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Romanticism's Longue Durée: 1968 and the projects of theory

Galin Tihanov

Abstract:

The immediate purpose of this paper is to offer a brief reflection on 1968 as a nodal point in the appropriations and deployments of Romanticism, not least as a diagnostic tool. The article substantiates the case for the continuous after-life of Romanticism in the various guises of post-romanticism, a process which de-emphasizes the notion of *period* or indeed *event*, and constructs instead a complex discursive formation that re-negotiates past intellectual agendas and resources by framing them within a discursive *longue durée*. The article concentrates on the German scene of theory and the student protests during the second half of the 1960s. It traces the mediated links between them and demonstrates how this intellectual and political constellation is traversed by – repurposed and refashioned – Romantic discursive energies that are mobilized in order to make sense of, and respond to, the new developments. The groundwork and the hypotheses advanced in this article require a careful differentiation between two understandings (and projects) of "theory". In the Conclusion, I discuss the impact of May '68 on these two different theory projects.

Key-words: May '68; Romanticism; literary theory; structuralism; hermeneutics

Setting the Agenda: “Theory” and “theory”

1968 was not an exclusively Western phenomenon. On 18 June 1968, 70 academics and party cadres were publicly humiliated by the militant students of Peking University; in August 1968 Prague students would protest, tooth and nail, against the occupation of their country by the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact. But we are still far from a global account of 1968 that would eschew the fallacy of assigning the West a permanent (and natural) position of centrality. The scope of this article is thus of necessity more limited; it concentrates on the German scene of theory and the student protests during the second half of the 1960s. I am trying to trace the mediated links between them and to demonstrate how this intellectual and political constellation is traversed by – repurposed and refashioned - Romantic discursive energies that are mobilized in order to make sense of, and respond to, the new developments. The groundwork I propose to do and the hypotheses I will advance require that a differentiation be introduced between two understandings (and projects) of “theory”. The first one (one can visualize the word “theory” with an initial capital “t” here) is reserved for theory conceived of as an important but somewhat softly defined body of thought that gravitates towards a substantial (if not full) overlap with Continental philosophy. There are two versions of this understanding of theory (with a capital “t”) that are worth pointing to, each represented by a seminal recent work. One is the equation of Theory with French post-structuralism; on this version, Theory unfolded in France in the second half of the 1960s and migrated to the United States in the 1970s. François Cusset, who has studied the process of this migration, has written persuasively about “French Theory” (to quote the title of his book published in France in 2003, in which the words “French Theory”, in English in the French

original, drive home his point about the transformative power of Theory). Cusset makes an excellent argument about the possible reasons for this equation, or substitution. On reaching the shores of America, dominated as it was (and still is) by the traditions of analytic philosophy, French post-structuralist philosophy (foremost Deconstruction) was appropriated not as philosophy per se but as a powerful method of analyzing (and putting in question) narratives: literary, religious, legal. Theory, in Cusset's words, became "mysteriously intransitive": no longer a theory of something, but "above all a discourse on itself".[1] The second version is the equation of Theory with the dialectical method, honed by Hegel but detectable before him, right down to medieval philosophy and letters (in Andrew Cole's reconstruction). Theory, in this second version, allows one to perform a move within philosophy away from philosophy, as Andrew Cole would have it when he associates the birth of Theory with Hegel.[2] Again, the ensuing claim is all-encompassing: "theory historicizes thought, studying its materialization across disparate forms of human expression—music, literature, art, architecture, religion, philosophy—either in a diachronic or synchronic analysis—or, aspirationally, both at once".[3]

Theory, on this extended understanding of it, and May 1968 – a shorthand here for the transnational protest movement that would unfold in parts of Western Europe and in the USA – may not appear, at least at first glance, to be the most natural of bedfellows. To begin with, the Theorists – those to form the international canon of Theory in the 1970-1980s - were

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[1] François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. by Jeff Fort with Josephine Berganza and Marlon Jones, Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 99.

[2] See the argument in Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

[3] Andrew Cole, "The Function of Theory at the Present Time," *PMLA*, 2015, Vol. 130, No. 3, pp. 809–18, here p. 810.

largely absent from the events taking place in Paris, even though their popularity as intellectuals was beyond doubt in France. Félix Guattari, who made Daniel Cohn-Bendit's acquaintance and could be seen on the barricades, arriving on his motorcycle with anarchist panache, as well as stirring colleagues and even patients at the psychiatric hospital in which he worked to support the students, appears to have been an exception confirming the rule. Deleuze was sympathetic but hardly directly involved;[4] Kristeva and Todorov, in the mid-1960s both fresh arrivals from Communist Sofia, were onlookers and, in the case of Kristeva, chance participants.[5] Sartre, as is well known, was the preeminent philosopher of the old generation who would offer succor to the movement. Secondly, Theory, in its French post-structuralist incarnation, had not yet properly turned into a global phenomenon at that time; in 1968, it was only beginning to take hold of the American East Coast. Then, thirdly, and as a consequence, the '68-ers were engaged, at least in Germany, in mastering domestic thought: Marcuse, Adorno, and Benjamin, not Althusser, Goldmann, nor Foucault or Deleuze, who were yet to become recognizable figures in the German intellectual landscape (not least through the efforts of the small Merve publishing house founded in West Berlin in 1970 by Peter Gente, whose father, a former Nazi, worked as judge both before and after Nazism and was involved in that capacity also in the trial of Rudi Dutschke).[6] Dutschke himself read extensively Ernst Bloch, especially *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, a work of the second half of the 1950s; even Rodolphe Gasche, with whom Dutschke worked together in the group "Subversive Aktion", a couple of years before May 1968, was at the time largely unaware of

[4] On Guattari and Deleuze in May 1968, see François Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: Intersecting Lives,* trans. Deborah Glassman, New York: Columbia UP, 2011, pp. 170-179.

