Introduction

Romantic Mythologies

1.1 The Gods of Greece

On March 17, 1788, Christian Gottfried Körner received a letter from his longtime friend:

> You'll be pleased to hear that for a few days I shook myself free from the dust of my historical studies and threw myself back into the realm of poetry. On this occasion I made the discovery that, notwithstanding previous neglect, my muse has not yet forsaken me. Wieland was counting on me for a new contribution to *Der Teutsche Merkur*, and out of fear I composed something—a poem. You'll find it in the March issue of the *Merkur*; enjoy it, for it's quite the best I've come up with lately.[1]

The contribution in question was "Die Götter Griechenlandes" ("The Gods of Greece"), written by the poet, philosopher, and historian Friedrich Schiller, then twenty-nine years old.[2] Schiller had already achieved literary fame with his play *The Robbers*, whose publication in 1781 and inaugural performance in 1782 made Schiller an overnight sensation. Never one to back away from controversy, Schiller did not avoid exploring complex social, political, and religious issues in his work. Yet "Die Götter Griechenlandes" sounded a new alarm. The poem voiced a lament for the vanishing world of pagan mythology, issuing a call for its gods to come back. To the shock of his readers, Schiller did not hide what he thought was to blame for their exile: monotheism and mechanism, a belief

Return of the Gods. Owen Ware, Oxford University Press. © Oxford University Press 2024.
DOI: 10.1093/9780197763995.003.0001

in one supernatural being and a belief in one supreme law of nature. Schiller likely anticipated that his poem would cause dissension, but he could not have foreseen that his call for a return of the gods would help shape one of the richest movements of modern European literature: Romanticism.[3]

I.2. "Dreams of Philosophy"

Part of the puzzle surrounding Schiller's poem is that attitudes toward mythology were anything but uniform during the early modern period. The English churchman Thomas Sprat, for instance, could speak on behalf of a wide audience when he lamented:

> The *Wit* of the *Fables* and *Religions* of the *Ancient World* is well-nigh consumed: They have already serv'd the *Poets* long enough; and it is now high time to dismiss them; especially seeing they have this peculiar *imperfection*, that they were only *Fictions* at first; whereas *Truth* is never so well express'd or amplify'd, as by those Ornaments which are *Tru* and *Real* in themselves.[4]

Sprat's negative assessment was part of a growing consensus in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For those seeking answers to life's great mysteries, many people would recommend a method of rational reflection starting from clear and distinct ideas; others would recommend the path of empirical science, letting the results of experiment serve as a guiding light; and still others would say that there is only one Truth, that which was revealed long ago in sacred scripture. But not many would appeal to Homer's *Odyssey* or Hesiod's *Theogony* as a means of acquiring such answers. Philosophy, science, and religion were all considered viable avenues to what is "*Tru* and *Real*," but few were prepared to assign this status to pagan mythology. This was something that defenders of religious orthodoxy and even the most radical of atheists could agree upon: the gods of Greece were fictions and nothing more.

A century after Sprat's denunciation, Louis de Jaucourt adopted a more positive tone in his contribution to the *Encyclopédie*, writing that the mythology of ancient times is a "fallow field, immense and fertile":

> It is an inexhaustible source of strange ideas, agreeable images, interesting subjects, allegories, and emblems. How effectively these are employed depends on the taste and genius of the artist. Everything is animated, and everything breathes in this enchanted realm. . . . Mythology is a formless, disorganized mass, yet pleasing in its particulars. It is a confused mixture of the fancies of the imagination, the dreams of philosophy, and the debris of earliest history. Analysis of it is impossible.[5]

Without hesitation or hostility, Jaucourt could praise the aesthetic richness of pagan myths while keeping to the view that they lack truth. Like any product of fantasy—whims of the imagination, or so many "dreams of philosophy"—they dissolve once the mind awakens. The call we find in Schiller's poem, by contrast, is not to imitate pagan models of beauty; for Schiller maintained that the gods of Greece do contain a "truth," though it is a truth of a special kind, which the modern world urgently needs. It is, he believed, a truth about the unity of human beings that has been forgotten, a vision of our capacity to live in harmony with ourselves, with others, and with the world. For Schiller, no less than for the romantics at the time, mythology was the key to unlocking this vision.

