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The Philosophy of Myth

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The Philosophy of Myth

Erwin Cook

The* early German romantic philosophy of myth can help elucidate the nature of early German Romanticism itself, which notoriously resists descriptive or theoretical definition. To be sure, myth is an equally problematic term, whose precise meaning varies among romantic philosophers, though its role in the romantic project remains usefully consistent: myth is offered as a solution to the crisis of modern alienation, or, more radically, to the crisis of the subject object dichotomy. The sources of this alienation are likewise varied but broadly coherent. I will mention those relevant to the task at hand. The central issues are these: what led romantic authors to invent both an ancient literary genre that was allegedly responsible for the unity of Greek culture and a feature of such literature that grants access to transcendental reality?

Given the intimate association between romantic philosophy and aesthetic theory, it is unsurprising that a central concern of romantic authors is a presumed diminution in the immediacy of experience and expression as defining features of the modern condition. Central to both issues is the problematic nature of language use—a problem felt to be exacerbated by the development of rational and abstract thought—which imposes itself between us and the outside world, as the mental activity responding to sensory experience and communicating that response to others. By extension, the sentimental artist could also impose himself between objects and perceiving subjects. This problematic loss of immediacy was further exacerbated by Kant's first *Critique*, with its foreclosure on human ability to directly experience things in themselves.¹ Mankind is thus trapped in the world of subjective phenomena conditioned by the *a priori* categories of understanding, and thereby separated by an unbridgeable gulf from an unknowable absolute.

The early German Romantics believed, however, that the first men enjoyed a oneness with experience, and specifically with nature, that was lacking in

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1 Kant, *Critik der reinen Vernunft* (Riga: Hartknoch, 1781. Revised 2nd ed. 1787).

civilized Europe. For this, civilization itself was held accountable, including the rise of the modern city and capitalist economy. The latter serves to alienate man from other men through the division of labor, and even from himself as he sells his body in exchange for sustenance. Again, the problem was exacerbated by philosophical intervention, in this case the mind body dualism of Descartes that left our very being fragmented. Science also contributed to man's alienation from nature, with the mechanistic worldview ushered in by the Copernican revolution and dramatically strengthened by Newton's demonstration of physical laws governing nature: his law of gravity establishing an inverse quadratic relationship between two bodies, $F = Gm_1m_2/r^2$, silenced the music of the spheres.

Man is further alienated from his fellow man by the fragmentation of religion begun with the Avignon papacy (1309–1378) and Protestant Reformation. Together with the triumph of modern science the rise of personal religion helped produce a decline in church attendance throughout Europe. Religious fragmentation was coupled with and reinforced the political fragmentation of Europe, which reached a crisis with the Thirty Years War that ravaged Europe from 1618 to 1648. The war led to centuries of mutual suspicion and conflicts that pitted Protestants against Catholics, and the north against the south, that continue to the present day in economic terms. In Germany, the sense of political fragmentation was compounded by its failure to achieve political union before 1871, leaving it a loose conglomeration of minor states. Finally, one should note that the cultural fragmentation of Europe was abetted by adoption of the vernacular in professional discourse and scholarship.

In offering myth as the solution to all these dislocations, the romantics were obviously making enormous claims for the power of a narrative genre that had no name in the ancient world and was essentially invented as such by Heyne. Yet it was felt that myth gave the ancient world its coherency, and was a key to restoring coherency to the contemporary world. It also expressed primitive man's rapport with nature, and could help modern man restore his oneness with a nature reanimated by Spinoza-inspired pantheism. Above all, myth could restore immediacy of experience and expression. In contrast with modern thought, the language of myth was held to be concrete, highly affective and unencumbered by extensive learning and ratiocination. Spectacular imaginative leaps among the first men were not simply possible but rendered necessary by the impoverishment of language, knowledge and logic. By virtue of being a symbolic, intuitive mode, myth could, to various degrees, narrow the gap between signifier and signified, between consciousness and the objects of consciousness. At its limit, and despite Kant's strictures, myth could even give modern man access to transcendent reality.

The symbol is a key to the power of myth, and claims made for its powers are even more portentous than those for myth itself. Given the uses to which it is put by romantic thinkers, it is ironic that the symbol has its origins in two passages from Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (*Kritik der Urteilkraft*).² First, Kant argues that in contrast to the concepts of understanding (*Verstand*) which admit of sensible illustration—e.g., a square can be represented by four lines connecting at each end in right angles—concepts of reason (*Vernunft*) do not, and can only be illustrated to sense indirectly—e.g., justice can be represented as a beautiful blindfolded woman holding scales and a sword. Kant's term for a concrete illustration of an abstract concept is "symbolic hypotyposis."³ The visual nature of the symbol has a lasting legacy among romantic thinkers.

In a separate passage, Kant defines genius as:

the faculty of presenting *aesthetical Ideas*. And by an *aesthetical Idea* I understand that representation of the Imagination (*Vorstellung der Einbildungskraft*) which occasions much thought, without, however, any definite thought, i.e. any *concept* (*Begriff*), being capable of being adequate to it; it consequently cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language.⁴

Kant himself indirectly connects the symbolic hypotyposis with the aesthetic idea in finding that both operate by analogy and are irreducible to a single concept. Schiller begins using 'symbol' in the sense of Kant's 'aesthetic idea' by 1794, and Goethe quickly adopts the term, as do the early romantics.⁵ The symbol thus defined is generative, and over time its generative activity is inflated to the point that symbols become finite representations of the infinite.⁶ The

2 Kant, *Critik der Urteilkraft* (Berlin: Largarde. 1790. Revised 2nd ed. 1793). For the Kantian symbol, see esp. H. Adams, *The Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1983), 29–45.

3 Kant, *Critik der Urteilkraft* (Berlin: Largarde. Revised 2nd ed. 1793), 254–60 § 59.


4 Kant, *Critik der Urteilkraft* (Berlin: Largarde. Revised 2nd ed. 1793), 192–3 § 49. Cf., e.g., T. Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. C. Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1982), 190; H. Adams, *The Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1983), 40; J. Schulte-Sasse, "The Concept of Literary Criticism in German Romanticism, 1795–1810," in P. Hohendahl, ed., *A History of German Literary Criticism, 1730–1980*, trans. F. Blaha et al. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 99–177 at 144; A. von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 35.

5 R. Welleck, "Symbol and Symbolism in Literature," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*. 4 vols., ed. P. Wiener (New York: Scribner's, 1973): 337–45, at 338.

6 González argues that the ability to perceive the universal in the particular is central to Aristotle's aesthetic theory. See, J. González, "The Aristotelian Psychology of Tragic Mimesis,"

romantic symbol is thus naturally drawn into the orbit of religious symbolism, so that it provides direct mediation between the phenomenal and the noumenal: the bread and wine of the eucharist *are* the body and blood of Christ, while retaining their fallen status as bread and wine;⁷ Christ himself is God incarnate; body and soul are united in the human being.

It is important to note that there are virtually as many definitions of symbol as there are romantic theorists, and the meaning of its effete doppelgänger, allegory, is just as variable.⁸ Still, important and even pervasive patterns of meaning can be observed. Perhaps the most important idea is that symbols only refer to themselves: Zeus is the ruler of the cosmos *and* awesome cosmic phenomena; one does not represent the other. Indeed, Zeus is both the cosmic ruler and everything else he is said to have been. Late Schelling adopted Coleridge's 'tautegorical' to denote this feature of the symbol.⁹ Todorov's term for the same feature is 'intransitive'; which allows him to distinguish the symbol from 'transitive' allegory more crisply than the romantics themselves were able to do.¹⁰

Three figures standing on the temporal or spiritual periphery of early German Romanticism provide  important inspiration for its early conception of myth: the philologist, Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729–1812)—whose Göttingen lectures both Schlegels attended—Heyne's younger friend, the cleric Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803)—in residence at Weimar since 1776—and, Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805)—whose dramatic activities at Weimar led to his falling out with Herder.¹¹ Heyne, the founder of Classical Studies, is also a founder of the modern scientific study of myth, and of comparative mythology and ethnology. He coined the word *mythus* in 1763–1764 by Latinizing the Greek word *muthos*—Heyne wrote in Latin—in order to describe a body of material that formerly went by the name of *fabula*,

in *The Poetics in its Aristotelian Context*, eds., M. Heath and D. Munteanu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

- 7 G. Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (Leipzig: Karl Wilhelm Leske, 1800), 47–8, 78. See H. Adams, *The Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1983), 17–20. Adams terms this type of symbolism 'miraculous,' in contrast to 'secular' symbolism.
- 8 For romantic allegory, see H. Adams, *The Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1983), 12–23.
- 9 F. Schelling, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie*, in K. Schelling ed., *Sämtliche Werke* 2.1 (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856), 196n.
- 10 T. Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. C. Porter. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1982), 201.
- 11 For the falling out of Herder with Schiller and even Goethe, see R. Clark, *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1955), esp. 373–81, 414–7. Friedrich Schlegel had a similar falling out with Schiller.