[5] See Kristeva's account in Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, she said. An Interview by Philippe Petit*, trans. Brian O'Keeffe, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, New York: Seniotext(e), 2002, pp. 16-17.

[6] On Merve Verlag's role, see Philipp Felsch, *Der lange Sommer der Theorie: Geschichte einer Revolte 1960-1990*, Munich: Beck, 2015. He notes (p. 13) that amongst the students it was first and foremost interest in Marcuse's works that later occasioned their acquaintance with Marx's writings, and then with Hegel's. For Peter Gente's father's career as judge, see Kerstin Kohlenberg, "Denker und Punk", *Die Zeit*, 2007, No. 8 (15 February), p. 57.

French Theory. However, and this is important to keep in mind, all these thinkers – Marcuse, Benjamin, Adorno, Bloch – were themselves representatives of Theory – not in the French post-structuralist version of it, but in the version that would identify Theory with different shades of the Left and the dialectical method. In that sense, what was happening in Germany in the mid- to late 1960s was not an aberration; it looked more as a sideway move that confirmed this wider, more universalist understanding of Theory (and its expansionist deployment), albeit in a manner that was very different from the magisterial developments under way in France.

On the other hand, in France 1968 did stimulate Theory in ways that would be difficult to overlook. Institutionally, the aftermath of May 1968 triggered the establishment in 1969 of *Centre Universitaire Expérimental de Vincennes* (CUEV), an experimental institution, as its title suggests, that, at its foundation, did not even have full university status. It was at this institution that Foucault would be appointed as Chair of the Philosophy Department, to which also Deleuze, Badiou, and Lyotard (to name but a few) would soon be recruited. Conceptually, the aftermath of '68 is equally recognizable in France. Guattari himself calls *Anti-Oedipus* "an effect of May".[7] In a retrospective gesture, Guattari and Deleuze would write a short piece, "May '68 Did Not Take Place", in which they would underscore the irreducibility of the 1968 events to causal chains: "May '68 was neither the result of, nor a reaction to a crisis."[8] Deleuze and Guattari refused a Hegelian instrumentalization of '68, insisting instead that May '68 be seen as a manifestation of singularity, a process of desire without a subject. In the words of one of Guattari's close friends, the Italian political activist Franco Berardi, May '68 signified a movement "against

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[7] Quoted in Dusse, *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari*, 179.

[8] Deleuze and Guattari, "May '68 Did Not Take Place", in *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotext(e) Reader*, ed. Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer, Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2001, pp. 209-211, here 210.

the bondage of the Signified."[9] Advancing their theoretical emphasis on immanence and the possible, Deleuze and Guattari referred to May '68 as something "of the order of pure event, free from all normal or normative causalities" ("May '68 Did Not Take Place", 209). As such, May '68 would present to them a platform for reflection on the category of the possible, intimately linked to what they conceived of, in positive terms, as "chaos" and uncertainty: "the event is itself a splitting off from, a breakthrough with causality, it is a bifurcation, a lawless deviation, an unstable condition that opens up a new field of the possible" (*ibid.*, 209).

There is, however, also another understanding of theory (we could imagine the word being written with a small 't' here); it focuses on a particular time-limited episteme and on a much more well-defined area, that of literature or the other arts: music, architecture, theatre, film, etc. The episteme I am referring to must be time-limited, for it is itself the product of a time-limited regime of relevance that bestows on literature (or these other arts) a sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency, without which the semblance of timelessness constituted in the act of theoretical reflection – with its uncovering of seemingly universal principles (or even immutable rules) – would not be possible.[10] When it comes to May '68, we also need to be taking interest in theory as this specific time-limited episteme focused on literature (hence "literary theory"),[11] and on how it relates to the other version of theory (theory with a capital 't').

[9] Franco Berardi (Bifo), Félix Guattari: Thought, Friendship and Visionary Cartography, trans. and ed. by Giuseppina Mecchia and Charles J. Stivale, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 85 (cf. the entire Ch. 8 in Berardi's book, "Why is Anti-Oedipus the Book of the '68 Movement?", pp. 73-87).

[10] I elaborate here on arguments advanced in my book *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019 (see especially the Prologue).

[11] For a terminological distinction between "literary theory" and "theory of literature," see Antoine Compagnon, *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, trans. Carol Cosman, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, pp. 11–12.

In mid-1960s Germany, these two projects of theory intersect in a way that is indicative of, and marked by, earlier developments in the German humanities. The version of theory that tends to extend to a full overlap with dialectics is very much alive in the legacy of what we still refer to as "critical theory", an intellectual project that commenced in the 1920s and was already influential by the late 1950s. In the 1960s, this project revives Benjamin's work which the '68-ers rediscover; it also formulates what Adorno would call a "negative dialectic": reversing Hegel's postulate "the whole is the true" but remaining nonetheless dialectical, albeit negatively so. This extended understanding of Theory as coextensive with dialectics (almost exclusively, as I noted before, of German provenance) is not the only one on offer in Germany during the 1960s. A competing version of Theory seeks inspiration in hermeneutics, and thus also largely in the domestic intellectual tradition. To some extent, of course, in the version practiced by Gadamer hermeneutics meets the dialectical method; Hegel is undoubtedly important for the subtle moves of mediation that are on display in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer's opus magnum published in 1960.

