of German romantics and with what he terms their inauguration of ‘an entirely new mode of accomplishment’ for the modern literary or art work (353). It is this engagement, then, that I shall seek, briefly, to elaborate before returning to Surrealism in the next section.

Of course, the connections between romanticism and the more general discourse of the avant-garde are easily acknowledged. Renato Poggioli famously talks of the avant-garde ‘renewing the romantic precedent’,⁸ while Calinescu finds the concept already implicit in texts like Shelley’s ‘Defence of Poetry’ written in 1821.⁹ Moreover, one recent theorist has, for example, suggested that Jena romanticism itself might be considered the ‘first modern instantiation’ of an avant-garde movement; avant-garde *avant la lettre*, as it were.¹⁰ As for Surrealism, it is in the (German) romantics, as Blanchot himself notes, that Surrealism ‘recognises itself...and recognises what it rediscovers on its own: poetry, the force of absolute freedom’ (351). And, indeed, such a historical relation of self-recognition is clearly posited in the writings of the Surrealists themselves. In Breton’s ‘Originality and Freedom,’ from the 1940s, for example, he cites as Surrealism’s forebears those ‘explorers in whom an insatiable desire carries to the verge of discovery – those for whom nothing matters except the continual surpassing of the goal already attained’; a temporal dynamic of exploration and non-identity which finds its original momentum, Breton asserts, in the likes of Hölderlin and Novalis.¹¹ This is romanticism, Breton writes elsewhere, ‘as a specific state of mind and temperament,’ to which Surrealism responds as an attempt to uncover ‘the subversive elements concealed within it.’¹²

This much is well established and needs little recounting here. Nonetheless, the connection between romanticism, and both Surrealism and the concept of an avant-garde more generally, should not be restricted to the form of a chronologically-delineated ‘art historical’ continuity forged solely by evidence of direct ‘stylistic’ or ‘thematic’ influence. Rather, I want to argue, if we are to understand its more fundamental historical meaning, what should be in question here is the much broader, and self-



defining, relation that each have to the developing general *temporal* logic of modernity, as I have outlined it above, and the structures of cultural historical experience it opens up.¹³ For, as Habermas asserts, it is in the 'romantic spirit' that one can see emerging the 'radicalised consciousness of modernity' of which we are 'still the contemporaries.'¹⁴ In this sense, it is the differential repetition, from romanticism onwards, of a general *modern* problematic – what can be described as the problem of how to *affirm* the non-identity of modernity and tradition while resisting modernity's dominant social formations¹⁵ – which precisely allows Surrealism's historical 'recognition' of what it 'rediscovers on its own' in romanticism.

This can, perhaps, be best approached, at least initially, through a consideration of the historical importance Blanchot accords to the particular concept of the *fragment* in romanticism, particularly in the work of Friedrich Schlegel, as one thematic which is clearly carried through to his readings of the Surrealist image and, elsewhere, of the poetry of René Char, upon which I shall come to focus in what follows. A crucial point in this respect is that, while the fragment may present itself as a certain kind of 'spatial' form, its character is always fundamentally temporal. This is why, for Blanchot, as for Benjamin, the fragment is distinctly 'modern' as a *question*.¹⁶ The temporal experience of the fragment (as of the ruin) is an experience of the present's 'incompletion' which can be understood, historically, in terms of the non-identity or irreconcilability of modernity and tradition at the cultural present. The experience of historical time that the fragment invokes is, thus, necessarily a peculiarly modern experience of *irreversible* time (as opposed to a 'mythical time') where 'nothing ever returns to an origin,' with the concomitant 're-orientation to the future' that this necessarily involves.¹⁷ In this sense, the insistent question of the fragmentary, of how to understand and to 'deal with' the 'presence' of the fragmentary, at the cultural present, simply *is*, viewed in its most expansive sense as a question of time, the question of modernity itself, as the non-identity of modernity and tradition, and of its abstract temporal form.¹⁸ And if romanticism does not quite 'invent' the 'cultural form' of the fragment (citing its own precedents in Montaigne, Pascal and Chamfort), in relation to art at least it provides its inaugural *philosophical* articulation – or rather articulations – for that modernity to which I (like Habermas) would argue that 'we' still belong.

However, far from holding a consistent view of the fragment's historical significance, as a 'manifestation' of modernity, romanticism is, significantly, distinguished by its internal contestation – not simply between different thinkers but just as often in the writings of a single author – opening up a range of different conflicting forms of historical temporalisation as alternate forms of 'response' to present incompleteness, which might, very schematically, be divided into two nostalgic and affirmative modalities, as differentiated through their respective conceptions of this incompleteness: the present as a site of loss *or* of possibility. From the early Lukács through to Peter Szondi it is the former position which has tended to be stressed in readings of German romanticism; readings which, following the dominant metaphors of ruin (derived largely from the architectural ruin), present it as a tragic form of cultural melancholia. In this the fragment denotes, above all, modernity as lost wholeness, condemning the present to a Fichtean 'absolute sinfulness' which may or may not be transcended by



some moment of recovery or 're-birth.' It is this familiar conception of the fragment that is handed down, for example, to Wagner or to the early Eliot of *The Waste Land*.