German *Fabel*.¹² The new name implied a new understanding of the material as an object of serious study. The reason it needed rescuing was twofold: the general discrediting of allegorical interpretations of myth, and with them of myth itself.¹³

It should be noted at the outset that allegory is already a feature of Homeric epic, most strikingly in Phoinix's story of how Prayers are daughters of Zeus who follow after Ate (personified blindness or delusion) seeking to heal the ruin she causes (*Iliad* 9.502–12), and Akhilleus' account of the two wine jars that lie stored on the threshold of Zeus, consisting of both evils and good things (*Iliad* 24.527–33).¹⁴ Allegorical interpretations of Homer begin as early as Theagenes of Rhegium (*fl. ca.* 525 BC), though they proceed along other lines than Homer's actual usage.¹⁵ Theagenes himself seems to have explained the *Theomachy* in *Iliad* 20 as referring to strife between the elements; he goes on to say that the gods can similarly personify qualities such as folly (Ares) or

- 12 In a pair of essays: C. Heyne, "Temporum mythicorum memoria a corruptelis nonnullis vindicata," *Commentationes societatis regiae scientiarum Gottingensis* 8 ([1763] 1785/6); "Quaestio de caussis fabularum seu mythorum veterum physiciis," *Opuscula Academica* 1 (1785 [1764]). The core of his position is articulated in Heyne 1764: 189–96; cited by A. Horstmann, "Mythologie und Altertumswissenschaft. Der Mythosbegriff bei Christian Gottlob Heyne," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 16 (1972): 60–85, at 72–4; partial German translation in J. de Vries, *Forschungsgeschichte der Mythologie* (Orbis Academicus. Problemgeschichten der Wissenschaft in Dokumenten und Darstellungen. I, 7.) (Freiburg i. Br.: Karl Alber, 1961), 144–9; partial English translation in B. Feldman and R. Richardson, eds., *The Rise of Modern Mythology: 1680–1860* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 218–19. The word *mythos* first occurs in a German-Latin dictionary dating to the first half of the sixteenth century; on which cf. A. Horstmann, "Der Mythosbegriff vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 23 (1979): 7–54, at 14.
- 13 F. Graf, "Die Entstehung des Mythosbegriffs bei Christian Gottlob Heyne," in F. Graf, ed., *Mythos in mythenloser Gesellschaft. Das Paradigma Roms* (Colloquium Rauricum 3.) (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1993): 283–94, at 287–8; A. von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 2–3.
- 14 On allegory and allegoresis, see, e.g., J. Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); F. Graf, "Die Entstehung des Mythosbegriffs bei Christian Gottlob Heyne," in F. Graf, ed., *Mythos in mythenloser Gesellschaft. Das Paradigma Roms* (Colloquium Rauricum 3.) (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1993): 283–94; N. J. Richardson, *The Iliad: A Commentary. Vol. VI: Books 21–24*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 25–49; A. Grafton, G. Most, and S. Settis eds., *The Classical Tradition*. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 34–41, s.v. "allegory."
- 15 For recent discussion of the evidence, see J. González, *The Epic Rhapsode and his Craft: Homeric Performance in a Diachronic Perspective*. (Hellenic Studies 47) (Washington D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2013), 156–63. González is skeptical as to how much can be said about Theagenes. J. Pamiás, "The Reception of Greek Myth," in L. Edmunds, ed., *Approaches to Greek Myth*. 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014): 44–83, provides a brief history of the reception of myth from antiquity to Creuzer.

wisdom (Athene).¹⁶ In other words, Theagenes seems to have employed both physical and moral allegory in defense of Homer against the objections of moral philosophers such as Xenophanes (*fl. ca.* 540 BC). In time, physical allegory would be taken up by Stoic, and moral by Neoplatonic philosophy. A third type of allegorical reading, euhemerism, together with moral allegory would remain popular throughout the middle ages and into the renaissance, especially among Christian authors. The reason for its popularity is simple: myth was the common stock of ancient art and to do away with it was unthinkable, yet it offended against reason and moral decency and a way had to be found to render it unobjectionable.

The reasons that allegory becomes discredited by the 18th century are not hard to find. First is the potentially subjective and arbitrary nature of allegorical hermeneutics, and the implausible and conflicting interpretations to which they often lead, such as the aforementioned allegoresis of the *Götterkampf* by Theagenes. More important is that allegory was increasingly seen as developmentally implausible: those nurtured on a degeneration model of human history, embodied in the Judeo-Christian myth of the fall, might find it easy to believe in “the wisdom of the ancients;”¹⁷ but those who adopted the enlightenment model of progressive history would not be so inclined. (It is important to note that both models of history, generational decline and cultural progress, can easily coexist in society without the contradiction being apparent: they do so already in Homer, as also in the contemporary US.) A decisive factor in this regard was the comparatively recent discovery of ‘myths’ among other small preliterate societies in Africa and the Americas, and their sometimes astonishing similarity to the classical Greek myths. Thus bereft of hidden meaning, myth was increasingly seen to be illogical, absurd, and worst of all, immoral. Emblematic is Fontenelle’s oft quoted declaration: “Let us not seek for anything in the Fables except the story of the errors of the human mind.”¹⁸

Into this breach steps Heyne, a professor at Göttingen from 1763 until his death in 1812. Heyne advocated an interdisciplinary approach to the study of classical antiquity; myth was a key component of that approach, essential for

16 *Σλλ.* 20.67 = DK 8.2; for strife as the governing principle of the cosmos in the Presocratics, c.f. e.g. Herakleitos DK 22B80.

17 The title of an essay by Francis Bacon defending allegorical interpretations of myth: *De sapientia veterum* (1609).

18 A. von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 5, translating B. Fontenelle, *De l’origine des fables*, in *Oeuvres Complètes, Vol. 3* (Paris: Fayard, 1989): 187–202, at 202: “Ne cherchons donc autre chose dans les fables que l’histoire des erreurs de l’esprit humain.”

understanding ancient art and literature.¹⁹ Based in part on his own research into contemporary 'primitives' in Africa and the Americas, Heyne concluded that mythology is a universal feature of human culture: if a culture does not now have a mythology, then it has simply lost it. Moreover, myth is not merely a function of narrative content, but a type of speech and of consciousness; and it is not abstract or rational but highly concrete and emotional. Heyne's term for this language is *sermo mythicus*, the necessary and universal form of speech among the first men, *prisci homines*, who lived during the childhood of the race, in the *aetas mythica*. Every form of expression, including religion, is ultimately subordinate to its rules. Specifically, myth is the imaginative product of linguistic impoverishment, a verbal response to astonishing and frightening natural phenomena, often in the form of naming and personifying so as to make knowable (this can be paralleled in Vico though there is no evidence Heyne read him; echoes can also be found in Heyne's contemporary Blake, and will later be taken up by Blumenberg). The *sermo mythicus* thus produces the first philosophy of man, in the form of cosmogonies and theogonies. A second, and secondary, species of myth is inspired by memorable events, including heroic achievements. Early myth is thus a species of philosophical or historical narrative, but not as the allegorists and euhemerists understood it. Most important, Greek mythology is the anonymous product of Greek prehistory: contrary to popular belief of the day, Homer did not create the myths he relates; rather he adopts them primarily for purposes of drama and entertainment. Early philosophical and historical myth thus combine to produce a third and historically later species of myth, the poetic. Heyne is thereby able to reconcile the irrationalism of myth with the rationalism of the epics in which they are embedded by locating their origins at different stages in Greek history. As found in the epics, Greek myth is thus the product of centuries of evolution, in tandem with the evolution of Greek culture and literature. Restoring the myths to their original form is, moreover, an arduous process, and once restored they can only be evaluated in relation to the historical conditions that produced them; in other words, they should be understood and assessed on their own terms and not with the values and standards of the present day. Nevertheless, Heyne, based on his extensive reading of ethnographic literature, came to be

19 esp. J. de Vries, *Forschungsgeschichte der Mythologie* (Orbis Academicus. Problemengeschichten der Wissenschaft in Dokumenten und Darstellungen. 1, 7.) (Freiburg i. Br.: Karl Alber, 1961), 143–4; See esp. B. Feldman and R. Richardson, *The Rise of Modern Mythology: 1680–1860* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972): 283–94; A. Horstmann, "Mythologie und Altertumswissenschaft. Der Mythosbegriff bei Christian Gottlob Heyne," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 16 (1972): 60–85; F. Graf, "Die Entstehung des Mythosbegriffs bei Christian Gottlob Heyne," in F. Graf, ed., *Mythos in mythenloser Gesellschaft. Das Paradigma Roms* (Colloquium Rauricum 3) (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1993).

convinced that human nature is everywhere essentially the same, and that this is reflected in world myth, although the mythology of different peoples is also conditioned by environmental and historical factors. Contemporary 'primitive' societies can thus be used to elucidate early Greece and its literature.


