

INTRODUCTION: READINGS AND MISREADINGS

Returning to Romanticism

Over the last thirty years or so, European Romanticism has been subject to an extensive critical reappraisal. Much attention has been focused on early German Romanticism and, in particular, on the works of Friedrich von Hardenberg (better known as Novalis) and his fellow *Jenaromantiker* Friedrich Schlegel. Much of this criticism can be said to be a re-evaluation of the ‘modernity’ of Romantic thought. Developments in twentieth-century literary theory — in particular, those associated with the name of post-structuralism — have not only provided critics with a new framework and fresh critical vocabulary for considering Romanticism but have also paved the way to new insights into the Romantics’ own thinking on language, identity, and literature. Some critics, such as Andrew Bowie and Manfred Frank,¹ are engaged in rewriting the history of the phenomenon we have come to call ‘literary theory’. These critics argue that theory’s origins are to be found not only in Saussurean linguistics but also in the age of Romantic reflection ushered in by Kant.

I would like to narrow the field considerably by undertaking a close comparative study of just two thinkers: Novalis, as a representative of Romanticism, and Derrida, as a representative of post-structuralism. Strictly speaking, though, it is not a question of considering these authors as representative of wider movements. In many ways, they stand outside their respective movements, and undoubtedly one of the most important similarities between them is the difficulty they present to any attempts at categorization. As we will see, especially in Chapter 2, the question of definitions and the naming of concepts is a particular concern of both Romantic and post-structuralist theory. However, I feel that a detailed comparison of Derrida and Novalis will provide a contribution to the wider debate on Romanticism’s relationship to modern theory as well as to our understanding of modernity and postmodernity. It will, therefore, be important at times to place both writers in the more general context of literary theory.

I am going to begin by surveying some of the critical literature concerned with the continuing relevance of early German Romanticism. Concepts such as non-closure,² and ‘the de-mystified self’³ have shaped several revisionist investigations of Romantic theory and practice. It is now becoming something of a critical commonplace for fleeting parallels to be drawn between Romantic theory and post-structuralist theory, and sometimes specifically between Novalis and Derrida. For instance, Margaret Mahony Stoljar, in her introduction to a translation of some of Novalis’s philosophical writings, tells us:

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For contemporary readers [...] Novalis's writings can seem uncannily pertinent. They address issues that in recent years have continued to expand the parameters of our thinking on truth and objectivity, language and mind, symbol and representation, reason and the imagination. In form and style, too, Novalis's manuscripts demonstrate the associative fluidity of thought characteristic of Nietzsche. They proceed by intuitive and imaginative reasoning, rather than sustained systematic argument, in a manner that has become familiar in the writings of Derrida and others of our time.⁴

And the perceived similarities go well beyond 'form and style'. In *The Cambridge History of German Literature*, Nicholas Saul writes that 'many see early Romanticism as postmodernism *avant la lettre*'.⁵ However, although Saul's observation indicates a certain consensus that the theory of the *Frühromantiker* shares many of the features of post-structuralist theory, critics are far from agreement about the *extent* to which certain aspects of early Romantic theory can be regarded as postmodern or, indeed, whether Romanticism can rightly be regarded as a forerunner of postmodernism or post-structuralism. (In comparisons of Romanticism with twentieth-century theory there is a tendency to conflate post-structuralism and postmodernism. This does not really present a problem for my study because a clear distinction between the two is neither possible nor desirable. In any case, German critics in particular, when they refer to 'Postmodernismus', often mean Barthes and Derrida, rather than, say, Lacan or Lyotard.) And it is over the question of degree that a discernible split in opinion emerges. Often, comparisons with post-structuralist theory are followed by qualifying statements which tend to play down — even reject — the modernity of the Romantics. Later in the *Cambridge History* essay mentioned above, Nicholas Saul discusses Romantic irony and Friedrich Schlegel's concept of 'transzendente Buffonerie' and states: 'A direct line can be drawn from here to postmodern textual theory, although it is wrong to ascribe the postmodern sense of metaphysical void to the yearning for metaphysical plenitude which Romantic Irony connotes'.⁶

I cite Saul here because his second remark gets right to the core of the matter. In this book I will consider the effects of clear-cut oppositions such as the one between 'awareness of metaphysical void' and 'yearning for metaphysical plenitude'. Saul's formulation implies that the postmodern awareness of metaphysical void is totally incompatible with a so-called longing for metaphysical plenitude. Following Derrida, I describe such an opposition as an 'either/or alternative'. As we shall see, it is not the only either/or opposition to be found in readings of German Romantic literature and philosophy.

Romantic Ironist or Mystified Self?