Yet, as Simon Critchley, among others, has recently insisted, romanticism also possesses a strongly *affirmative* response to the non-identity of modernity and tradition, where the incompleteness of a fragmentary present marks what Critchley calls 'the very vertiginousness of freedom.'¹⁹ Take, for example, the following fragment from the *Athenaeum*, composed by Friedrich's brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel:

The mirage of a former golden age is one of the greatest obstacles to approximating the golden age that still lies in the future. If there once was a golden age, then it wasn't really golden. Gold can't rust or decompose; it emerges victoriously genuine from all attempts to alloy or decompose it. If the golden age won't last forever, then it might as well never begin, since it will only be good for composing elegies about its loss.²⁰

There is nothing terribly melancholic about this. Moreover, it is this *affirmation* of the non-identity of modernity and tradition – as the potential opening up of the present to a qualitatively different future – through which romanticism also opens up, for art and culture, an historically new conception of a necessary destruction and fragmentation of the already given that is quite different from, say, the earlier seventeenth-century 'Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes,' and which very clearly points forward to that form of historical temporalisation articulated by the concept of an avant-garde, as it subsequently emerges in the mid-nineteenth-century. Hence Friedrich's strikingly 'modern' assertion that: 'New or not new: that's the question [now] asked of a work.'²¹

Of course, this is itself not an unfamiliar link to make – Poggioli's remains the classic account – and is one that is perhaps most easily summarised as the legacy of a romantic *utopianism*. Furthermore, such utopianism can, as August Wilhelm's conception of a 'golden age that lies in the future' makes clear, be read (as Lyotard, for example, reads it),²² as essentially a mirror-image of the nostalgic modality of modernity which repositions desired wholeness in the futural dimension of a yet-to-come; a wholeness which, in Friedrich Schlegel's own words, 'doesn't lie behind, but before us.' It is this speculative desire for unification, and for a resistance to the 'disenchantment of the everyday with the violence of the imagination,' that is clearly passed on to dominant strains within the discourse of the avant-garde, from its origins in the nineteenth-century French utopian socialism of Saint-Simon and Fourier right through to the 1960s call for *l'imagination au pouvoir*. More generally, as Critchley suggests, the naivety of such utopianism as is manifested in romanticism could be understood to be that 'shared by all avant-garde movements...centred in the belief that a small group of men and women...could theorise and hegemonise new cultural forms and effect a new vision of social relations.'²³ Underlying this conviction is, in turn, an understanding of the artwork as 'a sensuous image of freedom' providing us with the model for a free society and a 'politically transfigured everyday life' – what the situationists, marking their own self-recognition in both romanticism and Surrealism, referred to as a project of simultaneously 'overcoming' and 'realising' poetry – and in which a speculative philosophical experience must be, for the romantics, a 'speculative Aesthetics,' where 'art is the speculative *organon par excellence*...formative power is aesthetic power.'²⁴ As



Andrew Bowie summarises: 'The aesthetic product [for romanticism] becomes a utopian symbol of the realisation of freedom: in it we can see or hear an image of what the world would be like if freedom were realised.'²⁵ Thus is the art work 'vibrated by the reflexes of the future.'

Mythology, Utopianism and the Futures of Romanticism

Such 'aesthetic absolutism', as Bernhard Lypp terms it,²⁶ constitutes, most clearly, the romanticism of the now famous 1796 'Oldest System Programme of German Idealism,' belatedly discovered among Hegel's notes but which may or may not have been written by Schelling:²⁷

The philosophy of spirit is an aesthetic philosophy...Poetry thereby gains a higher dignity, at the end it again becomes what it was at the beginning – *teacher of (History) mankind*...polytheism of the imagination [*Einbildungskraft*] and of art, this is what we need!...we must have a new mythology, but this mythology must be in the service of the Ideas, it must become a mythology of *reason*...we [must] make the Ideas *aesthetic* i.e. mythological...Then eternal unity will reign among us.²⁸ [second emphasis mine]

Now, if 'reason' is less obviously central to the rhetoric of the Surrealist invocation of the 'absolute' – although the use of the term in the 'System Programme' should not itself be taken in a restrictedly 'rationalist' sense ('the highest act of reason...is an aesthetic act')²⁹ – nonetheless it would be hard not to see a very clear continuity between this short, extraordinary piece and many of the central ideas of Bretonian Surrealism. Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, as is well known, begins, for example, by echoing the likes of Schelling in its articulation of the search for a 'mythology of the modern' which would provide the foundation, not only for poetry as a literary form, but for a '*poetic life*.'³⁰ (And think, in this respect, of Benjamin's reservations about Surrealism's residual 'romantic turn of mind,' in his 1929 essay, though this is, I would contend, a more complex judgement than it is often supposed to be.)³¹ Similarly, more than a decade and a half later, Breton in the 'Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism' famously remarks Surrealism's desire for a 'new myth,'³² and in 1947 is still asserting that the 'hour has come to promote a new myth, one which will carry man forward a stage further toward his final destination.'³³ More generally, even when the 'formative power' of the mythological as such is not evoked – an evoking which is in fact, in Aragon at least, more radical than it is frequently taken to be (not least by Benjamin)³⁴ – Surrealism clearly does invite its reading as a distinctly romantic 'longing,' as Balakian approvingly encapsulates it, 'for innate unity among the contradictions...[a] synthesis of the human dream and material reality...a permanent integral connection cementing abstract and concrete reality into a single framework.'³⁵ Thus, Breton writes in 'What is Surrealism?': '[W]e have attempted to present interior reality and exterior reality as two elements in a process of unification, of finally becoming *one*. This final unification is the supreme aim of surrealism.'³⁶