Herder shared Heyne's views on myth and did much to promote them.²⁰ As a consequence it is often impossible to determine the source of individual ideas, and what primarily distinguishes them can be attributed to their professional callings: the philologist Heyne sought to understand myth in semantic and philosophical terms, while the cleric Herder saw myth in terms of religious expressivity. It is worth observing in this context that the outlines of Heyne's thinking were already in place in his 1764 publication; and his friendship with Herder begins with the latter's visit to Göttingen in February 1772.²¹

Herder's own acceptance of national myth is linked to several defining features of his thought, including most notably his 'organic nationalism.'²² A second related feature is that, together with Vico, Herder is the recognized founder of historicism (although as we have seen Heyne also historicizes).²³ His historicism, in turn, leads Herder to reject enlightenment belief that universal laws could be applied to the study of human cultures and cultural products; he felt that, on the contrary, one could not do so without gross oversimplification and impoverishment, that is to say without stripping the culture so understood of all that makes it unique and interesting. Many of the conclusions he draws from this can be paralleled in Heyne: the value of all cultures is equal, and different cultures must be evaluated on their own terms: ancient Greece should not be judged by modern German standards and values, or vice versa. Culture and its products should therefore be understood from the inside: one must, so far as is possible, immerse oneself in the mindset and experience of the ancient Greeks in order to understand their myths and poetry. So literature must be historicized as well, and enlightenment attempts to apply universal standards to its study are likewise misguided.

20 See esp. Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking, 1976), reprinted in: H. Hardy, ed. *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); cf. J. Zammuto, K. Menges, and E. Menze, "Johann Gottfried Herder Revisited: The Revolution in Scholarship in the Last Quarter Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71 (2010): 661–84. Zammuto, Menges, and Menze rebut Berlin's claim that Herder belongs to the "Counter-Enlightenment," or proto-Romanticism (667–70); on which see also R. Clark, *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1955), 417–8.

21 Clark, *Ibid.*, 162.

22 Berlin, *op. cit.*, 180–4.

23  fundamental text is G. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Leipzig: Hartknoch, 1784–91).

Again like Heyne, Herder engages in comparative analysis of the ancients with other 'primitives,' though unlike the philologist, he turns not to the Americas or Africa but to the contemporary peasants of northern Germany. (Vico likewise studied the peasant farmers of Campania.) He departs from Heyne more fundamentally, however, in finding that religious sentiment is the *fons et origo* of myth; whereas Heyne thought that myth was developmentally earlier than poetry, Herder equated myth with religious poetry. This, rather than Heyne's historically more plausible account of myth's origins, will find an echo in romantic theories. And it leads to a more positive valuation of myth than we find in Heyne, who recognizes, even celebrates its value for understanding the ancient world and its artifacts, but who still feels the need to account for its scandalous and 'primitive' content. In an echo of Vico that may be deliberate, Herder finds that the very primitiveness of ancient man made them great poets: living in a state of nature, they sang about their lived experiences; while modern poets compose their works on paper locked away in their studies. Modern poetry is consequently more refined, but has lost the power and immediacy of the ancient songs. (This historical contrast directly foreshadows Schiller.) Thus, in contrast to enlightenment thought with its Whiggish perspective on historical progress, Herder favorably contrasts the free and vital savages of the first age with the effete and inconsequential men of the present. Finally, Herder finds that people are unified by common traditions and language, while language gives expression to their collective experience.

The importance of the individual's oneness with the community is central to Herder; from this it follows that a poem can be the product of a single person while still giving voice to the entire culture, which becomes an individual in its own right. Sadly, he finds, this is not so today. And it leads to a call to arms: "As early poetry was magical, a spur to 'heroes, hunters, lovers', men of action, a continuation of experience, so, *mutatis mutandis*, it must be so now also."²⁴ Where Schiller sees irredeemable loss, Herder directly anticipates Friedrich Schlegel's optimistic appeal to invent a new mythology (see below). He was also himself an avid collector of traditional stories, publishing a collection of folk songs in 1773 that would prove inspirational to the Heidelberger romantics, von Arnim and Brentano, and to the brothers Grimm.

Comparative mythology and ethnology, historicism, the universality of myth in small-scale, preindustrial and preliterate societies, an age of myth, myth as primitive, childlike, or religious thought, a mythic consciousness even, the necessary and universal mode of thought by early man, nature myth, myth as the origin of philosophy and science—these are the enduring legacies that Heyne and Herder bequeathed to romantic and subsequent theorization of myth.

²⁴ Berlin, *op. cit.*, 203.

If Heyne and Herder stand at the temporal periphery of early German Romanticism, then Schiller stands at its spiritual and physical periphery. Nevertheless, he was a professor of history at Jena from 1789 to 1799; and the Schlegels and Schelling were frequent and welcome visitors to Weimar, about twenty kilometers distant. Schiller had already published the elegiac *Die Götter Griechenlands* a year before his arrival in Jena, and would go on to publish a condensed version in 1800. During his time at Jena, in 1795–6, Schiller published *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* in three installments in the journal *Die Horen*, of which he was editor. Although more closely identified with Weimar classicism, Schiller was thus intimately acquainted with the Jena romantics and his elegy remains one of the most eloquent articulations of early romantic nostalgia for lost unity in the face of modern alienation.²⁵ At the same time, it echoes many of the beliefs and attitudes of Heyne and Herder—and before them Vico and Fontenelle—towards ancient myth.

In *Die Götter Griechenlands*, Schiller recasts the temporal antinomy found in Herder as the loss of natural religion, to which he responds with grief.²⁶ Whereas ancient man experienced the magic and wonder of an animate natural world, the rise of Christianity and scientific rationalism at the expense of paganism has left us with an *entgöttete Natur*:

Where now, as our wise men say,
 a soulless fireball spins,
 long ago Helios, in quiet majesty,
 drove his golden car, 20
 Oread nymphs filled these heights,
 a Dryad died with every tree,²⁷
 from the urns of lovely Naiads
 sprang the silver-foaming streams.

• • •

So as to enrich but one among you 155
 the world of gods must pass away:
 mournful, Selene I seek in the starry dome,
 but find you there no more.

25 A. von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 19–22.

26 Ibid., 20.

27 In the shorter edition of 1800, Schiller changed the line to read: “lebt’ in jenem Baum.”

Through the forest, through the waves I call
 Ah, their echoes are but empty! 160
 Unconscious of the joy that she bestows,
 never charmed by her own splendor,
 never ware of the hand that guides her,
 through my own thanks never richer,
 without feeling for her artist's honors 165
 like the dead clang of clock-pendula
 like a slave, she serves gravitation's laws,
 does Nature, now bereft of *gods*.

Nature has lost her divinities, her consciousness, and nothing compensates *us* for the loss. Seven years later, in *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*, the modern artist receives some measure of aesthetic compensation. In that essay, Schiller recast his earlier antinomy as the naive poetry of classical antiquity and the sentimental poetry of modernity: "The poet (*Dichter*), I say, is either Nature, or else he will seek her. The former makes for the naive, the latter the sentimental, poet" (716; cf. 712). The naive poet is characterized by a spontaneous originality, in contrast to the philosophically informed self-consciousness of the sentimental poet, in whom Schiller obviously sees himself. (He shrewdly identifies Horace as the first sentimental poet [712]: Horace is arguably the most refined poet of antiquity, and often expresses love for his Sabine farm which he claims to prefer to urban life in Rome, but his poetry is not characterized by emotional power.) As in *Die Götter Griechenlands*, the key to the contrast remains man's relationship with nature. Schiller closes the gap between subject and object by locating nature in the naive poet as he lived in and experienced it. Just as the distance between subject and object is closed in the person of the poet, so too is the gap between signifier and signified in his language, in marked contrast to the language of modern poetry:

If [in the case of modern poetry], the signifier remains eternally heterogeneous and alien to the signified, so springs forth [in the case of ancient poetry] the language as through an inner necessity from the thought, and is so one with it that the spirit (*Geist*) appears as though laid bare, even beneath its bodily husk. Such an art of expression, where the signifier disappears entirely in the signified, and where the language leaves the thought which it expresses simultaneously naked, since it could not express it in any other way without at the same time veiling it (*verhüllen*) is that which one, in the art of writing best calls brilliant and profound (*genialish und geistreich*).

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It is important to note that Schiller has a clear grasp of the phenomenon he is describing before he has a word for it. (*Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* appears one year after his first use of the word symbol, but it does not occur in the essay.) Compare the following passage from *Die Götter Griechenlands* (published two years before Kant's third *Critique*):

In ancient times the pictorial veil of poetry
still wrapped itself lovingly round Truth— 10
through the creation flowed life's fullness
and what will never feel, then felt.