On the other hand, literary theory as such (the second project of theory, "theory" with a small "t") is barely present in Germany until the mid-1960s. If anything, a great deal of what constitutes literary theory arrives initially as an export from France, in the guise of structuralist semiotics. Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, in a severely abridged translation,[12] becomes the first harbinger of this particular project of theory in Germany (the same translator, Helmut Scheffel, had brought out Barthes' *Le degré zeró de l'écriture* in 1959). As Horst Brühmann notes, Barthes' *Mythologies* appeared in Germany (as *Mythen des Alltags*) at a time when not a single book was available in German by Foucault, Althusser, Derrida,

[12] See Horst Brühmann, "'Als Diskussionsgrundlage für Großstadtbüchereien empfohlen.' Zu Übersetung und Rezeption der *Mythen des Alltags* in Deutschland", in *Mythen des Alltags – Mythologies. Roland Barthes' Klassiker der Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Mona Körte and Anne-Kathrin Reulecke, Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2014, pp. 25-40, here 30 (19 of Barthes' 53 *mythologies* were translated in the 1964 Suhrkamp edition).

Lacan, or even the members of the Tel Quel Group; Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* had been translated into German in 1960, but without the theoretical passages.[13] Thus, at least initially, French literary theory arrives in Germany without the supporting frame of French Theory. In both France and Germany, what anchors and advances structuralist literary theory is the parallel revival, for the first time in Europe since the 1930s, of Russian Formalism; in retrospect this could be seen as a self-reflexive gesture, by some of the structuralists, of establishing intellectual provenance for their own work. This process begins precisely in the mid-1960s. In 1964, a German translation of Victor Erlich's 1955 monograph on Russian Formalism is published in Munich; the next year, the first books of works by Russian Formalists appear in France and Germany: in France, the famous anthology edited in Paris by Tzvetan Todorov, with a preface by Roman Jakobson, and in Germany – a selection of Boris Eikhenbaum's writings brought out by Suhrkamp. To complicate matters, some of the essays included in Todorov's anthology of Russian Formalist literary theory (by Shklovsky and Eikhenbaum) are carefully read and referred to a few years later by Marcuse, the indisputable intellectual guru of the 1968 protests, thus staging a consequential meeting between theory and Theory.[14]

None of this, of course, is to suggest that somehow Germany was a late-comer to literary theory in its French version; if anything, the primary texts by Barthes and Lévi-Strauss mentioned above were translated into English after they had become available in German. What is more, in Germany, as part of the 1968 legacy, we see a veritable explosion of publications by structuralists and on structuralism, in a way we don't in either England or the USA. But it *is* to say that, to some not inconsiderable degree, literary theory in Germany in the mid-1960s is the outcome of appropriating contemporary work carried out in France

[13] Brühmann, *op. cit*., p. 32.
[14] See Galin Tihanov, "The Politics of Estrangement: The Case of the Early Shklovsky", *Poetics Today*, 2005, Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 665-696, especially pp. 689-690.

and earlier work done in Russia (in later years also in Prague). It is crucial to note that the Konstanz School reception theory - the only original contribution to literary theory to hail from Germany, precisely in the mid- to late 1960s and early 1970s, and thus evolving simultaneously with the import of French structuralist literary theory – was indebted to hermeneutics as one of the versions of German Theory. In 1963, the group Poetics and Hermeneutics was founded in Germany, building in its work on philosophical hermeneutics and essaying to adapt its procedures for the tasks of literary hermeneutics by also drawing on rhetoric and (structuralist) narratology. At its foundation, Poetics and Hermeneutics was conceived as an interdisciplinary group, with the prominent participation of both philosophers (Hans Blumenberg was amongst the four co-founders; Jacob Taubes and Odo Marquard participated in some of the meetings) and literary scholars (Hans Robert Jauß, Wolfgang Iser, and the now forgotten Clemens Heselhaus were the other three co-founders; notably, they all came from different disciplinary backgrounds within literary studies: Jauß was a Romanist, Iser a scholar of English literature, and Heselhaus a Germanist). In 1966, both Jauß and Iser were called to the newly founded University of Konstanz which was to become the institutional centre of the group. It was at Konstanz, in his inaugural lecture in 1967, titled "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory", that Jauß would outline more systematically the arguments of reception theory (indicatively, the English translation introduces the term "literary theory" in the title, whereas the German has "literary science" instead [*Literaturwissenschaft*]).

The scene of German literary theory (and of German Theory) reconstructed here bore directly on the way the events of '68 were interpreted in Germany. Two particular features are worth spelling out. To begin with, given the prominence of hermeneutics and reception theory, it should come as no surprise that important pieces engaging with the events were of a decisively hermeneutic bent (occasionally, also availing themselves of the tools of semiotics).

Secondly, and perhaps more important, in the absences of a theory master narrative (be it structuralist or hermeneutic), responses to May ’68 would reach back to the past to find there those absent narratives. This discursive reawakening of the past, especially the mediated presence of Romanticism as a prism of interpretation, is a hallmark of the appropriations of May ’68 in Germany.