Of course, once again, if we are to think properly about Surrealism's particular modernity, the status of this 'final unification' must be seen as related to a certain futurally-orientated temporality which, we can say, marks, in turn, a particular response to the problematic of present fragmentation



already outlined, in abstract form, in romanticism. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy assert of the 'System Programme' (but they could have been speaking of many Surrealist texts), the fact that it 'comes to us in a fragmentary form is perhaps a symbol...of the incompleteness...to which the will to completion, moreover, was deliberately dedicated.' In this sense, what marks the *temporality* of the fragment, at this point, is 'its announcement in the future...the announcement of the "programmable" fact according to which the System is envisaged in the name and in the form of an exigency, a desire, or a will; the System is not there (does not exist). It is "to do".'³⁷ Such a temporal logic is repeated in the Surrealist reflection on the idea of myth – on the idea of a specifically *modern* myth – to the extent that it cannot be separated, as Chénieux-Gendron notes, from *futural* 'reflection on the notion of a *projective model*,' a characteristically utopianist belief in 'the necessity of inventing myths as models for the society to come.'³⁸ Thus, Breton writes in the first manifesto: 'I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*.'³⁹ At his most extreme, Breton even suggests that it may be a question of deciding 'in what measure can we choose or adopt, and *impose*, a myth fostering the society that we judge to be desirable?'; the formation of 'a collective myth' as a means to assisting 'the much more general movement involving the liberation of man.'⁴⁰ This would thus be one way (but, as shall be seen, not the only way) of reading Breton's exemplary avant-gardiste demand for the work of art to be 'vibrated by the reflexes of the future,' a vibration which would, in this case, be read as the artwork's 'sensuous' prefiguring of a 'final unification' which would overcome present alienation. (Most obviously, perhaps, in certain forms of the Surrealist image, to which I will return in a moment.)⁴¹

It is such utopianism which, all too obviously, opens Surrealism up to Hegelian or properly Marxist critique as the subjective and idealist invocation of a merely *abstract* or *formal* freedom which, as *The Communist Party Manifesto* puts it, yields 'historically created conditions of emancipation to fantastic ones.'⁴² Yet, while this is fairly indisputable as regards the affirmative modalities of modernity articulated in both romanticism and Surrealism, and for that matter the hegemonic manifestations of the avant-garde in general, it does not mean – and this is precisely the point that I want to argue – that this is the *only* way of thinking the relation between present and future opened up by Surrealist work and experience, even if it is undoubtedly the dominant one. Indeed, it seems to me, 'tomorrow is at stake' for Blanchot in Surrealism precisely in terms of the potential it may afford for recognising *another* model of the affirmative relating of present to future: a distinctively *non-utopianist*, yet still speculative, experience of the present as a site of possibility.

Surrealism and 'the other romanticism'

In order to understand this, though, we need to go back, once again, to Blanchot's reading of romanticism, especially as it is pursued in the essay, also included in *The Infinite Conversation*, which is simply entitled *The Athenaeum*. Key here is the search for what Blanchot terms – in a phrase to which I will return – a 'non-romantic essence of romanticism,' to be found in the work of Friedrich Schlegel in particular (357). And, in fact, as Blanchot, rather densely, elaborates this idea, it refers to



nothing less than an affirmative conception of the fragment which would, *contra* the projective temporality of utopianism, actually *affirm the fragmentary* as a condition of futurity itself; that is, a conception regulated by a certain organisation and acceptance of the fragmentary (and thus of the finite) as that which should 'guide' present action outside of any horizon of (utopian) completion.

One of the most famous of Schlegel's *Athenaeum Fragments* provides a particularly fertile resource for Blanchot, as well as for Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, in this respect:

A project is the subjective embryo of a developing object. A perfect project should be at once completely subjective and completely objective...The feeling for projects – which one might call fragments of the future – is distinguishable from the feeling for fragments of the past only by its direction: progressive in the former, regressive in the latter.⁴³

It must first be observed that – as in his brother's fragment cited earlier – what is conceptualised by Schlegel here are, *contra* melancholia, fragments of the *future* not of the past. The *affirmation* of fragmentation thus serves to re-orient the relation of cultural present to future away from the narrative of loss or decline and toward possibility as a 'product' of the fragmentary, opening up what Schlegel, in a remarkable prefiguring of surrealist rhetoric, calls 'the as-yet-uncharted territories of life, art or science.'⁴⁴

The question which then arises is how, within this temporal set-up, the relation of (fragmentary) present to future – to the 'as-yet-uncharted territories' of tomorrow – is to be understood. There is little doubt that the most obvious reading of this passage – with its suggestion that the 'feeling' for fragments of the future is 'distinguishable from the feeling for fragments of the past only by its direction' – would view it, once again, as simple utopianism. The 'meaning' of the fragment would then remain very much under the governance of a reconciliation – a speculative future when the missing contents would be finally filled in – of a synthesis of subject and object, sensible and intelligible, the ideal and the real; romanticism as the 'progressive, universal' projection directed by the regulating Idea of a reunification of poetry' and 'life.'⁴⁵ This would be the *telos* of the 'project' as that which marks, as the 'embryo of a developing object,' a promised future unity, even if one which cannot, historically, be realised 'here and now' in the fragmentary present. If non-identity is, in this, irresistible at the present – is indeed 'dialectically' necessary as the force which would project the development of the embryonic wholeness forward – and thus to be affirmed, it is still to be affirmed *in the name of* an identity which cannot *yet* be instantiated.