In his general introduction to a critical anthology of German Romantic theory, Jochen Schulte-Sasse identifies the tendency to oppose yearning for plenitude to awareness of metaphysical void as the central issue in the debate over the contemporary relevance of Romanticism. His summary of the opposing positions is very useful. In order to clarify a highly complex situation, we can say that Schulte-Sasse borrows from Paul de Man two opposing ways of reading Romanticism. The Romantic writer can be read as either an 'ironist' or a 'mystified self'. The latter

interpretation (and this would appear to underpin readings such as Saul's) would be governed by what de Man calls an 'aesthetic ideology'. Schulte-Sasse defines such an ideology as:

an ideology — or, more precisely, an institutionalized discursive practice — that seeks to suppress the structurality of structures in favor of an illusive experience of wholeness. To use Lacanian terminology, the aesthetic enables the subject to establish an imaginary relationship between self and text. Art serves here as a mirror in which the subject experiences itself as unified and as possessing an equally unified, privileged consciousness.⁷

He points out that many artistic movements, as well as many conventional readings of Romantic writers, have been susceptible to such an aesthetic ideology and identifies a tradition of what he describes as 'misreadings' of Romanticism, by influential thinkers ranging from Hegel to Benjamin. These so-called misreadings seek to emphasize the Romantic desire for unity at the expense of moments at which the very impossibility of this unity is articulated. Schulte-Sasse regards de Man's 1969 essay 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' as the first reading to question this and to deal adequately with indications in European Romanticism which point to the impossibility of transcendence or unity. The figures of irony and allegory (as opposed to that of symbol which rests on the notion of an inherent unity between the symbol and its meaning) are central to de Man's argument, being as they are modes of discourse which admit to a radical disjunction between signifier and signified. Schulte-Sasse finds de Man particularly interesting for the way his discourse has a 'tendency to constantly slide from statements concerning representation to ones concerning the self'.⁸ The close relationship between representation and subjectivity is one of the main themes of this study. Chapter 1 deals with the role of representation in Novalis's version of self-consciousness, and in the final chapter, we will look at how representation and subjectivity interact in our attempts to relate to and communicate with other people, other subjects.

De Man says that the act of irony 'reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality'.⁹ Schulte-Sasse remarks that the Romantics, thus read, are 'radical structuralists, accepting the inevitability of structural, that is, spatial and temporal, difference, and consequently the impossibility of constructing a subject identical with itself'.¹⁰ However, Schulte-Sasse goes on to question the validity of such a clear distinction between the two critical stances and to hint at a different way of reading, of circumventing what amounts to a stand-off between critics like de Man, on the one hand, and those who insist on the Romantics' longing for plenitude, on the other. But before exploring this different strategy, I want to look at some of the defining characteristics of the opposing approaches and at a few Novalis critics who seem to fall into each category. These critics are specifically concerned with the modernity of Romanticism — indeed, two of them actually consider Novalis in relation to Derrida. By highlighting one or two issues from their readings, we can see how each critic explicitly defines his or her own position in terms of its opposition to the other stance. I am, therefore, going to retain the terms of de Man's opposition for a while longer because they

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are convenient designations, useful signposts for mapping the ways in which diametrically opposed views can emerge from an either/or approach to reading Romanticism.

The two opposing ways of interpreting and defining the modernity of early German Romanticism can be seen as a manifestation of a more general divide in the field of literary criticism. Oversimplifying to an extent, we might say that the critics of one camp posit or attempt to locate an extra-linguistic ground, origin or other form of presence. These readers subscribe to what Derrida terms the 'transcendental signified'. As both origin and telos, outside of and/or anterior to language, it is the transcendental signified which is held to guarantee meaning or truth. Readings governed by the assumption of a transcendental signified tend to characterize the early Romantic writer as a 'mystified self' in search of the elusive absolute or metaphysical plenitude. Members of the other broad group, to whom Andrew Bowie gives the name 'anti-foundationalists', are held to be intent upon tracing the play of signifiers, without attempting to find any central foundation or transcendental signified.

Géza von Molnár is one critic who seems to want to rescue Novalis from the clutches of critics who would proclaim him a 'radical structuralist'. His book, *Romantic Vision, Ethical Context: Novalis and Artistic Autonomy*, as its title suggests, is devoted to demonstrating that Novalis's theories on self-consciousness and language, for all their modernity, remain firmly rooted in the idea of moral freedom which is vital for both Kant and Fichte. This freedom is unthinkable without an essential self-identity — the self-identity of the ego must remain intact in the flow of time and circumstance. Molnár's complex and subtle argument actually highlights many of the striking similarities between Novalis and Derrida. He even goes so far as to say that, in some respects, Novalis's concept of *Poesie* can be equated with Derrida's *écriture*, observing at one point: 'Not only does he [Novalis] lay his text open to deconstruction but he appears to deconstruct it himself'.¹¹ However, and once again this is anticipated by the title, Molnár persists in identifying Derrida as an 'autonomist', who 'demands' the non-referentiality of the artistic statement,¹² and would have us believe, moreover, that we can never escape the 'prison walls of language'.¹³ This characterization of Derrida is by no means restricted to Molnár and, as we shall see, it is evidence of a general and very persistent misconception of Derrida's work.