We can take a cue from Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion of “bifurcation” and uncertainty to focus here on how ’68 and the protests that preceded it – as early as 1966 - were discursively processed in Germany. This is a story of interpretative bifurcation *tout court*. As I will demonstrate, discourses focusing on Romanticism – and its post-romantic exfoliations – were the main interpretative screen that grounded and kept together an otherwise polarized debate on the student movement. I thus aim to establish the significance of post-romanticism in the process of formulating intellectually and politically relevant responses to May ’68 (serving here as a short hand for the protest movements from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s). At the heart of this paper, then, is the desire to understand how discourses and ideas are transposed in time, indeed how entire domains of ideologically constructed meaning get relocated and grafted in the tissue of a historically different culture in order to provide resources for formulating answers to newly posed questions. Doing so amounts to recovering and articulating a previously under-reflected cultural phenomenon that could best be captured as a syndrome of both returning to, but also fleeing from, Romanticism, of acknowledging its ineluctable and continuous presence, but also, in the same breath, critiquing it through numerous creative gestures of realignment and (dis)continuation.[15]

[15] For consistency, I capitalize Romanticism (“proper”/”historic”) but leave derivatives that signal a specific (later) relationship with Romanticism (e.g. post-romanticism, neo-romanticism, etc.) uncapitalized.

Locating Post-Romanticism

The immediate purpose of this paper is to offer a brief reflection on 1968 as a nodal point in the appropriations and deployments of Romanticism, not least as a diagnostic tool. I hope to substantiate the case for the continuous after-life of Romanticism in the various guises of post-romanticism, a process which de-emphasizes the notion of *period* or indeed *event*, and constructs instead a complex discursive formation that re-negotiates past intellectual agendas and energies by framing them within a discursive *longue durée*. Let me first detail what is actually meant by "post-romanticism".

Romanticism occupied a unique place in the cultural formation of modernity. Not only did Romanticism enjoy – like so many artistic currents from the eighteenth century onwards – a resurrection in periods of imitation and emulation in literature, music, and the arts; unlike all later currents, Romanticism became an attitude, a wider cultural reality, one might even say, a lifestyle. It branched out with equal force into philosophy, the sciences, and social theory; it established its own code of social intercourse and intimacy, its own privileged heroes and villains, in short – a whole philosophy and ideology of culture. Aesthetic and cultural modernity, most of us would agree today, began with the Romantics, even though its roots lay in an earlier defense of the autonomy of reason.[16]

Romanticism's relations with modernity are much more complex than the picture painted by those asserting it as a promoter of the process of modernization. In Germany and Britain, this ambiguous dynamic is particularly evident: the very same generation of poets and thinkers that began by embracing the French Revolution ended up bitterly opposing its

[16] This section elaborates on arguments first outlined in my article "The Post-Romantic Syndrome: Reflections on Work, Wealth, and Trade from Adam Müller to Ernst Jünger", *Primerjalna književnost*, 2016, Vol. 39, No. 3, pp. 43-58.

ideals; in Germany, some of the major Romantics went as far as to undertake religious conversion (to Catholicism) to seal their change of heart and mind. It would thus be much fairer to describe the stance of Romanticism towards modernity as profoundly contradictory. Romanticism did not always play into the process of modernization; much of its energy was spent doubting, criticizing, or simply rejecting it. The French Revolution, with its radical agenda, served not as the cause but as the point of crystallization; latent social and intellectual forces gathered and focused on an event of enormous momentum, thus revealing the entire spectrum of reactions to modernity, from passionate embrace to uncompromising resistance.

This is certainly nothing new for students of Romanticism. What needs to be emphasized instead is the fact that Romanticism, with its dual attitude towards the Revolution, presented a laboratory case in its response to modernity. In a way, Romanticism was the first such reaction that would display the whole gamut of enthusiasms and critique. Behind the particular responses to the Enlightenment belief in the universality of reason embodied in the acts of the Revolution, there lurk here the contours of a more general paradigm. It is this paradigmatic nature of the Romantic attitude to modernity and the Revolution that has not been sufficiently recognized before. Drawing out the implications of this paradigm-setting process constitutes an indispensable step in appreciating the longevity of post-romanticism, in the multitude of forms and guises it took long after the Romantic movement itself had ceased to exist. Romanticism, one may suggest, was an examination of modernity, a check on its performance, an inspection of its resources. Such an examination was bound to take place with renewed vigor in different circumstances every time a society and a culture would find themselves at a critical juncture in their modern history. Being an

evolving and "incomplete" process, as Habermas has called it,[17] modernity is subject to these regular performance tests throughout its history. Because Romanticism was historically the first such critical assessment, the features and the parameters of the test, as well as the mode of formulating its questions (and often also the answers), would be drawn upon and would resurface in an ever-changing fashion every time modernity was subjected to such an examination. This continuous afterlife of the Romantic intellectual legacy, at a time when Romantic responses to the new social and cultural agendas would no longer do, constitutes the essence of the post-romantic syndrome. To put it in today's terms, checking on the performance of modernity has proven to be intimately dependent on mobilizing and carrying forward the arguments and the style of argumentation – at times in the guise of severe critique – worked out in the various strains of Romanticism. Of course, this is not to say that all subsequent engagements with modernity are of Romantic provenance (cf. Nietzsche and Kafka, to adduce just two examples); but it is to maintain nonetheless that the Romantic prism does color significantly later debates on modernity, paradoxically even when these debates lend support to non-Romantic (realist or otherwise more directly committed) forms of creativity and ideological intervention (the Spanish Nuevo Romanticismo of the 1930s is a case in point,[18] as is indeed the turn to Romantic resources in the political stand-off – on either side of the divide – in 1968 Germany and France).