Nor is this turn to mythology limited to the authors we today call the "early romantics" (*Frühromantiker*), who lived mainly in Jena during the 1790s. A similar concern animates the work of William Blake, who had no knowledge of Schiller, as well as that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth before their trip to Germany put them in touch with texts from the Jena circle. This parallel becomes that much more striking when we consider a defining feature of the German movement, namely, the call for

a "new mythology," which was announced in two separate books, Friedrich Schlegel's *Gespräch über die Poesie* (*Dialogue on Poetry*) and F. W. J. Schelling's *Das System des transzendentalen Idealismus* (*System of Transcendental Idealism*), both published in 1800. As the coming chapters will show, the British romantics were committed to their own version of this project. While it is most evident in Blake, whose entire corpus can be understood as an experiment in mythmaking, it also sheds much light on Coleridge and Wordsworth, two English romantics who understood the need for mythic thinking—the use of allegories and symbols—to express truths that elude the intellect.

I.3. The Anglo-German Turn to Mythology

Why, then, is mythology of vital importance for the romantics? What role does mythology play in their philosophical and literary work? And what common sources of influence inspired these writers across Britain and Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century?[6]

Schiller was unambiguous about the kind of mythology he wanted to rescue: his gods were the gods of Greece or their Roman equivalents. Yet the romantic turn to mythology that would flourish in the decades after his poem appeared was not limited to such classical preferences, and mythology came to acquire a wider range of reference. While some of the romantics fell under the spell of Philhellenism, most were eclectic in their tastes and open to combining different traditions. Indeed, this eclecticism was one of their signature characteristics: like Schiller, the romantics pored over sourcebooks of classical mythology, looking to find deeper meaning in its symbols and stories, but their investigations often went further afield. Celtic mythology (drawn from the *Ossian*) became a topic of study, as did the traditions of the Germanic and Scandinavian countries (drawn from the *Nibelungenlied* and the

Edda). Nor did the romantics limit themselves to traditions from the West; many were drawn to the study of Arabian and Indian systems, with the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich and August Wilhelm, going so far as to read Persian and Sanskrit in order to access original texts.

Because the romantics came to see mythology as having its origin in the faculty of imagination, they could approach these systems as so many bodies of literature. For this reason there was no sharp boundary preventing them from engaging with the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, for instance, in the same spirit in which they read Homer or Hesiod, Shakespeare or Cervantes, Klopstock or Goethe. Blake preferred the "Hebrew poets," as he called them, over all the pagan and modern authors because he considered their work more inspired than any other tradition. Coleridge and Wordsworth found little in the world of pagan antiquity to emulate in their writing, in contrast to second-generation romantics like John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley; yet the differences within this group are often superficial. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," for example, shows no obvious trace of pagan or Christian mythology, but it is nonetheless a mythic poem. Once the romantics could read mythology as poetry, the door was opened to their own creative endeavors. They could use old myths in new ways, or more provocatively still, invent new myths altogether.

This explains an otherwise puzzling fact about the romantic turn to mythology. Authors could hold contrasting attitudes toward their preferred sources—Hebrew versus Hellene, ancient versus modern, Oriental versus Occidental—without that affecting their underlying aims. But if we look past these attitudes, it becomes clear that the romantics of Britain and Germany shared a diagnosis of what afflicts the modern self as well as a vision of what the remedy should be. The problem we face, they maintained, is fragmentation: an inner fracturing of the self's powers that has cut us off from ourselves, from others, and from the world. At the origin of this fragmentation is a decline in our capacity to experience the

unities, sympathies, and correspondences that interlink things and persons.[7] While the romantics often appealed to some variety of a metaphysics of unity to support these claims, their interests were never merely speculative. Rather, in the medium of mythology they were seeking ways to transform our normal modes of thinking and feeling.