Paul de Man could be said to belong to the other category of critics, those who emphasize what they see as the Romantics' own deliberate articulation of the illusory nature of such notions as unity, identity, and totality. But, as Schulte-Sasse points out, de Man is one of the very first critics of Romantic literature to do so. I would suggest, therefore, that he emphasizes difference and temporality in order to question the dominant conception of the Romantic poet as 'mystified self'. Another critic who might be described as seeking to read the Romantic writer as ironist and radical structuralist is Alice Kuzniar. Her study, *Delayed Endings*, defines its argument very clearly in terms of a binary opposition between Kuzniar's insistence on 'radical temporality' in contrast to the contentions of older Novalis criticism which emphasizes unending Romantic progression towards transcendence and fulfilment. For her, as

we will see in Chapter 3, ‘non-closure’ is something radically different to the idea of unending progression. She questions the ways in which Novalis critics have in the past sought to imbue the narrative structures in his work with non-religious, but nonetheless transcendental, significance. These readings she describes, in an article of 1988 entitled ‘Reassessing Romantic Reflexivity’, as ‘theologically restorative’.¹⁴ Like this article, *Delayed Endings* was written twenty years ago and, as with de Man, the very force of Kuzniar’s counter-argument stems partly from a need to shake up the dominant interpretation of Novalis as the archetypal Romantic poet, filled with an indeterminate longing for the golden age.

The tendency to work in terms of such oppositions is in a certain way inevitable. If post-structuralism has taught us anything it is that all texts can give rise to different — even diametrically opposed — readings. However, when reading Novalis and Derrida — both separately and together — adhering too strongly to one of the two positions outlined above runs the risk of obscuring the extent to which both writers continually and consciously complicate such oppositions. They prefer instead to trace the contours of the strange folds and paradoxes by which the ‘either’ and the ‘or’ are linked. In fact, I argue in this book that the most important similarity between Derrida and Novalis is their affirmation of paradox.

Critical Consequences

Certain critics are very much aware of the significance of paradox and its implications for any reading which seeks to bring together Romanticism and post-structuralism. Herbert Uerlings, for instance, takes issue with Kuzniar’s *Delayed Endings*, in particular with her assertion that Novalis, and the other early Romantics, as well as Hölderlin, renounce all teleology in favour of ‘discontinuous seriality’.¹⁵ A certain impatience with such black-and-white distinctions — and not just those of Kuzniar — can be detected when Uerlings comments that: ‘Alternativen wie “Dekonstruktion oder Utopie” oder “Diskontinuität oder Teleologie” sind zu heuristischen Zwecken brauchbar; für eine differenzierte Interpretation des Hardenbergschen Werkes im historischen Kontext sind sie viel zu schroff’.¹⁶ Uerlings suggests a solution to such pairs of alternatives — and he makes the point that this is Novalis’s own approach. This solution is the paradoxical ‘*Teleologie ohne Telos*’,¹⁷ and he shows how Novalis reacts to the loss of a telos through a strategy which Uerlings terms ‘narrative Konstruktion immanenter Transzendenz’.¹⁸ This phrase is a way of naming Novalis’s conscious fictionalization of the absolute. I hinted above that Schulte-Sasse finds Paul de Man’s distinction between ‘ironist’ and ‘mystified self’ ultimately inadequate, and even misleading, to the extent that it fails to emphasize the central paradox of Romanticism itself — namely that an explicitly futile desire for an impossible absolute is still shown to be *necessary*.¹⁹ Schulte-Sasse points to the importance of the word ‘Schein’ — translated by de Man as ‘fiction’ — and sees the Romantics’ emphasis on concepts such as ‘belief, fiction, and illusion’ as being the key to appreciating the central paradox of Romanticism outlined in the following quotation:

The Romantic ‘believes’ in a ‘future unity’ in the sense that he consciously constructs such unity as a fiction, an illusion that enables him to construct

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or 'synthesize' himself as unified, while always remaining aware that every construction is preliminary and incomplete.²⁰

As our reading of Novalis will demonstrate, many of the works of early German Romanticism reveal a permanent tension between these two apparently contradictory positions, maintaining simultaneously a belief in future plenitude and the awareness of its impossibility. Schulte-Sasse terms this 'Romanticism's paradoxical articulation of desire', and his definition corresponds to 'narrative Konstruktion immanenter Transzendenz' as described by Uerlings. Recognizing the importance of paradox is in my opinion the most productive and interesting way to approach any comparison between Romantic and post-structuralist thought.

As I have indicated, it is very difficult to avoid the tendency to work in terms of oppositions such as the one between 'longing for metaphysical plenitude' and 'awareness of metaphysical void'. One can therefore detect oppositional thinking even in works which otherwise strive to avoid it. Significantly, this applies to interpretations of both Novalis and Derrida. Andrew Bowie, as I mentioned above, recognizing the broad split in literary criticism and philosophy, refers to 'anti-foundationalists', but I take issue with the fact that he seems to want to count Derrida among them. Derrida has his own way of describing the two apparently incompatible ways of reading which we are considering here. Bowie cites Derrida's identification of two 'interpretations of interpretation'. One type 'dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin that escapes the play and order of the sign', and the other 'affirms play and tries to go beyond man and humanism'.²¹ However, Derrida is concerned here with Nietzsche and does not explicitly align himself with the latter version of interpretation. It is true that Derrida never ceases to question the existence of a 'transcendental signified', but this does not mean that he has no interest in such questions as truth, 'man', the subject, and, consequently, the complicated relationship between subjectivity and language. Later, Bowie returns to the two 'interpretations of interpretation'. He makes the following point:

It should already be clear, then, that Derrida's model of the 'two interpretations of interpretation' in modernity, the one seeking the origin and foundation of meaning, the other delighting in the infinite play of signification, is inadequate to the real tension in question here, because it does not give sufficient space to other ways in which conceptions of language and meaning are explored.²²

However, a remark of Bowie's hints that he is not entirely happy with his own characterization of Derrida. In the concluding chapter of his book, he qualifies the above with the observation that 'in recent years' Derrida has moved away from the first position ('which affirms play and tries to go beyond man and humanism'). Bowie continues:

The second position, that Derrida has increasingly come to espouse in recent years, sees truth as an ethical obligation inherent in communication with the Other, which leaves space to connect truth to what can be revealed by aesthetic modes of articulation'.²³

Derrida has always been interested in 'the other' — as productive 'force' of difference and *différance* — and to say that, in the earlier works, he is *only* interested

in the infinite play of signifiers is to accuse him falsely of a kind of (Nietzschean) scepticism.²⁴ James K. A. Smith, in a book which sets out among other things to debunk the ‘Derrida myth’, points out that many commentators have identified what they see as a political ‘turn or *Kehre*’ in Derrida’s work from the 1990s on and perhaps this is what influences Bowie’s conclusion. But Smith rightly points out that Derrida’s work did not suddenly *become* political in the 1990s:

rather it would be better to say that the topics of his analysis shifted from the deeper metaphysical assumptions that undergird the political (the dualism that produces structures of exclusion and marginalization; logocentrism *as* ethnocentrism) to those institutions that we more regularly regard as ‘political’ (matters of law, justice, ethics, religious wars, etc.).²⁵

Smith’s strategy in demythologizing Derrida is to trace the ways in which deconstruction responds to the call of the other right from Derrida’s early engagement with Husserl. I find his remarks on Derrida’s philosophy of language a particularly succinct response to Molnár’s assertion that deconstruction would have us remain behind the ‘prison walls of language’:

To mistakenly assume, as many have, that deconstruction denies reference beyond language would fail to see, above all, that such a supposed linguistic idealism would be a realm of sameness, whereas it is clear, even to Derrida’s critics, that deconstruction is concerned above all with difference — that is, *the other*.²⁶

I said above that all writers can be read in different ways, and no doubt Derrida can be read with great emphasis on his interest in the never-ending play of signifiers. However, such a one-sided interpretation can only obscure the extent to which he is *not only* interested in the play of signifiers. Bowie succumbs to this only at times, but we have already looked at Géza von Molnár’s unequivocal rejection of Derrida’s so-called attempts to prove that we can never escape the ‘prison walls of language’. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of Derridean thinking, and it is significant that Molnár has a certain amount of trouble in supporting such a characterization with quotations from Derrida’s work. It seems particularly ironic, given that *Romantic Vision, Ethical Context* is an attempt to rescue Novalis from the clutches of those critics who would see him as the archetypal Romantic solipsist, that Molnár makes precisely the same (though inverted) mistake with regard to Derrida. Such one-sided interpretations of Derrida’s work are of the same order as those that account for the diametrically opposed interpretations which constitute Novalis criticism.

It is my contention that Novalis and Derrida are more likely than other writers to inspire such decisively conflicting interpretations because of the role of paradox and aporia in their works. We have already seen how two Novalis critics acknowledge this with their own formulations: Uerlings speaks of ‘Teleologie ohne Telos’ and Schulte-Sasse’s term is ‘Romanticism’s paradoxical articulation of desire’. Building on the work of critics like Schulte-Sasse, my own study shows that only readings which are attuned to paradox can do justice to the complexity of early Romantic thinking on identity, language, literature, and philosophy, and suggests, furthermore, that such readings can better appreciate Romanticism’s proximity to post-structuralist thought.

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Along with Schulte-Sasse, other readers of Romanticism, including Andrew Bowie, Manfred Frank, William Arctander O'Brien, Gail Newman, Mary Strand, and Lisa Roetzel, have investigated the paradoxes inherent in Romantic thought and explored affinities with twentieth-century literature and theory. I have, therefore, sought to build on their critical insights and have supported my arguments with quotations from their work, especially at the points where they are content to 'endure' — Derrida's word — *aporia* and paradox, to read and misread at the same time, and this in the interest of respecting the intricacies of both Romanticism and post-structuralism. But, ultimately, it is the texts of Derrida and Novalis themselves which have provided the model for my reading which tries to, if not avoid, then at least to complicate an either/or approach. I have therefore quoted both writers extensively, letting their texts — their writings which are also readings — communicate the striking resemblances in their affirmation and celebration of paradox. This affirmation of *aporia* is felt in all the various aspects of living and thinking, loving and writing, which are the themes of this book. The resemblances between these two writers are, at times, uncanny, and reading Novalis *responsibly* with Derrida, after Derrida, before Derrida, is not only interesting but has much to teach us about both.