Romanticism's *longue durée* is enacted, as I have briefly suggested in the preceding paragraph, through a syndrome of non-identical repetition, modulation, and critique. Let me dwell a little more on the word "syndrome" that is so central to my argument. There are at least two likely objections to this term: a) that it naturalizes rather than historicizes the

[17] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity – an incomplete project," in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, London: Pluto, 1985, pp. 3-15.
[18] The founding text is: José Díaz Fernández, El nuevo romanticismo: polémica de arte, política y literatura, Madrid: Zeus, 1930.

phenomenon I am discussing; and b) related to this: that it is turning the phenomenon into some kind of clinical predisposition to illness, evil, or other undesirable conditions. "Syndrome" comes from the Greek *syn* "with" and *dromos* "a race;" running; race-course; or even "a public walk." The verb *syndromein* means "running together," "meeting," or "running along with," or "following closely." The noun, then, has accrued the meaning of somebody or something that runs along but maybe still just behind something or somebody else. In other words, a response that is not late in coming, but also a set of features that occur simultaneously and characterize a particular phenomenon, usually seen as some kind of "abnormality." This brief etymological excursus is needed in order to demonstrate that at its very origin the term "syndrome" has a diachronic dimension built into it: "following closely," "unfailingly appearing just behind" something. I thus insist that writing about a "syndrome" does not naturalize the phenomenon, as it actually allows us to follow the curves of the race, with our eyes fixed on the run and the response of the chaser. This is exactly what we do when we interpret Romanticism and post-romanticism as discourses that represent responses to modernity in its historical evolution, i.e. as discursive formations characteristic of modernity and tracing its dynamics as an integral part of it. To some extent, Marx captures this – although in negative terms – when he writes in the *Grundrisse* that "the bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and this romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it [i.e. the bourgeois viewpoint] as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end."[19]

What is more, I deliberately choose to speak of "*post*-romanticism," thus placing the emphasis on the notion of distance, transformation and non-identity vis-à-vis Romanticism, rather than of, say, "neo-romanticism," which both narrows down the scope of anticipation to

[19] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, London: Penguin, 1973, p. 162.

literature and the arts, excluding sociology and political thought,[20] and also – equally unacceptably – stresses repetition and identity through imitation and emulation.

Still, what about the likely reservation that "syndrome" is redolent of disease, of an unhealthy condition that is dormantly available and awaiting actualization? This impression is further corroborated by the resilient link produced in scholarship between Romanticism and Nazism, in the case of Germany. Indeed, there has been a long tradition of seeking and locating the longevity of Romanticism and its supposedly baleful impact precisely and solely in Germany, and on the Right. One has to re-examine this connection and rethink this bond that seem so deeply entrenched. There are two crucial implications to asserting, as I do, that Romanticism and post-romanticism are evolving responses to modernity. One is that Germany cannot be singled out as the sole target of analysis, and as the only host tissue in which post-romanticism recurred (even when one consciously decides to focus primarily on Germany, as I do here); rather, the intimate link between modernity and post-romanticism can be observed across the cultural, ideological, and geographic divide, and throughout the twentieth century. The examples here are drawn from Germany, but the Romantic slogans of May '68 were just as widely spread (indeed often originating) in France. In a sense, the geographical distribution need not even matter: what is really at stake is the pervasive nature of the post-romantic syndrome that permeates modernity at each critical juncture of its evolution. The second implication, going back to the original instance of Romanticism responding to the French Revolution in ways that set the parameters for future responses – both for and against – is that post-romanticism should not be seen as linked exclusively to Conservatism and the Right, as has been the case for so long. In equal measure, albeit in a more complicated fashion, it was also linked to Left (usually Leninist or social-democratic

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[20] For a still rare interpretation of post-romanticism (and not just of Romanticism) that extends beyond the domain of literature and the arts, see Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter, Durham, NC and London: Duke UP, 2001.

and reformist, but also anarchist and Maoist, as was the case in May '68) thinking and political action, a connection that has so far remained largely unexplored. Thus, our interest in post-romanticism as a complex discursive formation must challenge the double misconception that post-romanticism is a specifically German malaise, and that it was nurtured by an exclusive alliance with Conservatism and the Right.[21] What better case to examine, then, than May'68, with its explicit and passionately held Left political ideals.

Given this, the word "syndrome" conveys the fact that post-romantic ideologies come to reflect and engage the structural problems of modernity itself. I am here invoking the work of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman who, in what is one of his most seminal books, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, made the case for the structural deficiency of modernity, or to use his stronger word, its "pathologies."[22] It is this deficiency that generates the discourses of post-romanticism which function as a syndrome to the extent to which they accompany, or "follow closely," modernity at different junctures of its history, by critiquing its various deep-seated problems – sometimes latent, sometimes manifest – from vantage points across the ideological spectrum.

The pattern of drawing on Romanticism in formulating and dealing with twentieth-century concerns could be observed, as I have already suggested, across European cultures and intellectual traditions. In France, Baudelaire and the surrealists rediscovered Romanticism and revived its critical potential.[23] In Italy and Scandinavia, a range of fin-de-siècle writers availed themselves of the Romantic legacy to articulate new anxieties and to diagnose new social problems.[24] In Russia, where in the nineteenth century a string of writers

[21] For a discussion of left post-romanticism, see Galin Tihanov, "The Post-Romantic Syndrome" (as in n. 15 above).

[22] See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.

[23] On this, see e.g. Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Die Kritik der Romantik: Der Verdacht der Philosophie gegen die literarische Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989, pp. 39-61 and 72-83.