For many of the romantics, the question of how we can attain such experiences of unity follows a pattern of the self in stages of wholeness, separation, and return. Shelley, for example, reinterprets the myth of Prometheus as an allegory of the soul's alienation under tyranny, represented by Jupiter, whose overthrow allows Prometheus to reunite with Asia, symbolic of nature. A similar pattern appears in Blake's work, which often centers on the fall of Los, the imagination, under the force of separation, Urizen, whose overcoming ushers in an apocalyptic revival of the Earth. Friedrich Hölderlin and Friedrich von Hardenberg (known by his pen name Novalis) follow this narrative sequence in terms of the self's ability to exist in community with nature. The myth of a Golden Age is a guiding theme in the work of both authors, as it allows them to present the idea of a world transformed by the power of poetic representation. In their writing, a new mythology has the potential to overcome the fragmented world of modernity, thereby ending what Novalis calls the "long dream of pain."[8]

This pattern displays what has been variously called the "circular journey," the "romantic spiral," or the "elliptical path" characteristic of early romanticism. These terms are meant to convey the idea of a self-educational journey that is both circuitous and progressive, involving a return to the original condition of consciousness in its self-unity, but from the higher vantage point of a mature mind.[9] As Karl Ameriks puts it, the journey is both "rising" and "open-ended"; it is one that requires "repeatedly returning to one's original place in a way that involves development through off-center movements with more than one focal point."[10] For both the British and the German romantics, the goal of this path is never a

"return to Nature" in the sense of a return to an undifferentiated unity characteristic of pre-reflective childhood. Instead, it is an advance to a position where the conflicting powers of a developing mind, involving both reason and sensibility, intellect and feeling, are no longer at war.

As far as sources are concerned, the romantics drew freely on this pattern of wholeness-separation-return wherever they found it: in the parable of the Prodigal Son, in the prophecy of a New Earth, in the story of Odysseus's wayward journey home, or in the many Greek stories of death and rebirth such as the myth of Persephone, to name only a few. The romantics took these myths to be poetic expressions of the same plot: wholeness of the self "lost" and wholeness of the self "regained." They interpreted the plot as an allegory of the self's journey, with mythic characters or events serving as so many projections of the soul's inner development. So we hear Schiller speak of the moment the gods "throw off their ghostly masks" with which they had frightened the self in its childhood, "revealing themselves as representations of its own mind."[11] And Blake goes so far as to declare that mythic beings originated in poetry and were later reified by priests into literal entities, such that human beings forgot that "all deities reside in the human breast."[12]

Statements like these reveal an innovative feature of the romantics' work: their aim to render the process of mythmaking open, reflexive, and transparent.[13] One of their strategies was defamiliarization, either by rewriting old myths with new names (as we find Blake doing with biblical sources) or by rewriting old myths with new storylines (as we find Shelley doing with pagan sources). In *Prometheus Unbound*, for instance, Shelley states that he has no intention of repeating Aeschylus's version of the Prometheus story, and he adds that all poets are at liberty to breathe new life into a myth by way of creative modification. In other cases, the romantics are so syncretic in their blending of material that the final result is often something new. Can one say that any single tradition lies behind Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or

Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*? Certainly one can find hints and traces of their inspirations throughout, but the overall impression one has upon reading their work is that of novelty.

The astonishing freshness of the romantics' creative work, in both British and German traditions, even has a disadvantage: it can tempt us to idealize romanticism as *sui generis*, a self-born movement without ties or debts to the past. This impression is something the romantics are at times guilty of encouraging, often under the rallying cries of instituting a new poetry, a new religion, a new church, or a new mythology. In "Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus" ("Oldest System-Program of German Idealism")—transcribed by G. W. F. Hegel but thought to have been conceived of by either Schelling or Hölderlin—the author purports to speak of an idea that "has not before entered anyone's mind": "We must have a new mythology" (*Wir müssen eine neue Mythologie haben*).[14] Yet this idea had occurred well before many of the romantics were born: its first expression occurs in an essay by Johann Gottlieb Herder, "Vom neuern Gebrauch der Mythologie" ("On a New Use of Mythology," 1767), which, as we shall see, was itself shaped by even older sources.[15]

I.4. The Roots of Romantic Mythology

While there is a sizeable body of literature devoted to the rise of mythology in romanticism, these studies tend to be restricted to either its British or its German context. One finds this tendency at work in Fritz Strich's *Die Mythologie in der deutschen Literatur von Klopstock bis Wagner*, Douglas Bush's *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry*, Paul A. Cantor's *Creature and Creator*, Anthony Harding's *The Reception of Myth in English Romanticism*, George S. Williamson's *The Longing for Myth in Germany*, Nicholas Halmi's *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*, and Tae-Yeoun Keum's *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought*. Rarely

do these scholars acknowledge that mythology is a hidden link between the British and German romantics.[16] Their attitude is best captured by Douglas Bush, who once wrote: "Although it was the Germans who brought back the gods from exile, actual contacts between German literature and English poets, apart from Coleridge, were few and slight. For us Wordsworth is far more important than Schiller or Goethe."[17]