Methods of (Mis)reading

I propose to undertake close comparative readings of some of the works of Novalis and Derrida in order to identify the most interesting and important affinities between them. We will find that it is through the affirmation of paradox that their writing corresponds most closely. In view of this, to take an either/or approach is fundamentally disloyal to both writers, precisely because they themselves question such an approach. John Neubauer expressed the hope in 1988 that 'ein [. . .] besser verstandener oder besser angewandter Postmodernismus zu einem besseren Novalis-Bild beitragen könnte'.²⁷ I agree entirely with Neubauer on this point and hope that a close comparison of the writings of Novalis and Derrida will indeed contribute to a better understanding of both Romanticism and post-structuralism.

But what does it mean to strive for a 'better' understanding? I have already used the word 'misunderstanding', and have also cited critics such as Bowie and Schulte-Sasse who use the term 'misreading'. We need to turn our attention to the 'mis-' of misunderstanding and misreading. I said above that post-structuralism has given us a new horizon and new ways of conceptualizing the modernity of Romanticism and its role in shaping contemporary literary theory. These new ways of reading have naturally had an impact on the critical discourse which we now use and my own study is no exception. However, a deconstructive or post-structuralist reading is at best a reading which questions the assumptions upon which all discourse rests — and crucially this questioning applies to those assumptions which undergird its own discourse. Derrida has shown how even the most seemingly fundamental concepts such as truth and meaning can be deconstructed to reveal that they are actually not fundamental. They are, rather, constructed, motivated, and far from stable.

And yet it is impossible to avoid using such concepts or to ignore their effects. Derrida has never failed to admit this, contrary to the various interpretations of deconstruction which emerge from the work of critics who censure him, and also, interestingly, from his most enthusiastic devotees. To put this in the context of the either/or approaches to reading we have been discussing, Derrida speaks of ‘oppositional logic’ or ‘all or nothing oppositions’ and points out that: ‘Every concept that lays claim to any rigor whatsoever implies the alternative of all or nothing. [. . .] It is impossible or illegitimate to form a *philosophical concept* outside this logic of all or nothing’.²⁸ He explains that we cannot simply throw away our existing terms, recognizing that philosophical discourse only emerges through oppositional logic. Indeed, he has always stressed that we cannot simply do away with old terms in favour of new ones, because we would then run the risk of making these new terms — including *différance* or the supplement — into master terms, as though they were then themselves exempt from questioning and deconstruction. The attempt to posit *différance* or the supplement in order to *oppose* oppositional logic is constricted by an internal contradiction, a kind of double bind: how does one *oppose opposition*? Recognizing the double bind, Derrida says:

To this oppositional logic, which is necessarily, legitimately, a logic of ‘all or nothing’ and without which the distinction and the limits of a concept would have no chance, I oppose nothing, least of all a logic of approximation [. . .]; rather I add a supplementary complication that calls for other concepts, for other thoughts beyond the concept and another form of ‘general theory’, or rather another discourse, another ‘logic’ that accounts for the impossibility of concluding such a ‘general theory’.²⁹

Derrida argues that words like ‘truth’, ‘meaning’, or ‘concept’ must continue to be used but ‘sous rature’ or ‘under erasure’ — a sort of retaining while reinscribing and complicating. So in a study which questions words and concepts such as ‘truth’, ‘philosophy’, and ‘literature’, I have at times used these terms without comment or qualification, partly as a matter of convenience, but also because, in a more profound sense, there is no alternative.

It is also vital to stress that, while Derridean terms such as *différance*, the re-mark, and the logic of supplementarity have provided a useful framework for identifying similarities, this study does not simply represent an attempt to *apply* post-structuralist theory to Novalis. With this in mind, I do not intend to consider in detail any of Derrida’s readings of Novalis. Though Novalis is at best a marginal figure in his oeuvre, Derrida has at times invoked Novalis, almost as a kind of ally, as we shall see in Chapter 1. He also gave several seminars at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in the late 1980s and early 1990s which drew on Novalis’s scientific-theoretical notebooks. David Farrell Krell has published his lecture notes on the 1990–91 course in ‘All You Can’t Eat: Derrida’s Course, “*Rhétorique Du Cannibalisme*” (1990–1991)’.³⁰ Krell also considers Novalis in relation to Derrida in his book, *Contagion: Sexuality, Disease and Death in German Idealism and Romanticism* and identifies affinities in their thinking on ‘the system of the mouth’,³¹ and on the themes of ingestion, digestion, and excretion.

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There is no doubt that the texts of Novalis could be ‘deconstructed’ in order to demonstrate the warring significations that seem to emerge from them. A reading of this kind, however, would operate on the assumption that Derrida, as the more knowing writer, can somehow demystify Novalis as Romantic poet. Apart from the fact that this approach fails to do justice to deconstruction itself and to the subtlety of its methods of reading, the main problem with this perspective is that it is bound to overlook the extent to which Novalis himself consciously thematizes the contradictions and paradoxes in his work. Such a perspective can, therefore, only obscure the very modernity of the Romantic position.