Yet, for Blanchot, this is not the only way of understanding the nature of the 'fragments of the future' which are to be affirmed at the present. For one can also locate in the margins of Schlegel's conception a kind of 'equivocity' which points to a thinking of the fragment beyond the hold of 'solutions and resolutions, systems and chaoes' and which suggests that the 'future' itself might be conceived of as fragmentary. It is, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy argue, this 'gesture which distinguishes it infinitesimally but all the more decisively from metaphysical idealism,' insofar as 'discreetly and without really wanting to...it abandons or excises the work itself – and thus is transformed in an almost imperceptible manner into the "work of the absence of the work



[*désœuvremen*].⁴⁶ Such is the 'non-romantic essence of romanticism,' 'unworking' the temporalities of utopianism. As Blanchot puts it in the later *Writing of the Disaster*:

The demand, the extreme demand of the fragmentary...traverses, overturns, ruins the work because the work (totality, perfection, achievement) is the unity which is satisfied with itself – this is what 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 whereby we share it with him.⁴⁷

If, then, as Blanchot concedes, Schlegel most often thinks the fragment through a model of 'history, which, become revolutionary, places at the forefront of its action work that is undertaken in view of the whole' – and he will say the same of Breton – there is also, in tension with this, a sense of 'fragmentary writing' as an *infinitely* disruptive movement of *unworking* which exposes and traces the *impossibility* of any final resolution and makes possible 'new relations that except themselves from unity, just as they exceed the whole' (359). At the very least, one can say, Blanchot asserts, that 'literature will from now on bear in itself [the] question of discontinuity or difference as a question of form – a question and a task German romanticism not only sensed but already clearly proposed – before consigning them to Nietzsche and, beyond Nietzsche, to the future' (359).

Surrealist Image and Fragment

It should by now be obvious that Blanchot is very clearly *not* concerned, in his writings on Schlegel and the *Athaeneum* group, with the fragmentary simply as a particular 'literary, rhetorical, or stylistic form,' which is exhausted by its romantic expression, but rather as a much more general (and necessarily abstract) problematic or *question* which romanticism hands on to those coming after; the question, in some sense, as I have already suggested, of *modernity* itself. Needless to say, among those to whom such a 'question' is 'consigned' are the Surrealists. It is in these terms that one might thus approach the Surrealist image, in particular, as a practice which bears the 'question of discontinuity or difference as a question of form.' (Recall Aragon's distinction between 'image' and 'metaphor', where the former should 'produce a cataclysm'.)⁴⁸ As Breton famously describes it in the first manifesto: 'The value of the image depends on the beauty of the spark obtained; it is, consequently, a function of the difference of potential between the two conductors.'⁴⁹ For Blanchot, as such, the Surrealist image may be philosophically delineated, in resolutely non-Hegelian fashion, as 'the surprising manifestation (a manifestation by surprise) of the un-unifiable, the simultaneity of what cannot be together' (415) – the sewing machine and the umbrella, in Lautréamont's famous phrase. As he notes, a range of terms are used to denote the experience thus 'produced' – shock, the spark, the explosive, the convulsive; experiences of the extraordinary, the marvellous, the unexpected, the *surreal* – concepts that, as Blanchot puts it, 'would like to escape all conceptualisation' (406). The question that then emerges, where 'tomorrow' is at stake, is: What kind of futurity does such a 'spark' evoke or 'respond' to? And the answer to this is far from self-evident.



Adorno's famous critique, for example, would see little, if any, futurity at work in the Surrealist discontinuous juxtaposition of images,⁵⁰ presenting – in 'wide-eyed' fashion – only 'unmediated absorption of the fragments of immediacy', as Wolin puts it.⁵¹ 'The marvellous,' Aragon writes, 'is the eruption of contradiction within the real.'⁵² But, Adorno asks, does such an 'eruption' do anything more than merely replicate the existing 'reality' of capitalism? How is such 'eruption' to be connected to any speculative experience? A reasonable question. Yet, equally, in its potentially *utopianist* functioning, the Surrealist image could, just as easily, of course, be accused of *too much* futurity, in the sense of a direct 'imagistic' projection of the desired future unification of which Breton also speaks in the first manifesto, betraying, in another form, the Adornian insistence upon the necessity of a *negative* dialectics. As always, such a stark opposition would suggest that something is being missed, and, as I am not the first to note, it is clear that part of the problem with Adorno's critique of Surrealism – and of Benjamin in similar terms – lies in his own restrictively Hegelian conception of 'mediation.' For it tends to presume that speculative experience can *only* ultimately be conceived of in utopianist or Hegelian terms (even if negatively defined). However, it is, in fact, precisely this assumption that, for example, Benjamin's, early accounts of montage (as a form of self-conscious incompleteness, or, we might say, fragmentation) – which look forward to the 1929 Surrealism essay – are intended to counter, insisting as they do upon the montage or image's capacity to open a (necessarily speculative) perspective on how the present 'may be changed,' without violently predetermining the form that such a change might assume in terms of new modes of experience.⁵³ As Caygill rightly observes, the *whole point* of Benjamin's philosophy is the principled attempt to elaborate a 'non-Hegelian account of speculative experience.'⁵⁴

It is in the terms of such an attempt that Blanchot's readings of romanticism and Surrealism might also be placed. In this sense, just as, as I have been arguing, Blanchot seeks to read Schlegel against that which in him leads into Hegel – the 'rhythm of the romantic fragment' which works, 'anachronistically', against its 'dialectical *Aufhebung*'⁵⁵ – so, too, he seeks to read Breton against the grain of his own Hegelian or utopianist formulations. It is in the light of this, for example, that Blanchot cites the possibility, in Surrealist practice and experience, of an 'opening' which the Hegelian determination of chance is 'insufficient to account for' (414), insofar as the latter must always work to recuperate such an 'opening' through its own dialectical movement.⁵⁶ Of course, echoing Adorno in this respect, it should be said that Blanchot expresses his own doubts about the Surrealists' conceptions of the 'chance operation,' doubts which centre on what it would mean to 'will' or 'desire' the chance formation or encounter. Surrealism's 'temptation' is its 'wish to believe', Blanchot writes, that 'the very unknown...in the world, but disturbing the world, would allow itself to be observed so as to make the surrealist affirmation, in the full light of day, tangible and real' (416). Yet, above all, Blanchot argues, what is important in the 'play' with 'chance' (beyond any futile debates concerning its 'origins' or 'authenticity'), is the 'provocation' by which the future 'itself' comes into play. Such a future – the future upon which chance 'speculates' – is quite different from that of Hegelian logic or utopianist imagining. For this future is precisely, Blanchot writes, the future as unknown – 'ever exterior to the horizon against which it seems to stand out' (412) – which comes 'into relation', in the