One reason for taking questions of genealogy seriously is to improve upon this state of scholarship. Critics often work on either the British or the German romantic tradition exclusively, but the enigma of their shared preoccupation with mythology calls for an investigation of common sources, and undertaking this investigation calls for a wider scope in the history of ideas.[18] If we limit ourselves to, say, the early modern period, it might seem that the romantics were the first writers to link myths to a special form of cognition of self and world, given that attitudes to myth had become relegated mainly to aesthetic questions of how artists can draw upon classical antiquity to embellish their work. Once we widen our historical lens, however, going as far back as late antiquity, a richer narrative comes to light. We learn that many writers in the Platonic tradition, the so-called Neoplatonists, had argued that myths contain modes of representation that are inaccessible to ordinary thought, just as the romantics would later claim.[19]

From this broader perspective, we also have grounds to question a view defended by scholars such as Manfred Frank, Heinz Gockel, and Daniel Greineder.[20] Among their proposals for what was "new" about the mythologies of romanticism, Greineder goes so far as to say that the "novelty of the new mythology" consisted of a "new, dehistoricized view of mythology" which promoted a "broadly Enlightenment view that art represents an objective, mind-independent world."[21] But a "dehistoricized" view of mythology is not unique to the romantics; rather, it was a model handed down from the Platonists to their early modern readers.[22]

Moreover, Greineder's claim that the romantic view of mythology is continuous with Enlightenment rationalism—on the grounds that art reveals an "objective, mind-independent world"—is problematic for several reasons. Aside from the fact that many of the romantics worked to upset divisions between the "objective" and the "merely subjective," as well as between the "natural" and the "supernatural," their philosophical commitments point us to a world of unities that often escapes ordinary understanding.[23]

Clarifying these commitments brings us to a principle which, I argue, lies behind the romantics' use of mythology. It is variously called the "principle of contraries," the "universal Law of polarity," the "principle of the unity of opposites" (*coincidentia oppositorum* in Latin), or the "principle of reciprocal interaction" (*Wechselwirkung* in German).[24] One of my tasks in the coming pages is to show how this principle served as a master category for the romantics who reanimated or invented myths with the aim of capturing a union of contraries. As we will see, their aim was to enable insight into such a union—not only at the intellectual level, where we can think unity in opposition, but also at the affective level, where that unity can be felt. For the romantics, the ability to see ourselves in community requires nothing less than a transformative vision of the unity of all things, which neither perception nor reason alone can sustain.[25] Mythology, they believed, can be a vehicle for such visions—*unitive cognitions*, as I shall call them—opening what Blake terms our "Vegetative Eye."[26]

This begins to explain why the mythologies of romanticism center on an ideal of wholeness. As will emerge, this ideal is multifaceted, involving (1) wholeness of the self-to-self relationship, (2) wholeness of the self-to-other relationship, and (3) wholeness of the self-to-world relationship. At times it can appear that the romantics frame this ideal in conflicting ways, as they speak of a unity that is constituted (in acts of self-creation) and a unity that is discovered (in acts of self-revelation), as well as a unity that is cognized (in modes of understanding) and a unity that is felt

(in modes of sensibility). On the reading I hold, the romantics' philosophical commitments allow them to characterize unitive cognitions in terms that disclose wholeness in our representation of self and world at the same time as they invoke (and in that sense bring into existence) such wholeness. This is why their language tends to shift between cognitive and affective registers, for the unitive cognitions they want to awaken through mythology are meant to engage both our powers of intellect and feeling at the same time.[27]

Looking ahead, it is not surprising that in developing this idea the romantics appeal so often to the story of Orpheus.[28] When Orpheus sought to rescue his wife, Eurydice, it was his singing and the sound of his lyre that granted him access to the underworld, and when he returned to the surface of the earth, it was his music that enchanted animals and rocks and trees into rhythmic order. For the romantics, this myth captures the power of poetry, which is why they often explored musical or otherwise aural metaphors to characterize both the path to wholeness and its attainment: it is a matter of tuning and attunement, and the poet is anyone who is both self-harmonized and capable of harmonizing others. Thus Novalis has his Orpheus-like character sing of the "all-powerful sympathy of nature," instilling feelings of love in its listeners[29]—a theme we find again in Shelley when he writes that "Language is a perpetual Orphic song, / Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng / Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were."[30]