Taking the following definition of deconstruction by Jonathan Culler, we can see that there is another sense in which my reading has been informed by deconstructive methods of reading. Culler regards one of the principal effects of deconstructive criticism as precisely its disruption of the ‘historical scheme that contrasts romantic with post-romantic literature and sees the latter as a sophisticated or ironical demystification of the excesses and delusions of the former’. He continues:

Like so many historical patterns, this scheme is seductive, especially since, while providing a principle of intelligibility that seems to insure access to the literature of the past, it associates temporal progression with the advance of understanding and puts us and our literature in the position of greatest awareness and self-awareness. The strategy of many deconstructive readings has been to show that the ironic demystification supposedly distinctive of post-romantic literature is already to be found in the works of the greatest romantics — particularly Wordsworth and Rousseau — whose very force leads them to be consistently misread.³²

In this sense, then, I have certainly undertaken a deconstructive reading of Novalis. However — and Derrida has always insisted on this — one of the steps in a deconstructive reading is to tease out elements in a text which appear to be at odds with one another. This does not apply only to texts which thematize these apparent contradictions or, to put it another way, which ‘deconstruct themselves’. As we shall see when we come to Rousseau, texts which are ‘blind’ to these warring significations can nonetheless be read as saying something other than the author intended. (Derrida is sometimes regarded as dismissing out of hand authorial intention. This image has perhaps arisen from too close an identification with Roland Barthes and his famous essay on the death of the author.) Deconstruction is, in Culler’s words, a kind of ‘writing with both hands’, a way of reading and writing which produces a constant shifting between perspectives without seeking a synthesis but rather allowing an ‘irresolvable alternation or aporia’ to stand.³³ When I use Derridean terms in order to appreciate the undecidability of Novalis’s texts and his awareness of aporia, this does not mean that I wish to join the ranks of critics who would claim Novalis as a ‘radical structuralist’ or post-structuralist. John Neubauer warns against precisely this and attacks critics who randomly collect an arsenal of citations from Novalis’s work in order to fashion their ‘Novalis-Bild nach eigenen Zwecken’.³⁴ (Significantly, many critics have said the same of their fellow critics’ readings of Derrida.) I *have* quoted extensively from the texts of both writers and have, of course, been selective in my choice of texts and quotations — this,

too, is unavoidable. I would respond to Neubauer's warning by saying that Derrida reminds us that every quotation is, by its very nature, out of context.

For me, the interest in a comparative study lies more in examining similarities than differences. That Derrida and Novalis are different goes without saying. Apart from the fact that enumerating all the similarities *and* differences in their respective bodies of work would take a lifetime, it would, in fact, contribute very little to the debate on the relationship between post-structuralism and Romanticism. In looking at similarities, my purpose is not to claim Novalis for a particular type of criticism or literature. I have not tried to gather ammunition to defend a critical school or movement. By outlining above the work of several important critics, I identified and set out at this early stage the two broadly discernible — and seemingly incompatible — approaches which divide much criticism of Romanticism: the Romantic writer as either 'mystified self', yearning for plenitude, as Saul would have it, or as de Man's knowing 'ironist'. These two positions provide a backdrop for my own readings, being instances of precisely the type of either/or approach to reading which I, following in the steps of Schulte-Sasse, O'Brien, Newman, and others, have sought to avoid.

Derrida has always insisted that a text can give rise to different readings. This is why we cannot dismiss either of the two critical stances outlined above as *misreadings* or *misunderstandings*, even though critics like Schulte-Sasse do not hold back in doing so. Because we would have to then ask: what would be the opposite of a misreading? A reading? A true reading? An objective reading? Derrida has long reminded us that any claim to objectivity is every bit as suspect as a so-called biased reading or misreading. I know that, like every reading, my own will inevitably be a misreading. However, adhering strictly to an either/or approach can only fail to do justice to Novalis and Derrida precisely because paradox is so important in their texts. When discussing Novalis and Derrida, it is somehow inappropriate to insist too much on the distinction between reading and misreading. Both writers remind us that a text can live on only through its readings. Rather than think of the text as an 'original', intact and self-identical before it is read or 'translated', we must follow Novalis and Derrida in thinking of the reader's response as opening the very possibility of the text itself — the text always already awaits the other. This makes it even more important to understand that literary criticism is *at once* 'serious' and 'a game'. If we are to attempt to read faithfully and with respect, it cannot be otherwise. Both Derrida and Novalis speak of reading as a kind of writing. Novalis tells us: 'Der wahre Leser muß der erweiterte Autor seyn',³⁵ the word 'muß' resonating with Derrida's demand when he says:

S'il y a une unité de la lecture et de l'écriture, comme on le pense facilement aujourd'hui, si la lecture *est* l'écriture, cette unité ne désigne ni la confusion indifférenciée ni l'identité de tout repos; le *est* qui accouple la lecture à l'écriture doit en découler.