Surrealist image, as ‘interruption, interval, arrest, or opening’ (413), rather than as any actual positive projection. What Blanchot explicitly terms René Char’s ‘fragmentary writing’ is exemplary in this respect:

Whoever says fragment ought not to say simply the fragmenting of an already existent reality or the moment of a whole still to come. This is hard to envisage due to the necessity of comprehension according to which the only knowledge is knowledge of the whole...For such comprehension, the fragment supposes an implied designation of something that has previously been or will subsequently be a whole – the severed finger refers back to the hand...Our thought is thus caught between two limits: the imagining of the integrity of substance and the imagining of a dialectical becoming. But in the fragment’s violence, and, in particular, the violence to which René Char grants access, quite a different relation is given to us – at least as promise and as a task (307).

Hence, in Char, the ‘fragmented poem...is not a poem that remains unaccomplished, but it opens *another form of accomplishment* – the one at stake...in questioning, or in an affirmation irreducible to unity...[a] new kind of arrangement not entailing harmony, concordance or reconciliation, but that accepts disjunction or divergence’ (308) [my italics]. What would such an ‘accomplishment,’ and ‘acceptance,’ entail?

Another Form of Accomplishment

I will come back to the motif of ‘questioning,’ in Blanchot’s reading of Char, in a moment, but before doing so it is worth fleshing out a little more – beyond the dense compactness of Blanchot’s own text – what is being suggested here of the Surrealist image. For, as suggesting the possibility of ‘another form of accomplishment’, a ‘new kind of arrangement,’ the Surrealist image, clearly, for Blanchot, manifests, in some sense, the promised conception – promised by early romanticism – of a fragmentary writing no longer regulated by the dialectical *Aufhebung* or utopianist horizon of final unification. This does not so much negate ‘completion’ – whatever that might mean – as it proposes ‘a new form of completion that mobilises – renders mobile – the whole through its *interruption* and through interruption’s various modes’ (358) [my italics].

As the emphasis on mobility, on *movement*, here implies, I would argue, this is not the destruction of affirmative speculative experience *per se*. Rather the *future* appears here – comes ‘into relation’ with the present of the art work – *only through interruption*, in doing so continuing to insist upon its ‘unknown’ character. This then is, as it were, the other romantic precedent for avant-garde experience, and for its defining relating of present to future. Hence, the remarkable convergences between Blanchot’s essay on romanticism and that on Surrealism. And is it, indeed, not possible to read a central part of what Blanchot calls the Surrealist ‘exigency’ in this way – that Surrealism for which, as Breton writes, ‘freedom, not only ideally but as a constant regenerator of energy...must exclude any idea of comfortable balance; it must be conceived of as a permanent *erethism*?’⁵⁷ At the very least, it seems clear that Blanchot is right to insist upon something like a crucial *différend* in



temporalities at stake, in the alternate ways in which Surrealism sets 'tomorrow' 'in play and as a player' through the 'eruption' of the image – a fact that commentators have often failed to acknowledge. It is in the light of this, perhaps, that Blanchot, meditating on the question with which I began – that is, the 'historical' character of Surrealism – writes that 'one cannot claim that surrealism has been realised (thus losing more than half of what names it: everything in it that goes out ahead of it), neither can one say that it is half-real or on the way to realisation' (407). What, then, finally, is the *time* of this Surrealism?

The Future of the Question

Of course, as I have already noted, Blanchot is not unaware of the problematic aspects of much of Surrealism's (essentially utopianist) self-understanding: 'Authentic thought? Non-distorted, non-enclosed, non-alienated?', he writes: 'The *real* is the temptation to which surrealism risks succumbing when it lends itself to a search for the immediate.' Yet, for Blanchot, Surrealism is, in relation to such a temptation – and I recall that he says something similar of Schlegel – 'less responsible than it is its victim' (410). And it is against this notion that he cites, in Surrealism, a non-utopianist 'search for an affirmation that stands in a distant relation with the unknown: that which is not measured by unity, and be it even interior to it, always extends beyond, separates from and disarranges the whole' (411). This is, as I have tried to show, the key to Blanchot's alternate understanding of the 'surrealist affirmation,' its particular temporal modality, as a 'perpetual affirmation, perpetual dissuasion and dissidence.' Surrealism, he significantly argues, is not, in its fullest radicality, a project or programme – much as, at times, Breton (and others) might have *wanted* it to be – but rather the inscription, and perpetual re-inscription, of a 'summons', an 'exigency' – a *demand* – which comes precisely from the 'unexpected', the 'unknown' itself as the source of the future's reflexes which 'vibrate' it:

From the unknown – what is neither the pure unknowable nor the not yet known – comes a relation that is indirect, a network of relations that never allows itself to be expressed unitarily. Whether it be called the marvellous, the surreal, or something else...the unknown provokes – if in fact (in what way?) it is provoked – a non-simultaneous set of forces, a space of difference and, to speak like the first surrealist work, a *magnetic field* always free of the itinerary it calls forth, embodies, and nonetheless holds in reserve...*the future of surrealism is bound to this exigency of a plurality escaping unification and extending beyond the whole* (while at the same time presupposing it, demanding its realisation), untiringly maintaining, in the face of the Unique, contradiction and rupture (409). [my italics]

It is at this point, in thinking about this 'exigency' to which 'the future of surrealism is bound,' that we might then return to the notion, elaborated in the reading of Char, that the 'fragmented poem...is not a poem that remains unaccomplished, but it opens another form of accomplishment – the one at stake...in *questioning*.' For, there is, as Blanchot attests elsewhere in *The Infinite Conversation*, a clear *temporality* to the question generally which is not unimportant here:



A question is movement...In the simple grammatical structure of interrogation, we already feel this opening of questioning speech – there is a demand for something else; incomplete, the speech that questions affirms that it is only a part. In which case...the question would be essentially partial, it would be the place where speech is always given as incomplete (12).