Because of their very oneness with nature, however, the ancients took nature for granted, a fact one finds reflected in their poetry. On the other hand, the separation of man and nature defines the modern condition, producing a nostalgic appreciation of nature. It is thus precisely because nature has disappeared from our beings that we can appreciate it *outside ourselves*: "They (i.e. the ancients) felt naturally; we feel the natural.... Our feeling for nature is like the feeling of a sick man for health" (711). Finally, only the naive poet is a true genius; and he also has a childlike simplicity of character and expression (704–6). Unfamiliar with the rules, and guided solely by nature and instinct, the genius solves every problem with ease; his intuitions (*Einfälle*) are divine gifts, his feelings (*Gefühle*) are laws for the poets of later ages:

It is only granted to the genius, when he is outside the familiar to always
feel at home, and to expand nature without going beyond her.... The
genius must resolve the most complicated tasks with modest simplicity
and ease; the egg of Columbus holds true for every verdict of genius.

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The naive genius does not go beyond nature because he remains part of nature.

Although Schiller's discussion is devoted to the difference between ancient and modern *poetry*, it should already be apparent that it bears a striking resemblance to romantic theories of *myth* and *symbol*, and to the crises they were meant to address. In this regard, two points should be kept in mind: with the exception of Heyne, contemporary critics routinely identified the ancient poets, and Homer chief among them, as the creators of the myths they relate; and romantic theorists tend to conflate myth and poetry, in particular Homeric epic. Whereas Schiller's overall assessment in both the poem and the essay is pessimistic—what is lost is lost, though we may be partially compensated by heightened aesthetic appreciation—the early romantics believed

it was possible to restore the lost unities through the healing power of myth, of whom none was more optimistic in this regard than Friedrich Schlegel.

If anyone could be said to personify the *Frühromantik* it is the younger Schlegel.²⁸ His *Gespräch über die Poesie* includes a section entitled *Rede über die Mythologie* that will be the focus of our discussion. Schlegel began work on the *Gespräch* in Berlin in the spring of 1799, and would return to Jena in the fall to complete and publish it in volume three of the *Athenäum* (1800), a journal he edited with his brother, August Wilhelm. (In that same year, Schelling published *System des transscendentalen Idealismus* and Wordsworth added the famous preface to the second edition of his *Lyrical Ballads*.) In volume one of the journal (1798) there appeared a collection of notionally anonymous literary fragments, among which Schlegel's *Fragment* 116 is generally acknowledged as the manifesto of the early German Romantic movement: the *Gespräch* in turn has been called an extended commentary on the fragment;²⁹ and at its very core lies a discussion of myth. It follows that the young Schlegel saw myth—and as we shall see, specifically the creation of a new and universal mythology—as the key to the entire romantic enterprise. Myth does not simply foster unity, myth is both itself a unified whole and it and poetry are one.

Although the *Rede* will be our focus, it is essential to place that section in the wider context of the *Gespräch*, which is formally modeled on Plato's *Symposium*. The setting reflects Schlegel's advocacy of collective enterprises, reinforced by his belief that myth is a collective expression that remains the product of countless individuals; and he did much to promote cooperative ventures among members of the Jena circle. Emblematic of this are the collections of fragments he published in volume one of the *Athenäum* and the same volume in which the *Gespräch* appears (the *Ideen*). Numerous members of the circle contributed to the collections, but they remained largely anonymous, just as the 'authors' of myth were anonymous.

In the *Gespräch*, Schlegel follows Herder's historicism, in an effort to develop a history that is also a theory of literature. And as in Herder, his historicism is incompatible with neo-classical theories of rigid literary genres, but instead

28 On Schlegel, the most complete and up-to-date account in English is by Millán-Zaibert, *Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence of Romantic Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007); and for the *Gespräch*, see 160–75. All references to Schlegel's *Gespräch* are to KFSa 2: 284–362.

29 E.g. Jean Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. P. Barnard and C. Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 83; Ernst Behler and Roman Struc, eds., *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms* (The State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1968), 45 also note the close relationship between the *Rede* and the *Ideen*.

treats genre as changing through time, so that any attempt to deploy the same interpretive models on say Homer, Vergil, Dante, and Milton will be hopelessly reductive. As it relates to myth, Schlegel's historicism means that Greek or Norse myth *on their own* are unable to supply the modern need for a canonical frame of reference. Nevertheless, the romantic yearning for unity and the reverence in which Greek culture was held in the wake of Winckelmann meant that Greek myth remained a 'necessary' and even central part of the new mythology Schlegel envisions. His solution is thus radically assimilationist: a new mythology will incorporate all earlier mythology into itself, as well as history, philosophy and science.

Ludovico, who delivers the speech on mythology, has been seen as a pseudonym of Friedrich Schelling. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe identify him confidently—and go on to identify the other discussants as well—and they are followed in this by Adams and von Hendy, while Behler and Struc are more circumspect.³⁰ It is certainly the case that "Ludovico" shares the optimism one finds in Schelling over the modern capacity to create myth, and the eventual return of all the arts and sciences to it; also like Schelling, Ludovico treats myth as virtually identical to poetry. Weighing against simple identification, however, is a conceptual absence: although Ludovico uses the term 'symbol,' he does so interchangeably with allegory in the manner of Winckelmann; while Schelling has already begun to theorize the symbol in terms of Kant's aesthetic idea (see below). Moreover, the *Gespräch's* closeness to *Athenäum* fragment 116, and lack of a rebuttal of Ludovico's contribution on myth, which closely coheres with the overall program of the *Gespräch*, suggests that there is nothing in the speech that the Schlegels would not themselves endorse; and though Schelling was on cordial terms with August, relations with Friedrich were strained, and remained so throughout their lifetimes.

The *Gespräch* begins with an anonymous narrator eulogizing poetry, and declaring the need for the poet to be true to his own nature, and not to let a leveling criticism—compare Herder on enlightenment criticism—rob him of that. The worlds of poetry and nature are both infinite and inexhaustible. Indeed, poetry itself includes all living nature, all that is 'created.' And we are able to understand the poetry of man and nature because we share in the poet's creative spirit. We must strive to perfect and to expand the range of our poetry, and to integrate our individual voices into the larger whole. This is accomplished by learning to view poetry from a variety of perspectives. The *Gespräch* is thus itself an example of the process.

30 Ernst Behler and Roman Struc, eds., *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms* (The State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1968), 9 with n. 2.

There follows a *mise en scène*: Amalia and Camilla are discussing a play when Marcus and Antonio arrive. We learn that such get-togethers are common and that the topic is usually poetry. Amalia, however, realizes that they often talk at cross-purposes because they do not understand one another's views. Various members of the circle agree to give speeches explaining their thoughts about poetry. Andrea gives the first speech, on the *Epochen der Dichtkunst*.

His opening gambit is to equate the science of poetry with its history: "The art [of poetry] rests on knowledge (*Wissen*), and the science (*Wissenschaft*) of art is its history" (290). At the beginning of this history is Homer, whose epics are a beautifully constructed (291: *reizend gebildete*) and peaceful chaos (292: *ruhige Chaos*). The epic genre soon declined and was replaced by iambic and elegy, which is the very opposite of "mythic poetry," that is, epic (291). Together with epic, they formed the fonts of all Hellenic poetry. Among the tragedians, Aeschylus is the prototype for severe greatness (*Urbild der harten Größe*) and unschooled enthusiasm, and Sophocles of harmonic perfection, while Euripides betrays the unfathomable softness of the decadent (293). Greek poetry so conceived is poetry itself; all that follows is at best a return to its Olympian peaks. Turning briefly to the Romans, Andrea notes that erotic and didactic poetry predominates, and in a further echo of Herder declares that "the man of understanding leaves every creation (*Gebildete*) in its own sphere, and judges it only according to its own ideal" (295).


After a thousand year hiatus, Dante emerged as the father of modern poetry by binding it to religion. Although Greek literature was unavailable to him, the Romans were able to inspire in Dante the general conception of a monumental work with an elaborated architecture (297: *von geordnetem Gliederbau*). Together with Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio form the three leaders of early modern art: Petrarch perfected the canzone and sonnet; Boccaccio bequeathed to us an inexhaustible series of stories. Of those who followed, Ariosto is singled out for his advances in narrative art of the emerging genre of the romance; romance, however, never succeeded in establishing itself as the peer of epic.

Andrea groups the Spaniards and English together on the strength of their greatest authors, Cervantes and Shakespeare, who eclipse all others (299). Shakespeare breathed the romantic spirit into all of his dramas so that they constitute a foundation of modern drama that will endure. After these two died, so did poetry in their countries; yet philosophy rose to take their place. In France, nothing worthy of the name of poet has emerged. In Germany, Goethe is a universal genius; part of his success is that he has traced the history of poetry back to its source, so that the poetry of all ages is reflected in his work. Another important current trend in Germany is that philosophy and poetry work together to their mutual stimulation and development (303).