Il faudrait donc, d'un seul geste, mais dédoublé, lire et écrire. Et celui-là n'aurait rien compris au jeu qui se sentirait du coup autorisé à en rajouter, c'est-à-dire à ajouter n'importe quoi. Il n'ajouterait rien, la couture ne tiendrait pas. Réciproquement ne lirait même pas celui que la 'prudence méthodologique', les 'normes de l'objectivité' et les 'gardes-fous du savoir' retiendraient d'y

mettre du sien. Même niaiserie, même stérilité du ‘pas sérieux’ et du ‘sérieux’. Le supplément de lecture ou d’écriture doit être rigoureusement prescrit mais par la nécessité d’un *jeu*, signe auquel il faut accorder le système de tous ses pouvoirs.³⁶

Paradox, Aphorism, and Desire

Turning now to questions of structure, I would like to discuss the parameters of this study and say a few words on the texts I have selected for close reading. It has been particularly difficult to order the various themes of my comparison. This is mainly because — as will become clear — each theme cannot be fully separated from the others. One might even say that each chapter tries to do the same thing: namely, outline the contours of a certain paradoxical encounter with the absolutely-other. We will see this, for instance, in the way that certain texts appear in more than one chapter. One reason for this is that the works of both Novalis and Derrida form a kind of unfolding in which earlier themes and problems are always there; always already caught up in the process of reworking and rewriting. However, for the sake of clarity, it has been necessary to identify several different aspects or perspectives through which a paradoxical relation to alterity is articulated in their texts. The three terms which make up the title of this book — ‘paradox’, ‘aphorism’, and ‘desire’ — are intended to draw together some of the concerns which are pertinent to the thought of both Novalis and Derrida. Each term names one of the themes on which their texts correspond most closely and underlying each theme we will find a constant attention to the trace of the other.

I have chosen to begin with those texts of Novalis and Derrida which deal with the question of self-consciousness because they provide a relatively clear illustration of the paradoxical and temporal relation to the absolutely-other in the thought of both. This relation to the other — which Derrida sometimes names ‘l’autre’, ‘l’absolument-autre’ or ‘le tout-autre’ — will guide us through the readings and writings of all the other chapters. While we cannot directly equate what Novalis terms ‘das Absolute’ with the Derridean other, we can trace how both writers conceive of ways of articulating something which cannot be made a direct object of discourse. In Chapter 1, then, I compare texts by Novalis and Derrida which concern themselves explicitly with the metaphysical concept of the absolute. Derrida’s reading of Emmanuel Levinas, ‘La Violence et la métaphysique’, is one such text. As with all of Derrida’s texts, ‘La Violence et la métaphysique’ is itself a reading — an interpretation and commentary on the texts of another writer or philosopher. As well as Derrida’s reading of Levinas, we will briefly consider his essay on Foucault, ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’, also published in *L’Écriture et la différence*. Derrida’s essays will be considered alongside Novalis’s reading of the philosophy of one of his contemporaries, Johann Gottlieb Fichte. The insights of the *Fichte-Studien* — a collection of notes and reflections on Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, unpublished in Novalis’s lifetime — inform all of Novalis’s work (including his thinking on the subject-object relation which will concern us in the final chapter).

The second chapter considers literature and philosophy as specific forms of discourse, and the distinctions and similarities between them, and asks among other

things whether they differ in their apprehension or articulation of the absolutely-other. This entails looking at Novalis's and Derrida's respective views on the functioning of language itself and at the ways in which they deal with questions of representation, truth, and meaning. Derrida texts which are particularly concerned with these questions include his readings of Rousseau (in *De la grammatologie*) and of Plato ('La Pharmacie de Platon' in *La Dissémination*). We will also consider his engagement with the speech act theory of J. L. Austin and John Searle in the texts collected in *Limited Inc*. These texts are compared with Novalis's speculative discussion of signs and language in the *Fichte-Studien*, as well as with a detailed reading of his short text on the functioning of language, *Monolog*. *Monolog* is a remarkable text for a number of reasons, not least for its demonstration that paradox and undecidability are among the most important features of early Romantic literature. By the end of the second chapter, we will have started to move away from more strictly 'philosophical' concerns, in order to consider the emergence of 'modern' literature and literary theory in the era of German Romanticism as a response to philosophy's failure to account for that which cannot be made a direct object of discourse.

Chapter 3 takes up the discussion of literature and examines texts by Novalis and Derrida which best illustrate a shared interest in non-closure and the self-referentiality of literature. Building on the work of Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, and Kuzniar, this chapter considers the Romantics' preference for fragmentary forms of discourse alongside Derrida's texts on dissociation and never-ending undecidability. The word 'aphorism' as it appears in the title of this book corresponds not only to the Romantic predilection for the aphorism or so-called finished fragment, but also to Derrida's expansion of the term to include separation, dissociation, and the ways in which these structure both language and literature. Two of Derrida's shorter texts, 'L'Aphorisme à contretemps', a reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, and 'Devant la loi', a reading of the Kafka short-story *Vor dem Gesetz*, are considered in connection with Novalis's narrative strategies for evading closure in his unfinished novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*.

Finally, an examination of the concepts of love and desire in Chapter 4 reveals fascinating similarities between Novalis and Derrida when they write on relationships with a friend or loved one. In the case of Novalis, we will look at the role of Mathilde, the female beloved in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, and consider possible answers to some of the questions of feminist criticism. We will see too that, for both Novalis and Derrida, it is death which sheds more light on the essential separation which always already constitutes our relation to the other person. The Derridean texts which best elucidate the interweaving of death, language, and literature are *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* and the essay 'Pysché: invention de l'autre'. The discussion of the subject-object relation in the final chapter reprises the question of respect for alterity raised by Chapter 1's consideration of the philosophy of consciousness and it is to this that we now turn.