[24] This process is explored in Mario Praz's classic study *The Romantic Agony* (1930-33) which was the first broad survey of the after-life of Romanticism in European literature (as such, it also contains some inevitable exaggerations and oversimplifications).

partaking – to a different degree – in the Romantic movement built the national poetic canon (thus fusing indiscernibly Romanticism and the classic), the post-1917 age called into being a state-sponsored stream of "revolutionary romantic" (*revoliutsionnaia romantika*) which was more than a mere artistic current and stood for an entire world view and a broader life-attitude. In all these countries, the resurrection of the Romantic legacy at various points of their cultural history in the twentieth century was the inevitable result of these societies' complicated dealings with modernity. In brief, in all of them, post-romanticism became an extraordinarily value-laden cultural code that stood for a wide range of responses to the perpetual crises of modernity.

May 1968: Romanticism's *Longue Durée*

May '68 is a par excellence case of transposing Romantic ideas, sensibilities, and discursive energies. An anonymous poem composed during the '68 protests, "On ne peut pas ecrire" addresses directly and approvingly the Romantic cultural inheritance: "Do you remember, there is also/Music/Is it by chance?/Everywhere Chopin being played on/pianos/This romantic music/They think, the other lot/That it is just a fun fair/Which a little rain will disperse."[25] The defense of "this Romantic music" in the face of its detractors ("the other lot") is unmistakable, as is the re-writing of the Romantic legacy, by the end of the poem, for a revolutionary protest agenda. Many of the slogans and mural inscriptions in Paris exhibited a clear Romantic pedigree, revolving as they did around the semantic cluster of dreaming, unlearning, and giving oneself over to the excesses of imagination. "Forget all you have

[25] This translation and the French original are from *Paris '68. Graffiti, posters, newspapers and poems of the events of May 1968*, compiled by Marc Rohan, London: Impact Books, 1988, p. 128 (there also the French text). All Paris slogans of May '68 quoted in this paper are from the same source.

learnt, start again with dreaming"; "To exaggerate is to begin to invent"; and perhaps most tellingly, "Rêve + evolution = Révolution."

A lot of this was Romanticism filtered through the complex mediation of Surrealism. The Surrealists in France were, of course, largely responsible for the revival of Romanticism (Maurice de Gandillac quipped after the Second World War that the French could not have understood German Romanticism without first going through their own Symbolism and Surrealism),[26] and this revival was often politically coloured by Leftist aspirations. In 1937, *Cahiers du Sud* published a special issue on German Romanticism, in which the triangulation between Romanticism, Marxism, and Surrealism is clearly suggested (Benjamin is amongst the contributors). Alongside articles by Monnerot on Marx and Romanticism (the subject also of an earlier article by Auguste Cornu in *Europe*)[27] and by Jean Wahl on Novalis and the principle of contradiction, one finds here a piece on the German Romantics and the unconscious by the Francophone Swiss literary historian Albert Béguin. In the same year (1937), Béguin published (in the Cahier du Sud publishing house that also brought out the eponymous journal) his magisterial study *The Romantic Soul and the Dream* (L'Âme romantique et le rêve); just as important, 1937 also saw the publication of his book on Nerval, whose late prose had an impact on Breton and the Surrealists. Surrealism thus becomes the bridge that supplies Romantic impulses to Paris (and Berlin) around 1968. Stanzas by Breton appear as mural inscriptions (or, more appropriately, graffiti) in Paris; an echo of the great Surrealist break-through still reverberates in the writings of Guy Debord, at a time when his *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) is amongst the most frequently read (and apparently most frequently stolen, by both students and workers) books in Paris.[28] Debord's

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[26] Maurice de Gandillac, "Deutsche Philosophie in Frankreich", *Universitas*, 1947, Vol. 2, pp. 49-53, here p. 52.
[27] A. Cornu, "Karl Marx et la pensée romantique", *Europe*, 1935, Vol. 39, No. 154, pp. 199-216.
[28] Cf. the testimony in (anon.), "The Beginning of an Era" (1969), in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb, Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, pp. 225-256, here p. 241.

work offers a powerful analysis of the Surrealist appropriation of Romantic cultural philosophy. On one important point, the Surrealists did revive Romanticism: they resuscitated the Romantic belief in spontaneity (transformed by them through the psychoanalytic embrace of automatism); on another important point, however, they departed from Romanticism, and this departure was especially attractive to the '68-ers: art was no longer to be the fruit of individual creativity dispensed by a suffering genius (often conceived of by the Romantics as an outcast, an exile from the philistine world of daily transactions); for the Surrealists, art and culture were to be – ideally – the outcome of collective, anonymously communal creativity. This celebration of spontaneity, communal spirit, and the excesses of imagination encapsulates the ethos of '68, both in Paris and Berlin. To this one should add the ensuing revolt against elitism; as early as 1956, Debord, in a co-authored text, had praised Lautréamont (extremely important for the Surrealists long after his death), contrasting him with Brecht who is cast aside as useful but ultimately constrained by his "unfortunate respect for culture as defined by the ruling class," too much wedded to the harmful notion of "personal property" in the area of art.[29]

Debord, who was seeking to anchor the Situationist Internationale in the experience of what he termed the "collective avant-gardes" (including Futurism and especially Dada), would furnish, as I intimated, a mixed account of Surrealism, highlighting its past achievements but also its political "error" which consisted in praising "the infinite richness of the unconscious imagination."[30] The key word here is "unconscious": imagination had to be retained but re-educated to serve the rationality of the revolution and its rejection of the bourgeois worldview that had successfully assimilated the initial subversiveness of

[29] Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, "Methods of Detournement" (1956), in *Situationist International Anthology*, pp. 8-14, here pp. 9-10.
[30] Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action" (1957), in *Situationist International Anthology*, pp. 17-20, here p. 18.