There follows an *intermezzo* in which the symposiasts exchange witticisms. Lothario concludes that every art and science that achieves its effect through language is poetry if it is practiced for its own sake and reaches the peak of perfection (304). Marcus desires a theory of poetic genres which is a system of classification and simultaneously a history and theory of poetic art (305). They conclude by posing without answering the question of whether poetry can be taught and learned, and whether poetic schools, such as existed in ancient times, are still feasible.

Ludovico now presents his *Rede über die Mythologie*, which we will consider in detail below. His talk is followed by a second *intermezzo*, in which Lothario takes Ludovico's expansion of poetry to include all great and disinterested literature, myth, philosophy and even physics a step further by declaring that all the arts and sciences developed out of myth, and will "flow back" into it (324). He thus anticipates a core tenant of Schelling's theory of myth. To Andrea's praise that Dante had single-handedly managed to fashion a kind of mythology, Lothario replies with a definition of the artwork that closely mirrors the later, romantic understanding of myth and that again conflates myth and art: "Only insofar as it is 'one and all' (*Eins und Alles*), does a work become a work" (327). At this point, Antonio steps forward to read his *Brief über den Roman*, originally composed for Amalia.

Antonio maintains that "colorful potpourris of sickly wit are the only romantic products of our unromantic age" (330), endorsing the work of Friedrich Richter and dismissing that of Fielding and Fontaine as "ignoble rubbish." Although praising the wit of Sterne, Diderot and Swift, he denies that they are among the truly greats, owing to the "sickly conditions" of the present (331). Richter is thus greater than Sterne because he is more sickly, and we should cultivate our sense of the grotesque as a defense against the sheer stupidity of much modern literature. The romantic itself is defined as "that which depicts sentimental material in fantastic form" (333).³¹ True sentimentality is spiritual rather than sensual, and its source is love, which must "everywhere hover invisibly visible" in romantic poetry (333–4). It allows itself to be veiled in mortal beauty; but the particulars to which it clings "only hint at the higher, infinite hieroglyph of the one eternal Love and the sacred fullness of life of creating and fashioning Nature" (334). Whereas ancient poetry remains anchored in mythology at all times, and even avoids truly historical material, romantic poetry remains entirely grounded in history, even more than is generally recognized (334). Moreover, 'romantic' and 'modern' are not the same thing: Lessing, for example, is modern but hardly romantic, while Shakespeare is the

31  "tastischen" is glossed in a footnote with: "in einer ganz durch die Fantasie bestimmten" Form.

very heart of romantic fantasy. Early German Romanticism is thus not so much a genre or historical moment as an element of poetry, broadly defined, that may be more or less present at any time.

After the briefest of *intermezzos* on women's attitudes towards men and the arts, Marcus announces that he will offer some remarks about Goethe entitled *Versuch über den verschiedenen Styl in Goethes früheren und späteren Werken*. In this essay, we have a history of an individual that is implicitly analogous to the history of an epoch or genre. There is thus virtually no other author in whom the differences between the early and late works are so striking. The difference does not simply consist of his views and beliefs, but also his manner of depiction and the forms employed (341). Marcus chooses three works, *Goetz von Berlichingen*, *Tasso* and *Hermann und Dorothea* to represent Goethe's early, middle, and late periods. The central claim of the essay is that in Goethe's first period, subjective and objective are completely mixed; in the second period, the exposition is completely objective, although what is actually interesting about works of the period is that the spirit (*Geist*) of harmony and reflection betray its connection with a certain individuality; in the third period subjective and objective are purely separate, and *Hermann und Dorothea* is objective (345). In general, only Shakespeare and Cervantes are Goethe's peers in universal genius. Marcus also affirms the earlier claim that Goethe's art is the first "which embraces all the poetry of the ancients and moderns together, and contains the seed of eternal progress" (347). Goethe's art is thus implicitly the inspiration for desiderating a universal mythology.

After his talk concludes, the symposiasts briefly discuss the possibility, extent and nature of a union between ancient and modern poetry. Ludovico argues that the spirit of poetry is everywhere the same and the union should be complete. Lothario notes, however, that the spirit may be the same, but that the outward form may differ, in matters such as meter. Ludovico asserts that language, "as it was originally conceived, is identical with allegory" (348). Lothario concludes that "first when the mysteries and mythology have been rejuvenated by the spirit of physics will it be possible to create tragedies in which everything is ancient but will still be able to grasp through its meaning the spirit of the age" (350). Here too an inspiration for the notion that the new mythology should incorporate modern science can be found in Goethe, who had recently published *Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu erklären* (1790), in which he correctly describes the principle of homology in plants, and would eventually go on to publish *Zur Farbenlehre* (1810).

This then is the context in which Ludovico presents his talk on mythology. He begins by lamenting that modern poets lack a fixed basis (*festen Halt*) for their poetry, a nurturing soil (*mütterlichen Boden*), a heaven, a living air (312). Instead, each poet must create all this for himself from within and with each

new work. The ancients had such a basis in mythology, and modern poetry is inferior to ancient precisely because its poets do not:

My position is that our poetry lacks a common focus and frame of reference (*Mittelpunkt*), such as mythology was for the ancients, and the fundamental reason (*alles Wesentliche*) why our poetry is inferior to antique can be summed up in the words: we have no mythology.

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In other words, the Greeks were culturally unified by a body of shared narratives, and therefore produced superior art, as such narratives supplied a common stock of material and frame of reference and belief on which to draw in its production and reception. Had he replaced 'myth' with 'natural religion' his position would have seemed much like Schiller's. But whereas for Schiller the loss is permanent, Ludovico hastens to add that the solution to the modern dilemma is to work earnestly together to create a new mythology. The historicist position is confirmed that the old mythology cannot simply be revived and adopted; but, like the old, the new one will be a collaborative enterprise, in marked contrast to the modern poet, working in isolation.

Moreover, the new mythology will come to us by an entirely different way than the old did. In ancient times, myth was the first flowering of youthful fantasy, which without mediation (*unmittelbar*) attaches itself to and reproduces (*anbildend*) what was most immediate (*das Nächste*) and alive in the sensuous world (312). Thus far, Schlegel reproduces a contemporary commonplace on the origin and subject matter of myth, though what follows is anything but: the new mythology must be developed (*herausgebildet*) from out of the deepest depths of the spirit (*des Geistes*). It must envelop (*umfassen*) all other works of art, and serve as the bed and vessel for the ancient and eternal fountain-head of poetry, and even as the infinite poem which covers the seeds of all other poems (312).

At this point, Ludovico addresses the issue of why he is giving a talk on mythology in a dialogue about poetry that is implicitly a romantic manifesto: myth and poetry are one. They are a chaos that is also the highest beauty, indeed the highest order. The poems of antiquity join to each other until a whole constitutes itself, in which everything interpenetrates each other and everywhere there is one and the same spirit, differently expressed. In short: "Ancient poetry is a single, indivisible, 'complete and perfect' (*vollendetes*) poem" (313). Modern mythology will come about in a different way, but there is no reason it cannot be even more beautiful or great. And, in a move that would especially appeal to the pantheists, he declares it will even incorporate physics (315; for Lothario's response, see above).

As noted above, what is conspicuously absent from the discussion is the role of symbolism, even in passages that would seem to cry out for it, such as the following: “and what is any beautiful mythology other than a hieroglyphic expression of the surrounding nature in this transfiguration of imagination (*Verklärung von Fantasie*) and love?” (318). Noting that Schlegel uses symbol and allegory interchangeably in the *Gespräch*, Dieckmann in fact argues that Schlegel only comes to fully appreciate the meaning and usefulness of the ‘romantic’ symbol when Schelling lectures on mythology at Jena two years later.³² This bears on how we interpret a key passage in which Schlegel does mention symbolism:

For that is the beginning of all poetry, namely abolishing the standard processes (*Gang*) and laws of a rationally (*vernünftig*) thinking reason (*Vernunft*), and transporting us back into the beautiful confusion of the imagination (*Fantasie*) and the original chaos of human nature, for which I thus far know of no more beautiful symbol than the colorful pageant (*bunte Gewimmel*) of the ancient gods.

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Symbol here does not represent the infinite in finite form, but rather accidental allegory. Where Schlegel in fact comes closest to a symbolic understanding of myth is in Ludovico’s appeal to Spinoza and a mystical understanding of nature with which the talk closes.³³ As we shall see, this too can be paralleled in Schelling, though it is worth noting that Schelling nowhere mentions Spinoza in *Die Philosophie der Kunst* (*PdK*), and only once in passing in *Das System des transcendentalen Idealismus* (*StI*).³⁴

For a representative early romantic theory of the ‘secular’ symbol, we now turn to Schelling’s, *Die Philosophie der Kunst*.³⁵ That Schelling should be singled out needs little defense: in the work of no other romantic philosopher does mythology play such an important role, and *PdK* is his most important

32 L. Dieckmann, “Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Concepts of the Symbol.” *The Germanic Review* 34 (1959): 276–83.