There is, however, a difference in the ways in which this incompleteness might be conceived. Thus, Blanchot continues:

...in the Yes of the answer we lose the direct, immediate given, and we lose the opening, the richness of possibility. The answer is the question's misfortune, its adversity...And yet the question demands a response? Certainly there is a lack in the question that seeks to be made up for. But this lack is of a strange kind...the question is not pursued in the answer. On the contrary, it is terminated, closed again by the answer. The question inaugurates a type of relation characterised by openness and free movement; and what it must be satisfied with closes and arrests it (13-14).⁵⁸

In his essay on Char, Blanchot cites the following phrase from his work: 'How can we live without the unknown before us?' (300). It is, of course, precisely in the *question*, in its form, that such an *experience* must be confronted. To question – as a form of fragmentary, incomplete speech, as Blanchot defines it – is necessarily to 'speak' with 'the unknown before us.' This is always the case, but there is (and this is the crucial point for my concerns here), an articulable distinction between the presentation of this experience in relation to the completion of an *answer* – the relating of incomplete to complete at work in both utopianism and Hegelianism – and, as Blanchot divines in a certain Surrealist affirmation, its presentation in relation to what he calls the 'unknown as unknown' in which no such end is projected. This 'unknown as unknown' is, from the 'perspective' of the cultural present, neither 'the not yet known, the object of a knowledge still to come,' nor is it simply 'the absolutely unknowable, a subject of pure transcendence, refusing itself to all manner of knowledge and expression,' which would render impossible any relation to the unknown at all. It is neither the projected object of absolute knowledge, nor that which 'would arise out of intuition or a mystical fusion' (300). Rather, we might say, it is that which marks the open relation of present to future at stake in something like *experimentation*;⁵⁹ what Blanchot, in the essay on Char, and implicitly echoing certain formulations in Heidegger, terms 'research':

In this relation...the unknown would be disclosed in that which it leaves under cover...Research - poetry, thought – relates to the unknown as unknown. This relation discloses the unknown, but by an uncovering that leaves it under cover; through this relation there is a 'presence' of the unknown; in this 'presence' the unknown is rendered present, but always as unknown...This relation will not consist in an unveiling. The unknown will not be revealed, but indicated (300).

In such 'indication,' Surrealism functions as a 'concerted, non-concerted seeking that remains without assurance and without guarantee' (419). The future remains 'surprising,' because it *is* the future, that which is not reducible to the terms of the present, yet which may, precisely as (and only as) 'unknown,' *interrupt* it as demand or promise (for something other). If there are the reflexes of many



futures that vibrate the Surrealist work, it is this 'unworkable' future which, for Blanchot, constitutes its most 'radical exigency,' as that which is without end and 'exceeds every whole' (even as it endlessly evokes it).

In this light, let me return, then, finally, to Blanchot's question concerning the historical character of Surrealism. In his extraordinary 1995 book, *The Politics of Time*, Peter Osborne notes that the most fundamental 'lack' within 'the time-consciousness of historical studies' is that 'of an adequate sense of the future': 'In the constitution of historiography as a discipline, the future appears only negatively...it embraces the future only tangentially in past and present forms...It does not confront it as an independent temporal dimension.'⁶⁰ It is this 'lack' that, *unmodified*, does indeed render a history of Surrealism, in Blanchot's words, 'only of scholarly interest.' What it cannot, at any rate, account for is the radical temporalising of history set to work in Surrealism itself, in its affirmation of an irreducible futurity as a source of artistic value. It is in relation – and only in relation – to the full force of this tension that the time of Surrealism truly places the present in question as the 'demand for something else.' At the very least, this should serve to unsettle and to question the simplistic narrations of Surrealism, or of the avant-garde 'in general,' still all-too-prevalent within art and literary history, and their reduction to mere 'period styles' or univocal 'projects.' For a genuine account of Surrealism would have to take account of the challenge that Surrealism makes to the temporalities and categories of historicism – sociological or formal – that would seek to subsume it. Much as Blanchot may write against the grain of our customary readings of Breton's 'provocations' – and I have perhaps not acknowledged this enough – what he does serve to point to is the internal complexity of Surrealism itself, and of its self-understanding, as well as its relation to movements, artists or thinkers which came before, or which responded to its 'exigency' after it. More than most, Surrealism's 'text' is not an homogenous one. Indeed, this very 'reading against the grain' may well be the condition of any new contemporary encounter with Surrealism; the condition of 'our' own 'self-recognition' in the movement of its questioning. It is perhaps only on this condition that 'we' might think the tomorrow of Surrealism today.

¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Howard, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 356. Subsequent page numbers for this work will be given in brackets in the main body of the text. The piece that follows is the revised text of a paper delivered to the AHRB Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies Seminar Series, in Manchester, in November 2002. I would like to thank David Lomas and Gavin Parkinson for their kind invitation to speak, as well as those present at the seminar for their comments on the paper.