(Surrealist) irrationality. In a delightful twist, Debord's critique of the political barrenness of Surrealism would give a number of German professors much needed ammunition in defending their radical students. On 24 May 1968, Kommune I distributed in front of the student canteen at the Freie Universität in Berlin a number of different flyers, one of which appeared to be calling for the department stores of Berlin to be set on fire. Several professors at the university were asked to write expert evaluations of the texts of the flyers that could be considered in court. Szondi, Taubes, Wapnewski (at the time still at the FU, later founding director of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin) and Lämmert, to mention just the better known amongst them, all agreed (Adorno and Günter Grass were also asked but declined). In their evaluations, they adopted an approach of textual hermeneutics that would allow them to portray the flyers as the products of a playful but harmless imagination, mere instructions for organising absurdist happenings – rather than concrete political action. The students' radical rejection of consumerism was situated by their professors in the Surrealist and absurdist tradition of *épatage*. Wapnewski referred to Hieronymos Bosch, Salvador Dali, Beckett and Ionesco; Lämmert to Breton and Marinetti; Taubes to Breton, Aragon, the Dadaists and Queneau. The flyers should be read, Taubes concluded, as nothing more than an innocent "surrealist provocation" (as the title of his expert evaluation goes), devoid of any potency to incite or produce an immediate political intervention.[31]

In reality, the protesters in Berlin and Paris were seeking to blend the intoxicating cult of imagination with its sober utilization as an instrument of political revolt and power struggle. It is Jean-Paul Sartre who is credited with conjuring up the formula "power to the imagination", in an interview with Daniel Cohn-Bendit published on 20 May 1968 in *Le Nouvel Observateur* ("Ce qu'il y a d'intéressant dans votre action, c'est qu'elle met

[31] Jacob Taubes, "Surrealistische Provokation", *Merkur*, 1967, Vol. 21, No. 236, pp. 1069-1079 (the expertise itself is on pp. 1072-1079). On Taubes' expert evaluation, see also Robert Stockhammer, *1967: Pop, Grammatologie und Politik*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2017, p. 90.

l'imagination au pouvoir"). But it is in Germany that this slogan becomes reimagined as a slogan of Romantic provenance. In the German context, the juxtaposition of Romanticism and the Classic has been a persistent demarcation line, both culturally and politically. To get a sense of the high stakes involved in tilting the precarious balance between Romantic and Classic against the latter, it is worth recalling Adorno's unfortunate visit to the Freie Universität in Berlin, in July 1967, with a paper on the classicism of Goethe's play *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Adorno was invited by Peter Szondi, the brilliant Hungarian-Jewish comparatist and literary theorist, who, despite having been trained as an exponent of hermeneutics and continuing to work in its orbit, was increasingly interested in (post)structuralism and even deconstruction (in July 1968, Szondi organised Derrida's first visit to Germany; Derrida had just published *Of Grammatology* the year before).[32] Szondi had carefully written up his introductory speech, but in the light of the impending student protests he delivered only part of the original script, replacing the conclusion with a different text that asserted the right of his students to seek critical dialogue with Adorno and express scepticism vis-à-vis his untimely enthusiasm for classicist literature.[33] Indeed, the students believed Adorno's topic to be at odds with the urgent need to shake the canon, most of all its classical pillars; in the lecture hall, one could see banners, on one of which the following distich could be read: "Berlin's Left fascists greet Teddy the classicist" (in German, the lines rhyme: "Berlins linke Faschisten grüßen Teddy den Klassizisten"; in 1967, Habermas had accused the extra-parliamentary opposition of espousing "Left fascism"). The rejection of the classical was in stark contrast with the vigorous interest in the Romantic. In a short book completed

[32] On the invitation to Derrida, and on Szondi's contacts with Hartman, de Man, and René Wellek, see the notes to the posthumous publication: Peter Szondi, "Einführung zu Geoffry Hartman: Strukturalismus und Literaturwissenschaft (Freie Universität Berlin, 25. November 1966)", ed. Anna Kinder and Marcel Lepper, *Geschichte der Germanistik. Mitteilungen*, 2007, Nos. 31-32, pp. 105-108.
[33] The versions of Szondi's speech are in Peter Szondi, *Über eine "Freie (d. h. freie) Universität". Stellungnahmen eines Philologen*, ed. by Jean Bollack et al., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973, pp. 56-59.

apparently in Paris in 1968, when its author was barely 25 and yet to write his PhD, Richard Faber took up Sartre's slogan and placed it squarely in Novalis's mouth, defending this act of philological anachronism by citing the (alleged) revolutionary energy of Novalis' work.[34] The rallying cry of the day, which university students enrolled in German departments would issue repeatedly in the autumn of 1968 – "make the blue flower red" ("Macht die blaue Blume rot") – signalling as it did the resolute intention of rewriting the literature of (early) Romanticism for the purposes of the revolution, was declared redundant by Faber. To him, Novalis has always been a "red" poet, and his famous blue flower would not need to have its colour changed. Steeped in Benjamin, Bloch, and Sorel, Faber was re-appropriating Novalis for the agenda of 1968, finding elective affinities between his work and the slogans of Paris '68 (thus the slogan "le rêve est réalité" was interpreted by Faber as echoing Novalis's own "Die Welt ist Traum/Der Traum ist Welt").[35] In a not dissimilar vain, a year before 1968, with news of the student protests already spreading across the Iron Curtain, Anna Seghers had mobilised Novalis' metaphor of the blue flower in a novella (*Das wirkliche Blau* [True Blue]), set in Mexico and reworking the motif of reverie into a quest for social solidarity and justice.