33 Ibid., 282–3, Dieckmann emphasizes the mysticism of Schlegel’s later thought.

34 Despite the obvious relevance of Spinoza to Schelling’s philosophy: cf. A. White, *Schelling: an Introduction to the System of Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

See also R. Clark, *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1955), 417. Clark argues that “Without Herder’s energetic defense of Spinoza, the Romantics would hardly have blended pantheism into their philosophy of religion and nature” (Ibid., 417).

35 For Schelling, see esp. H. Adams, *The Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1983), 58–70; A. von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 33–42.

theoretical intervention on the topic during this period. Admittedly, *PdK* was published posthumously, in 1859, and was not translated into English until 1989, and its direct influence on romantic thought is not obvious. Nevertheless, Schelling delivered the lectures on which the essay is based at Jena in 1802–3, and again at Würzburg in 1804–5, and they were widely circulated in manuscript form: it is estimated that 130 students attended his lectures in Jena alone, among them Henry Crabb Robinson, who instructed Madame de Staël on Schelling both in person and with four essays that subsequently made their way to her ancestral estate on Lake Geneva, where they remain to this day.³⁶ Staël went on to publish the hugely influential *D'Allemagne* in 1810–13, including a 172-page section on contemporary German philosophy, with a brief, sustained discussion of Schelling and numerous further references scattered throughout the text. Friedrich Schlegel, who was not in Jena when Schelling delivered his lectures, likely became acquainted with them in this way, and it helped lead to systematic revision of *Gespräch* to include references to symbolism, including the subtitle to the section on myth which now reads: “*Rede über die Mythologie und symbolische Anschauung*.”³⁷ He also much influenced Coleridge, who became the mostly anonymous gateway of his ideas to Anglophone readers;³⁸ and he found a new champion at the turn of the last century in Ernst Cassirer, who was highly influential among contemporary theorists of myth and literature.³⁹

Schelling shares with Schlegel a number of assumptions that are typical of early German Romanticism, including the need for a return to myth and optimism over our ability to do so. He also makes some rather grandiose claims for myth, and in particular Greek myth, which outbid Schlegel himself. For example, he finds that myth is “the necessary condition (*Bedingung*) and first content (*der erste Stoff*) of all art” (45 [405]), and “the highest archetype (*Urbild*) of the poetic world” (36 [392]).⁴⁰ Echoing Schlegel’s assertion that art needs mythology to attain the greatness achieved by the ancients, Schelling declares that myth is not simply the first, but the “universal content” (*allgemeine Stoff*) of art (45 [406]), and even the universe itself:

36 J. Vigus, “Introduction,” in H. Robinson, *Essays on Kant, Schelling and German Aesthetics*, ed. J. Vigus. (MHRA Critical Texts 18.) (London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 2010): 1–27, at 16, 19.

37 L. Dieckmann, *op. cit.*, 276–7.

38 See above, n. 7.

39 Ernst Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Teil 2: Das mythische Denken*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977) 2, 6–22; and, in English, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Vol. 2: Mythical Thought*, trans. R. Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955): 2, 3–16.

40 Throughout this section, the first reference will be to the English translation, the second, bracketed reference to the German edition.

Mythology is nothing other than the universe (*das Universum*) in its higher manifestation (*Gewand*), in its absolute form (*Gestalt*), the true universe in itself, image or symbol of life and of wondrous chaos in the divine imagination, itself already poesy and yet in and for itself the content and element of poesy. It (mythology) is the world and as it were (*gleichsam*) the ground in which alone the exotic plants of art are able to bloom and grow. Only within such a world are abiding and definite forms (*Gestalten*) possible through which alone the eternal concepts (*Begriffe*) can be expressed.

45 [405–6]

Its objectives and even its scope are the same as those of philosophy: “all possibilities within the realm of ideas (*Ideenreich*) as constructed by philosophy are completely exhausted (*erschöpft*) in Greek mythology” (41 [400]). More than this, myth offers a solution to the horrors of modernity; and the secret to this awesome power is the concept missing from Schlegel’s dialogue, namely the symbol.

Schelling’s litany of modern horrors are those shared by his fellow romantics. The present age is at war against the sublime, great, ideal and beautiful, and instead worships the frivolous, “sensually pleasing” (*Sinnenreizende*) and a “vile sort of nobility” (*aufniederträchtige Art Edele*) (11 [361]; my translation). It is an age “of small-minded attitudes and a crippling of sense” (*Kleinlichkeit ... Verkrüppelung des Sinns*) (87 [464]; my translation). Whereas in the springtime of an age there is a cultural unity and living spirit shared by its artists, this is gradually lost, resulting in fragmentation (10–11 [359–61]), so that “the modern world is one of individuals and of degeneration or collapse (*Zerfallens*)” (73 [444]). Enlightenment thinkers are “imbeciles” (67 [435]: *blödsinnige*), who have never been able to produce poetry of any value, and such poetry as they have produced is utterly lacking in symbolism; if you brought them all together and gave them a hundred years, all they would come up with is sandcastles (71 [441]).⁴¹ Kantians in particular are distinguished by their “extreme tastelessness” (*äußerste Geschmacklosigkeit*), and a philosophy that is “devoid of spirit” (12 [362]). Unsurprisingly, art and nature are the twin remedies to mankind’s plight, these being analogous ‘creations’:

41 His imagery here can be elucidated with Robinson’s essay to Madame de Staël on Schelling, H. Robinson, *Essays on Kant, Schelling and German Aesthetics*, ed. J. Vigus. (MHRA Critical Texts 18.) (London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 2010): 126 § 3. “If the Universe be not a Sand hill but a System of beings, united into one whole, must there not be a sense to perceive it?”

I doubt one could find a more appropriate means of cleansing (*reinigen*) oneself from such pettiness than acquaintance (*Verkehr*) with the greatness of nature (*mit der großen Natur*). I doubt also that there is a richer source of great thoughts and of heroic resolve than the ever renewed pleasure in the vision (*Anschauung*) of that which is concretely and physically (*sinnlich*) terrible and great.

87 [464]

What *is* perhaps surprising is Schelling's further claim that art is potentially a more potent remedy than nature herself. For a work of art can and indeed must attain "an even higher reality" than nature (45 [406]): as a consequence it is able to convey an intuition of that reality more effectively than nature herself is able to do.

Before we turn to the cure, it is necessary to provide some context. Schelling's pantheism allows him to dissolve the Kantian divide between the phenomenal and the noumenal by locating God within and throughout nature. Humans are able to intuit the divine infinite in the particulars of nature because the divine also exists in ourselves. Schelling's word for this is Genius: it is "the indwelling element of divinity in human beings," "a piece of the absoluteness of God" (84 [460]). Those who possess enough genius are able to intuit the union of the infinite and the particular in the particular artwork. Conversely, it is able to "pour itself" (*ergießt sich*) into the particular it creates (85 [461]). As a consequence, "Each artist can thus produce only as much as is united or allied (*verbunden*) with the eternal concept (*Begriff*) of his own essence (*Wesens*) in God" (84 [460]).

Schelling's metaphysics treats all art, science and culture as emanating from and objectifying this divine absolute. God's creations are his ideas or archetypes, which are imperfectly embodied in the reflected world. God's work as the supreme creator is thus thoroughly analogous to that of the creative artist: "The divine creation is represented objectively (*objectiv*) through art, for that creation is based on the same informing (*Einbildung*) of infinite ideality into the real upon which art is also based" (31–2 [386]). The idea of God is the idea of absolute, infinite reality (23 [373]); thus, "In the intuition (*Anschauung*) of every *idea*, for example, the idea of the circle, we are also intuiting eternity" (25 [375]). Given objective form, the ideas are gods: thus, "What ideas are for philosophy, the gods are for art, and *vice versa*" (35 [391]). Apparent differences are a matter of perspective only:

These same syntheses (*Ineinsbildungen*) of the universal and the particular that viewed in themselves are ideas, that is, images of the divine, are, if

viewed on the plane of the real, the *gods*, for their essence (*Wesen*), their essential nature (*das An-sich von ihnen*), = *god*. They are ideas only to the extent that they are god in a particular form. Every idea, therefore, = god, but a particular god.

35 [390]

The gods are the ideas intuited in the real (35 [392]). Art and philosophy are thereby united in complementary fashion: "Whereas philosophy intuits (*anschaut*)... ideas as they are *in themselves* (*an sich*), art intuits them *objectively* (*real*)" (17 [370]). Stated from the standpoint of their creative activities, "just as philosophy presents the absolute in the archetype (*Urbild*) so also does art present the absolute in a reflex or reflected image (*Gegenbild*)" (16 [369]). Art is thus the "objective reflex" (*objectiver Reflex*) of philosophy (*ibid*). Art and religion, in turn, are united by an inner bond such that only religion can give art a poetic world; while only art can give religion an objective manifestation (8 [352]). And just as the creative processes of the artist and God are analogous, so too is the work of the artist and philosopher, and equally that of the philosopher and God: "Philosophy is thus within the phenomenal (*erscheinenden*) ideal world just as much the resolution (*das Auflösende*) of all particularity as is God in the archetypal (*urbildlichen*) world" (28 [381]).