² Maurice Blanchot, 'Reflections on Surrealism' in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandel, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1995, p. 85. It is, in part, for this reason that I would suggest – although this will not be the primary focus of what follows - that a critical attention to these pieces may serve to argue a need to rethink our customary conceptions of surrealism's relation to recent French theory and its recasting in the terms of Anglo-American 'post-structuralism.'

³ Blanchot, 'Reflections on Surrealism,' op. cit., p. 85.



⁴ Matei Calinescu, *The Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, 2nd edn., Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1987, p. 9.

⁵ See Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, Verso, London & New York, 1995.

⁶ André Breton, cited in Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, Fontana, London, 1992, p. 242.

⁷ For a slightly fuller elaboration of this argument about the concept of an avant-garde, see David Cunningham, 'Architecture, Utopia and the Futures of the Avant-Garde' in *The Journal of Architecture* 6, 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 169-182.

⁸ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald, Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 1968, p. 10.

⁹ 'For Shelley, the poet is not a relic of the past but a harbinger of the future...poets are specifically termed "heralds", and their minds are called "mirrors of futurity",' Calinescu, op. cit., p. 105.

¹⁰ Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 98.

¹¹ André Breton, 'Originality and Freedom' in *What is Surrealism?: Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont, Monad, New York, 1978, p. 207.

¹² André Breton, 'Cavalier Perspective' in *What is Surrealism?*, p. 314. It is the articulation of just such a task that, I believe, allows, in turn, Blanchot's own self-recognition in Surrealism, as will become clear in what follows.

¹³ It is not unimportant in this respect that, as Calinescu shows, 'romanticism' is often used in the early nineteenth century, particularly in France, as 'a synonym for "modern" in the broadest acceptation' and 'only later...narrowed down to designate [particular] literary and artistic schools that reacted against [a] neo-classical system of values,' Calinescu, op. cit., pp. 37-8. As Calinescu states, 'for Stendhal, the concept of romanticism embodies the notions of change, relativity, and, above all, presentness, which makes its meaning coincide to a large extent with what Baudelaire would call four decades later "*la modernité*" (p. 40). Baudelaire, as he points out, also uses a very similar conception of romanticism in 'The Salon of 1846': 'For me, romanticism is the most recent, the most contemporary form of beauty' (pp. 46-7).

¹⁴ Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity – an Incomplete Project', trans. Selya Ban-Habib, in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto, London, 1985, p. 4.

¹⁵ See David Cunningham, 'A Time for Dissonance and Noise: On Adorno, Music and the Concept of Modernism' in *Angelaki* 8, 1 (April 2003).

¹⁶ This, I take it, is what is partly meant by Schlegel's assertion that '[m]any of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written.' Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragments' [fragment 24] in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p. 21.

¹⁷ Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana & Chicago, 1994, p. 135.

¹⁸ See Cunningham, 'A Time for Dissonance and Noise', op. cit.

¹⁹ Critchley, op. cit., p. 112.

²⁰ August Wilhelm Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragments' [fragment 243] in *Philosophical Fragments*, op. cit., pp. 51-2.

²¹ Friedrich Schlegel, 'Critical Fragments' [fragment 4] in *Philosophical Fragments*, op. cit., p. 23.

²² See Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable' in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby, Polity, Oxford, 1991, pp. 126-7.

²³ Critchley, op. cit., p. 98.

²⁴ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard & Cheryl Lester, SUNY Press, Albany, NY, 1988, p. 35.

²⁵ Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, 2nd edition, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003, p. 57.

²⁶ See Bernhard Lypp, *Aesthetischer Absolutismus und politische Vernunft*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1972.

²⁷ See Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, op. cit., pp. 27-8.

²⁸ 'Oldest System Programme of German Idealism,' trans. Andrew Bowie, in Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, op. cit., p. 334-5. As Bowie comments: 'In the SP an understanding of Kant's postulated "kingdom of ends"...becomes available to intuition in the work of art,' op. cit., p. 57. More than this, the possible intuition of the absolute in the work of art tends to be matched by a conception of the world itself as a work of art. In Friedrich Schlegel's words: 'All holy games of art are only distant intimations of the endless play of the world, of the work of art which constantly forms itself,' *Conversation on Literature*, cited in Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, Routledge, London & New York, 1997, p. 78.

²⁹ 'Oldest System Programme,' op. cit., p. 334.

³⁰ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson-Taylor, Picador, London, 1980, p. 215.

³¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligensia,' trans. Edmund Jephcott, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, Verso, London & New York, 1985, pp. 225-239. These reservations would perhaps most obviously refer to what Peter Bürger re-terms, in his book on the movement, the 'magical irrationalist' side of Surrealism. Peter Bürger, *Der französische Surrealismus*, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, Frankfurt, 1971, p. 18. However, this should not be understood as an attempt to efface the communication between Surrealism and romanticism altogether, but rather to reveal the former's 'self-recognition' in a *different*



romanticism, one more akin to the Schlegelian conception of the fragmentary, about which Benjamin wrote in his 1920 essay 'The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism.' It is precisely in relation to this that a juxtaposition of Benjamin's reading with that of Blanchot would be productive, though I do not have the space to pursue this here. For some brief comments on Benjamin's reading of Surrealism, see Cunningham, 'Architecture, Utopia and the Futures of the Avant-Garde,' op. cit.

³² André Breton, 'Prolegomena for a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else' in *What is Surrealism?*, op. cit., pp. 217, 215.

³³ André Breton, 'An Inaugural Break' in *What is Surrealism?*, op. cit., p. 343.

³⁴ The key point here is that Aragon's 'mythology of the modern' is not simply envisaged as something like a new myth for the 'modern age' – in a socio-periodising sense – but as emphatically modern in its *temporality*; a 'mythology in motion' as Aragon terms it. Aragon, op. cit., p. 130. As far as I am aware, Susan Buck-Morss is alone among Benjamin scholars in having recognised this fact, and in not taking Benjamin's critique of Aragon rather too much at his own word. See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1989, p. 256.