Notes to the Introduction

1. See Manfred Frank, *Das Problem 'Zeit' in der deutschen Romantik: Zeitbewußtsein und Bewußtsein von Zeitlichkeit in der frühromantischen Philosophie und in Tiecks Dichtung* (Munich: Winkler, 1972) and Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).
2. See Alice A. Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings: Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin* (Athens, GA, and London: University of Georgia Press, 1987).
3. See Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 187–228.
4. Margaret Mahony Stoljar, trans., 'Introduction', in *Novalis: Philosophical Writings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 2.
5. Nicholas Saul, 'Aesthetic Humanism (1798–1830)', in *The Cambridge History of German Literature*, ed. by Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 202–71 (p. 203).
6. Saul, 'Aesthetic Humanism (1798–1830)', p. 229.
7. Jochen Schulte-Sasse, 'Romanticism's Paradoxical Articulation of Desire', in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. by Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 1–43 (p. 2).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
9. De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 222.
10. Schulte-Sasse, p. 5.
11. Géza von Molnár, *Romantic Vision, Ethical Context: Novalis and Artistic Autonomy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 156.
12. See *ibid.*, pp. 158–59.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
14. See Kuzniar, 'Reassessing Romantic Reflexivity', *Germanic Review*, 63 (1988), 77–86 (p. 78). Like de Man, she suggests here that this theologically restorative tendency of Romantic scholarship — even its 'deconstructive strain' — can be traced to Walter Benjamin.
15. Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings*, p. 8.
16. Herbert Uerlings, *Friedrich von Hardenberg genannt Novalis: Werk und Forschung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991), p. 624. The epilogue (pp. 616–25) takes as its title the question 'Konstruktion oder Dekonstruktion?' and provides a useful overview of Novalis's place in literary studies today.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 622.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 624.
19. See Schulte-Sasse, pp. 6–8.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
21. Bowie, p. 47. Bowie translates Derrida from *L'Écriture et la différence*: 'Il y a donc deux interprétations de l'interprétation, de la structure, du signe et du jeu. L'une cherche à déchiffrer, rêve de déchiffrer une vérité ou une origine échappant au jeu et à l'ordre du signe, et vit comme un exil la nécessité de l'interprétation. L'autre, qui n'est plus tournée vers l'origine, affirme le jeu et tente de passer au-delà de l'homme et de l'humanisme.' (Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p. 427).
22. Bowie, pp. 92–93.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
24. I have chosen to place the word 'force' in inverted commas because it is particularly difficult to find ways of describing *différance* without running the risk of *fixing* something which is never stable, which is itself subject to *différance*. Derrida says that *différance* is neither a 'word' nor a 'concept', and he often uses the word 'force' as a matter of convenience. For him 'force' has echoes of Nietzsche, and it is thus particularly apt for describing *différance* because, if a force *is* anything, it is a play of differences and quantities in motion. See the essay 'La Différance', in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 1–29.
25. James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 65.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
27. John Neubauer, 'Novalis und der Postmodernismus', in *Geschichtlichkeit und Aktualität: Studien zur deutschen Literatur seit der Romantik. Festschrift für Hans-Joachim Mähl*, ed. by Klaus-Detlef Müller et al. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988), pp. 207–20 (p. 208).
28. See Derrida, 'Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion', in *Limited Inc*, trans. by Samuel Weber (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 111–60. (For the discussion of oppositional logic, see especially pp. 116–17.) *Limited Inc* collects for the first time the essays — some unpublished in French — which represent Derrida's most sustained engagement with Anglo-American speech act theory. The original 'Signature Événement Contexte' was first published in French in *Marges de la philosophie* (1972), and later republished in a translation by Samuel Weber and Geoffrey Mehlman in the journal *Glyph*, 1 (1977). John Searle's article, 'Re-iterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida', which appeared in *Glyph*'s second volume (1977), refers to the Weber-Mehlman translation as does Derrida's response, the essay 'Limited Inc a b c . . .' (translated by Weber). *Limited Inc* includes a new afterword by Derrida, 'Toward an Ethic of Discussion', also translated by Weber. I have chosen to quote in English from *Limited Inc*, with the exception of 'Signature Événement Contexte' — I cite the French version of this text first published in *Marges de la philosophie*.
29. Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 117.
30. David Farrell Krell, 'All You Can't Eat: Derrida's Course, "Rhétorique du Cannibalisme" (1990–1991)', *Research in Phenomenology*, 36 (2006), 130–80.
31. Krell, *Contagion: Sexuality, Disease and Death in German Idealism and Romanticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 33.
32. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 248.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
34. Neubauer, p. 207.
35. Novalis, *Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, in 6 vols, ed. by Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960–), II, 470, *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, no. 125. All references to the works of Novalis are to this, the standard critical edition. Hereafter, N I, N II, etc.
36. Derrida, *La Dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 80.