The result of this outpouring of genius into a work of art is symbolism. Symbolism is a feature of all true art, but myth and symbol have a special affinity for each other, and symbolism is what gives myth its peculiar power. In *StI* the symbol is plainly Schiller's aesthetic idea, but it has already been transformed into the infinite informing the particular. (August Schlegel has been credited with introducing the term to Schelling in the following year.)⁴² Schelling's definition does not simply represent a romantic outbidding of Kant's dictum that the aesthetic idea occasions much thought without any single thought being able to represent it fully, but is the direct consequence of his pantheism, together with his conflation of the creative activities of God and artists:

Besides what he has put into his work with manifest intention, the artist seems instinctively, as it were, to have depicted therein an infinity which no finite understanding is capable of developing to the full. To explain what we mean by a single example: the mythology of the Greeks, which undeniably contains an infinite meaning (*einen unendlichen Sinn*) and a

42 T. Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. C. Porter. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1982), 198; A. von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 35.

symbolism for all ideas, arose among a people, and in a fashion, which both make it impossible to suppose any comprehensive forethought in devising it, or in the harmony whereby everything is united into one great whole.

StI 225 [293–4]

In further anticipation of *PdK*, symbolism is already distinct from schematism, though not allegory, which is nowhere mentioned (*StI* 136 [182]; see below). In *PdK*, however, the three are set in explicit apposition.

The symbolic, Schelling decrees in the latter essay, is a “synthesis of two opposing modes, the schematic and the allegorical” (*PdK* 45–6 [406–7]). Specifically:

The representation in which the universal means the particular or in which the particular is intuited through the universal is *schematism*.

That representation, however, in which the particular means the universal or in which the universal is intuited through the particular is *allegory*.

The synthesis of these two, where neither the universal means the particular nor the particular the universal, but rather where both are absolutely one, is the *symbolic*.

46 [407]

A potter, setting out to throw a pot, will have a schema of the object in mind. Nature, on the other hand, “merely” allegorizes; that is, it does not symbolize, because the particular organism points to the universal without actually being it (48 [410]). I assume that Schelling is being deliberately paradoxical here rather than merely clever in insisting that in symbol we have a double, complementary representation (*Darstellung*) that no longer represents (*darstellt*). Schematism and allegory are thus each other’s converse but remain transitive in pointing outside themselves, while the union of the universal and the particular in the symbol is treated as a synthesis of these two opposed modes of representation so that the signifying process becomes tautegorical.

The symbol is thus intransitive and supersedes schematism and allegory by attaining the romantic ideal of autonomy. Such thinking lies behind the remark that: “Only in the perfected informing (*Einbildung*) of the infinite into the finite does the latter become something that exists and endures on its own power (*etwas für sich Bestehendes*), a being *in itself* (*an sich selbst*) that does not merely mean or signify something else” (85 [461]). This striving for autonomy is why allegory is repeatedly denigrated by romantic theorists, Schelling notably included, although uncharacteristically among such theorists he

grants allegory some standing in art. It is thus easy to turn myth into allegory by a reductive process in which its schematic dimension is overlooked (47–8 [409–10]). Indeed, his description of Vulcan attempting to rape Minerva “as the merely earthly form of art that seeks unsuccessfully to unite with the divine form of art” (43 [402]) is impossible to distinguish from his definition of allegory. This would be to miss the very core of his argument, however: Vulcan *is* himself and earthly art, he does not merely represent such art, as in allegory. Heyne is thus pronounced wrong to claim that Greek myths were originally meant as allegory but that Homer “turned them into a kind of epic travesty, took them purely poetically, and came up with these pleasant children’s fairy tales he tells in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*” (47 [409]). Despite the potential superiority of art to nature herself in communicating the union of the absolute and particular within the particular, Schelling’s artistic symbol does not participate in the absolute itself: even though imagery such as the artist pouring his genius into his artwork might be taken to suggest otherwise, and even though Schelling’s symbol allows us to intuit transcendental reality, it is not itself transcendental. His favorite illustration of the symbol is, unsurprisingly, the pantheon of Greek gods: in Jupiter, for example, absolute power and absolute wisdom are united. But, he hastens to add, Jupiter does not mean this or is supposed to mean it: “This would destroy the poetic independence of these figures. They do not *signify* it; they *are* it themselves. The ideas of philosophy and the gods of art are one and the same, yet each is in and for itself what it is; each is a unique view (*eigne Ansicht*) of the same thing. None is there for the sake of another or to signify the other” (42 [400–1]).

In contrast with his sophisticated theorization of the symbol, and despite his own portentous claims for a narrative genre created only decades earlier by Heyne, Schelling’s theory of myth is fairly conventional, combining enlightenment commonplaces with romantic notions such as are found in Schlegel’s *Gespräch*. For example, Schelling closely echoes Schlegel’s claim that, from the perspective of the contemporary artist, the ocean of poetry is a chaos, but from that of the *longue durée* it is a unity: “only in the history of art does the essential and inner unity of all works of art reveal itself, a unity showing that all poetry is of the same spirit (*Genius*), a spirit that even in the antitheses of ancient and modern art is merely showing us two different faces (*Gestalten*)” (19 [372]). Like Schlegel, he advocates a modern return to mythology, and claims that each artist must create his own mythology, which can also include philosophy and physics (75 [446]); and he also sees the course of human history as arcing away from and returning to the ocean of poetry and myth, drawing on the same imagery as the *Gespräch*.⁴³ He follows the romantic consensus, traceable to

43 KFSa 2, 290–1.

Enlightenment thinkers such as Fontenelle and Vico, that ancient myth is a response to nature and religious experience, these being to various degrees the same.⁴⁴ Whereas experiencing sublime nature is the best restorative for the modern shrunken soul, in *StI* (138 [184]), Schelling asserts that myth preserves man's earliest understanding of nature. In *PdK*, he says more vaguely that myth 'refers to nature' (*bezieht sich auf die Natur*), and is a symbolism of nature (77 [449]). Echoing the romantic lament that man has become alienated from nature and can only experience it indirectly through the filters of knowledge, reason and the like, Schelling finds that Schiller's modern, sentimental artist also stands between us and the described object; the ancient, naïve artist, on the other hand, resembles Vico's Giganti: "The character of naïve genius is total—not so much *imitation* of nature, as Schiller puts it, as *attainment* of reality. His object is independent of him and exists in and for itself" (93 [473]). And as in Vico, this immediacy is a key to the superiority of ancient poetry over modern, though for Schelling this is achieved by the autonomy of the object, unmediated by the artist's own feelings:

One can summarize the entire difference between the naïve and sentimental poet by stating that in the former only the *object* holds sway; in the latter, the subject steps forward *as* subject. The former *appears* unconscious concerning his object; the latter constantly accompanies his object with his own consciousness and makes us aware of this consciousness. The former is cold and without feeling regarding his object, just as is nature; the latter presents his feeling to us so that we may participate in it as well. The former displays no intimacy (*Vertraulichkeit*) with us; only the object is related to us (*ist uns verwandt*), the poet himself flees us. The latter, by portraying the object, simultaneously makes himself its reflex.... Indeed, that which is actually the *ultimate*/strength of all poesy, that the poet allow the object itself to hold sway (*walten*), rouses modern sensibility to indignation (*empört*).

92–3 [471–2]

As previously noted, this same insistence on autonomy led Schelling to stipulate that the symbol must be tautegorical.

Myth is likewise a separate world "in which alone the exotic plants of art are able to bloom and grow" (45 [406]); but unfortunately the modern world "has no self-enclosed mythology" (71 [442]). This is because modernity comprises a

⁴⁴ Although now widely seen superannuated, this view continues to find adherents; cf. e.g. J. Scott and G. Marshall, eds., *A Dictionary of Sociology*. 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 497, s.v. 'myth.'

world of individuals while the ancient world was a collective that functioned as an individual: only under such conditions can myth “possess absolute objectivity” and become “a second world” (51 [414]).⁴⁵ (We see here the converse of Ludovico’s claim in the *Gespräch* that myth, qua unifying system of belief, is the prerequisite for great art.) Thus, true myth “is possible in and for itself only to the extent that it has developed (*ausgebildet*) into totality and represents the archetypal universe (*das urbildliche Universum*) itself” (50 [413]). The gods must also form a complete and self-contained system, “an organic whole, a totality, a world” (41 [399]). These ideas are intimately related. For in acquiring complete objectivity, poetry about the gods becomes mythology (45 [405]). Indeed, Schelling’s chief theoretical innovation regarding myth is his systematic conflation of Greek myth, epic, art generally, history, philosophy, symbolism, and the Olympian gods. We already saw a move in this direction in Schlegel’s fusion of myth and poetry in the *Gespräch*, but Schelling takes the process much further; and an analogy should also be drawn to his earlier conflation of the creative activities of God, the artist and the philosopher. Thus, for example, Schelling defines art as the representation of the absolute with indifference of the universal and particular in the particular. Myth is the universal content of this representation and is therefore symbolic (45 [406]). Regarding myth’s relation to poetry, Schelling notes that:

The ancients themselves designate mythology and—since it is one with Homer—the Homeric poems as the common source of poesy, history and philosophy. For poesy is the primal matter from which all else issued, the ocean from which all rivers flow out and to which all flow back.