³⁵ Anna Balakian, *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986, pp. 138-9.

³⁶ Breton, 'What is Surrealism?', op. cit., p. 116.

³⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, op. cit., pp. 28, 33. Interestingly, it is to such a schema that Blanchot traces Surrealism's attraction to Marxism in the 1949 article: 'In truth, it is glaringly obvious that historical dialectic offers to all those [like the surrealists] haunted by the ideas of a perfected man, of a limit to the human condition, a chance of the first order: complete man is not to be sought, now, in the rifts and disorders of capitalist society, it is not to be known, it is to be done,' 'Reflections on Surrealism,' op. cit., p. 94. This is, of course, in a sense, just to reconfirm what is already all-too-evident: that Surrealism's Marxism was that of a 'romantic' (early) Marx.

³⁸ Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, trans. Vivian Folkenflik, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, pp. 106, 111.

³⁹ André Breton, 'First Manifesto of Surrealism' in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver & Helen Lane, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1972, p. 14.

⁴⁰ André Breton, *Prolégomènes* and 'The Political Position of Surrealism,' both cited in Chénieux-Gendron, op. cit., p. 106.

⁴¹ See, for an example of this reading, Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1993, p. 16.

⁴² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Progress, Moscow, 1977, p. 70. The fact that such an argument has its origins in Hegel's engagement with the likes of Fichte, and the inability of romanticism to resolve the Kantian antinomy of 'ought' and 'is,' is not, I think, unimportant to a reading of surrealism, insofar as, while the desire for 'unification,' of subjective and objective, abstract and concrete, is often explicitly presented in Hegelian terms – in, for example, Breton's second manifesto or Aragon's 1924 text *Une Vague de rêves* – it is, in fact, more clearly 'romantic' in form. This is something I address at more length in 'Hegelianism, Romanticism and the Futures of Surrealism,' forthcoming.

⁴³ Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragments' [fragment 22], op. cit., pp. 20-1.

⁴⁴ Schlegel, 'Critical Fragments' [fragment 95], op. cit., p. 11.

⁴⁵ See Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragments' [fragment 116], op. cit., p. 31, where Schlegel outlines the desired end of making 'poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical.'

⁴⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, op. cit., pp. 124, 57. The term *désœuvrement* – variously translated as 'unworking,' the 'absence of the work,' 'idleness,' 'inertia' – is of course taken from Blanchot himself.

⁴⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986, p. 160.

⁴⁸ Louis Aragon, cited in Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, California University Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1993, p. 194. As Cohen notes: 'When Aragon asserts the disruptive power of the image, he stresses its destructive force.'

⁴⁹ Breton, 'First Manifesto,' op. cit., p. 37. Thus, as is well known, Breton argues that the Surrealist image is a juxtaposition which derives its 'convulsive beauty' from its denial of any straightforward unification of its disparate elements. It is this that would distinguish it from the drive to (ultimate) unification apparent in, the otherwise superficially similar, constructions of, say, Anglo-American imagist poetry.

⁵⁰ Theodor Adorno, 'Looking Back on Surrealism' in *Notes to Literature. Volume One*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, pp. 87-8.

⁵¹ Richard Wolin, 'Benjamin, Adorno, Surrealism' in Tom Huhn & Lambert Zuidervaart (eds), *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997, p. 107. See also Theodor Adorno, 'Letter to Benjamin, November 10th 1938', trans. Harry Zohn, in Ernst Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, New Left Books, London, 1977, pp. 128-130. Interestingly, such a critique has some echo within Surrealism itself. For example, André Masson, writing in 1950, states of automatism that its 'danger' lies in the fact that 'it often associates only unessential relations, whose content, as Hegel puts it, "does not go beyond what is contained in the images".' André Masson, 'Painting is a Wager' in *Yale French Studies* 31 (1964), p. 123. The fact that Masson cites Hegel at this point is interesting given Adorno's argument.

⁵² Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, op. cit., p. 217.



⁵³ This is why Adorno is also so profoundly wrong in attributing to Benjamin a kind of naive Fichtean faith in imaginative power as having a 'direct – I would almost say: developmental – relatedness to the future as Utopia.' See Theodor Adorno, 'Letter to Benjamin, August 2nd 1935' in Bloch et al., op. cit., p. 111. The problem for Benjamin was precisely one of how to think speculative experience outside of *both* Hegelian dialectics *and* Fichtean utopianist idealism.

⁵⁴ Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, Routledge, London & New York, 1998, p. 8.

⁵⁵ Critchley, op. cit., p. 115.

⁵⁶ There is an obvious proximity here to Bataille's concerns and to his reading of Hegel.

⁵⁷ Breton, 'What is Surrealism?', op. cit., p. 118.

⁵⁸ I have offered a slightly different commentary on this passage – which comes from a chapter entitled 'The Most Profound Question' – in David Cunningham, 'Ex Minimis: Greenberg, Modernism and Beckett's *Three Dialogues*' in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 13 (December 2003).

⁵⁹ See *The Infinite Conversation*, op. cit., p. 417, where Blanchot writes of an 'experience' that is 'an experimentation.' An interesting comparison could be pursued here with Lyotard's later, but rather similar, attempt to theorise the temporality involved in 'the condition of the literatures and arts that have no assigned addressee and no regulating ideal, yet in which value is regularly measured on the stock of experimentation,' Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Vlad Godzich, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p. 16.

⁶⁰ Osborne, *Politics of Time*, op. cit., p. 33.

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