Not surprisingly – considering the axiologically disputed territory that post-romanticism was – the spectre of Romanticism was also deployed by the opponents of '68. The professoriate of the Freie Universität, arguably (along with Frankfurt) the campus most seriously affected by the student protests in Germany, was uncompromisingly divided: while some, as we have seen, sought to help exonerate the actions of their students, others were inclined to see in these actions a return of the unhealthy spirit of Romanticism which they would hold responsible for the unfortunate turns in modern German history. The master text

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[34] Richard Faber, *Novalis: Phantasie an die Macht*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1970.
[35] Faber, *Novalis*, pp. 11-12.

of this invocation of Romanticism with the purpose of refuting it, is, of course, Carl Schmitt's *Political Romanticism*, a book whose first version was written in the aftermath of the German defeat in World War I. Schmitt decries Romanticism as politically vacuous, indecisive, and morbidly egocentric. In 1970 (the same year in which Faber's Novalis eulogy sees the light of day and in which Jack Zipes publishes his equally sympathetic account of the political potential of German and American Romanticism[36]), Richard Löwenthal, a prominent professor of political science at the Freie Universität in Berlin (and a maverick with Leninist credentials before World War II, occupying after 1945 a position on the conservative wing of the German Social Democrats), published a book in which Romanticism was turned into a diagnostic tool that should explain the disasters of '68. In this book, suitably titled *The Romantic Lapse* ("lapse" is here an attempt to convey the theological subtext discernible in the German "Rückfall"),[37] Löwenthal is adamant to expose Romanticism as a recurring syndrome of regress that obscures and enfeebles the powers of reason. Romanticism nurtures anarchism and an anti-Western cultural pessimism, the latter also affecting Marcuse, the principal ideological inspiration behind the student protests.[38] The student movement is thus but a stage in the protracted – baleful – afterlife of Romanticism; the students are engaged, according to Löwenthal, in a revolution that facilitates a backward movement, a retreat (from rationality and Western Enlightenment values) rather than progress. Romanticism thus reasserts its relevance as a foil against which competing interpretations of the present are brought into sharp relief.

[36] Jack D. Zipes, *The Great Refusal: Studies of the Romantic Hero in German and American Literature*, Bad Himburg: Athenäum, 1970. The book has a motto from Marcuse's One-Dimensional Man; Novalis is also amongst Zipes' heroes.
[37] Richard Löwenthal, *Der romantische Rückfall: Wege und Irrwege einer rückwärts gewendeten Revolution*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1970.
[38] Richard Löwenthal, *Der romantische Rückfall*, p. 72.

A Brief Conclusion

Beyond these spectral recurrences of Romanticism in the many different guises of post-romanticism, what were the wider consequences of May '68 for theory (both with a capital and a small 't')? In terms of literary theory (theory with a small initial 't'), in Germany May '68 consolidated and spurred pre-existing interest in structuralism and semiotics; after 1968, as mentioned earlier, Germany saw a veritable avalanche of publications in these fields. In the Federal Republic, May '68 also legitimized Marxism and social history as serious approaches to literature and the arts and gave further impetus to the development of media studies. The hermeneutic legacy, along with new work on reception theory and reader response theory, endured beyond 1968; their prominence on the German intellectual scene may at least in part explain the late – and generally rather lukewarm – encounter with Deconstruction.[39] With reference to Theory, and beyond Germany, the greatest shift was probably the gradual entwinement of Theory and political action, fitful and inconsistently consequential as it may have been. This is an important episode in the history of Theory, as it coincides with another such entwinement, of Theory and art (think, if only, of Deleuze's extensive body of work on literature and the arts), and foreshadows the rapprochement of literary theory and literature per se, which was to be practiced in the 1970s by Barthes and others – to the point where literary theory itself would be interrogated and abandoned. One should perhaps wonder whether the whole discourse of *jouissance*, in its Barthian version, can be thought away from the culture of pleasure and sexual liberation that was pervading the student movement - even as such a reading may come dangerously close to co-opting May

[39] For a lucid picture of the scene of literary studies and theory in Germany during the 1960s, see Rainer Rosenberg, "Die sechziger Jahre als Zäsur in der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft. Theoriegeschichtlich", in *Der Geist der Unruhe. 1968 im Vergleich*, ed. by Rainer Rosenberg, Inge Münz-Koenen and Petra Boden, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000, pp. 153-179 (there also on the post-1968 explosion of work on structuralism and by structuralists, p. 168).

1968 into the invigoration of a culture of self-centered indulgence and consumerism, a narrative that later proved resilient in conservative circles, both in England and on the Continent. This entwinement of literary theory and literature begins, of course, prior to Barthes, in Shklovsky's memoir trilogy of the 1920s, especially in his remarkable *Sentimental Journey* (1923), where he attempts to theorize literature without recourse to the meta-language of theory, realizing that the most important Other of literary theory is literature itself. But with Barthes after 1968, we are witnessing no longer an attempt to theorize literature per se; instead, the object of his analysis is a particular in its characteristics – but not confined to literature – experiential mode. Barthes' poststructuralist writing on literature thus attains an intensity and radicalism that gradually begin to question and annul the very project of literary theory. May '68 thus leaves behind multiple traces, some of them under erasure.