52 [416]

Indeed, as the first poet, Homer invented myth: “Mythology and Homer are one and the same; Homer was already involved in the first poetic products of mythology and was, as it were potentially present” (*ibid*). Thus, the reason the modern world has no self-enclosed mythology is because it has no epic (71 [442]). The symbol is likewise equated with myth itself: “the infinite within the finite becomes symbolic and to that extent mythological” (80 [454]). And Schelling considers it “the principle for the entire investigation” that: “the ideas can be viewed (*angeschaut*) objectively or in reality and as gods, and ... the world of ideas can accordingly be viewed as a world of gods. This world is

⁴⁵ In support of his position he claims Wolf had demonstrated that Homer “in his original form, was not the work of a single person, but rather of several individuals driven by the same spirit” (52 [415]).

the content or material of all poesy (*der Stoff aller Poesie*)” (78 [451]). The circle thus closes.

For a fully transcendental symbol, I turn in closing to Friedrich Creuzer, a professor of Classics at the University of Heidelberg from 1804 to 1845. In 1810 he published his hugely influential and controversial *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*. As Dieckman notes, the first edition of the work has an introduction which contains many of his most important ideas about the nature of myth and symbolism.⁴⁶ Creuzer echoes many contemporary commonplaces about the symbol, including a clear echo of its Kantian origins:⁴⁷

For the symbol becomes significant (*bedeutsam*) and stimulating (*erwecklich*) precisely through that incongruence of its being (*Wesen*) with its form, and through the superabundance of its content in comparison with its expression.⁴⁸ Therefore the more stimulating it is (*anregender*), the more it causes us to think.

68

This is given a romantic inflection so that: “in the symbol a universal idea (*allgemeiner Begriff*) puts on earthly garb, and steps full of meaning before the eye of our soul (*Geistes*) as an image” (108). The symbol is thus tautegorical, a term Creuzer does not himself use: it *is* what it represents, and both is and represents (70).⁴⁹ Creuzer also adopts a ‘degeneration’ model to the study of myth, arguing that an original monotheism degenerated into polytheism, symbolism degenerated into myth, and myth in turn degenerated for various causes, including literalization of metaphor. Antecedents to his model can be found in Bacon, Fontenelle, and Heyne; while his heirs include, the founder of comparative mythology, Max Müller, and Karl Jung, who imports transcendental assumptions into psychoanalytic approaches to myth.

Creuzer identifies as the source of myth not Greek poetry but the esoteric theology of Indian Brahmins. (Some version of his theory was inevitable following on the then recent decipherment of Sanskrit.) In a nutshell, Creuzer

46 L. Dieckmann, “Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Concepts of the Symbol.” *The Germanic Review* 34 (1959): 276–83, at 278–9.

47 Cf. also, G. Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (Leipzig: Karl Wilhelm Leske, 1800), 71.

48 That is, the “Incongruenz” issues directly from the transcendental nature of the symbol with its union of the Platonic idea and the corporeal; on which cf. e.g. *Ibid.* 66–8, 74–5.

49 Cf. T. Todorov, 1982. *Theories of the Symbol*. trans, C. Porter. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1982), 206.

believed that the first men were Indian monotheists, who created symbols that concretely and directly expressed their experience of the *mysterium tremendum* in natural portents, especially cosmological. These irruptions of the divine into the phenomenal world were themselves symbolic, and as the divine infinite embodied in the finite, they were also transcendental. They are thus sublime and infinitely evocative, but for this very reason they remain highly enigmatic and require interpretation.⁵⁰ In step the Indic priests, who communicate and elucidate their meanings with images in which the spiritual and material remain united, so that the spiritual is given concrete form: the transcendental symbol is thus a religious symbol.⁵¹ The symbol is also amphibious, as a divine immanence that is accessible to reason, just as and because the human soul is similarly amphibious (67–8). Above all, the symbol is instantaneous, pregnant with (religious) meaning, evocative, highly significant, and loaded with affect.⁵²

Armed with these symbols, these Indic priests spread through the ancient world teaching their esoteric doctrines. When they reached Greece, the inhabitants were still too primitive to be taught unmediated religious revelation.⁵³ So, these Indic missionaries communicated and explained their symbols by telling stories (e.g. 109–10); myth is thus the narrative of the symbol, and in its Greek form becomes polytheistic. Narrativizing the symbol as myth also satisfied the Greeks' longing to know the history of those they worshipped; the Greeks thus derived their religion from these myths, so that Greek polytheism is a degenerate form of Indic monotheism. The Mysteries and in particular Orphic poetry, however, preserved the memory of the original monotheistic religion, albeit in disguised form. In time the Greeks would develop their own,

50 Creuzer's metaphor is "dunkel," e.g. *op. cit.*, 69, 78, 110.

51 For Creuzer's historical model, see L. Dieckmann, *op. cit.*, 280; J. de Vries 1961. *Forschungsgeschichte der Mythologie*. (Orbis Academicus. Problemgeschichten der Wissenschaft in Dokumenten und Darstellungen. 1, 7.) (Freiburg i. Br.: Karl Alber, 1961), 149–51; B. Feldman and R. Richardson, *op. cit.*, 388; F. Graf, *Greek Mythology: An Introduction*, trans. T. Marier (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 20–1; G. George Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 127–9; J. Pamiás, "The Reception of Greek Myth," in L. Edmunds, ed., *Approaches to Greek Myth*. 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014): 44–83, at 66–7.

52 E.g. G. Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (Leipzig: Karl Wilhelm Leske, 1800), 70–1, 75, 78, 109–11 and with further references to the symbol's instantaneity below at n. 57.

53 J. de Vries, *Forschungsgeschichte der Mythologie*. (Orbis Academicus. Problemgeschichten der Wissenschaft in Dokumenten und Darstellungen. 1, 7.) (Freiburg i. Br.: Karl Alber, 1961), 150.

plastic symbols in the form of sculpture, which is the highest art form mankind has ever achieved. For Creuzer, symbolism thus has three meanings, and stages of meaning.

With his concept of the symbol, Creuzer confronts head on a central problem in myth-theory that had remained unrecognized or avoided in the years since Kant discovered the aesthetic idea: the relation of the symbol to narrative. Up to this point, the nature of that relationship had remained remarkably vague, despite a general tendency to identify the aesthetic idea with a visual image and to inflate its evocative power from “much” to “infinite”: as a result it was possible to identify all of Greek mythology or the Bible as a single symbol.⁵⁴ Creuzer, however, recognizes the discrepancy between the romantic symbol and the diachronic dimension of narrative. As von Hendy puts it, the symbol “is visual, instantaneous, and involuntary. But myth is auditory, discursive, and intentional.”⁵⁵ And as Todorov had observed earlier, “The symbol’s instantaneity is linked with the stress placed in the symbol on the process of production, with the fusion between the symbolizer and the symbolized, with the inability of reason to analyze and express the symbolized in any other way.”⁵⁶ It is this very instantaneity that differentiates symbol from allegory (83–4).⁵⁷ Creuzer’s symbol is thus primary even to language, while myth is secondary in more than one sense: it has become mere allegory of the symbol.⁵⁸ Or, as Feldman puts it: “The Creuzerian symbol *is* the thing symbolized, where myth now only *represents* it ... symbols overflow with meaning, where myth now can only discuss meaning.”⁵⁹ Müller would subsequently take from Creuzer his historical model and linguistic assumptions. As a result, Creuzer would remain an important if mediated influence among comparative mythologists well into the twentieth century. But Creuzer’s most important and wide-ranging legacy lay in his theory of the transcendental and concrete symbol, which informs the psychological theories of Karl Jung, and from him Joseph Campbell, whose Jungian inspired monomyth remains enormously influential in popular culture. From that perspective, it would not be wholly illegitimate to say that Creuzer is the spiritual ancestor of Star Wars.

54 A. von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 43.

55 Ibid., 43.

56 T. Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*. trans, C. Porter. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1982), 218.

57 For references to the symbol’s instantaneity, see e.g. Creuzer, *op. cit.*, 4, 66, 69–71, 75, 79.

58 B. Feldman and R. Richardson, *The Rise of Modern Mythology: 1680–1860*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 388; A. von Hendy, *op. cit.*, 43.

59 B. Feldman and R. Richardson, *op. cit.*, 388–9.