I.5. Overview of Chapters

As a study of mythology in the traditions of both British and German romanticism, the five chapters of this book emerge as two distinct threads: the German strand weaves together Chapters 1, 2, and 4, covering Schiller, Schelling, Schlegel, Hölderlin, and Novalis,

and the British strand weaves together Chapters 3 and 5, covering Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley.

For Schiller, the task facing moderns is not to return to the world of pagan mythology, no more than the task facing adults is to return to the state of childhood. As I argue in Chapter 1, Schiller's view is that attaining wholeness of self requires coordinating the imagination, the faculty at the root of all mythology, with the faculty of reason, which has temporarily estranged us (both individually and collectively) from a felt reciprocity with the world. The argument of Chapter 2 is that Schlegel and Schelling develop this idea in their claim that a new link is needed to reconcile the divided self, one that will elevate the activity of mythmaking to a higher mode of self-consciousness. However, whereas Schelling leaves the promise of such a new mythology open-ended, it serves as the driving impulse behind three of the great novels of early German romanticism: Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, Schlegel's *Lucinde*, and Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. The argument of Chapter 4 is that each of these novels attempts to realize the project of a new mythology, the aim of which is to disclose a vision of the world revolutionized by the power of poetry itself.

Chapter 3 marks the book's first transition from Germany to Britain, starting with Blake and closing with Coleridge and Wordsworth. In Blake we find an effort to create new symbols and stories which will trace humanity's fall into self-fragmentation and its (possible) return to self-unity. I show that Blake's aim to write a new mythology reveals influences that he shared with the early German romantics, including both the ancient Platonists and modern authors such as Böhme, Winckelmann, and Lavater. Clarifying Blake's debt to these figures also reveals his commitment to a basic premise of romantic thought: that grasping the unity of opposites (such as soul and body, reason and imagination, self and other) is possible only through the medium of mythology. For Blake, the task of a new mythology is to awaken the human mind in such a way that the metaphysical truth of unity can

become a felt truth. We find this tenet operative even in Coleridge and Wordsworth, the least "mythical" of British romantics, and it reaches another height of development in the work of Keats and Shelley, as I show in Chapter 5.

While the two threads of Anglo-German romanticism intersect at various points in the book's chapters, my task in the Conclusion is to tie them together. I devote the first half of the Conclusion to dissolving three "myths" of romantic mythologies, from the relatively innocuous suggestion that such mythologies remained an empty promise, to the more damning verdict that they opened a path to nationalist movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I then step back to consider how the results of this study challenge a long-standing reading of romanticism as a secular doctrine of "natural supernaturalism."[31] When we see why the romantics worked to bring about unitive cognitions in the medium of mythology, I maintain, this secular reading is no longer adequate for capturing their metaphysical and moral ambitions. One context for negotiating this topic is the Platonic tradition, where we find writers connecting mythology to transcendent knowledge of self and world. As supplementary material to this book, then, the Appendix provides readers with a sketch of this Platonic tradition and its reception in Britain and Germany.

I.6. Key Terms and Methodology

Anyone who pursues a study of the romantics is liable to feel frustrated by the sheer range of terms they employ when speaking of mythology. It is not always clear whether this variety of expression is meant to capture subtle distinctions in meaning or whether the romantics believed these terms converge on a single thing, mythology as such. A similar frustration has come to haunt many scholars, for whom the very term "romanticism" seems to be so full of different referents—in short, so overdetermined—that it is of

little value for tracking the historical and systematic links among the authors we tend to group under this heading.[32] Before undertaking an investigation of mythology in romanticism, it will be helpful to introduce a higher degree of precision for terms that the romantics often left undefined:

- *Myth and mythology*. Since the early twentieth century, it has become customary for scholars to distinguish between myth, referring to a specific cultural narrative or symbol, and mythology, referring to the system of such narratives or symbols.[33] For the romantics, however, there was no strong distinction between the two, and readers are left to determine from context whether they used "myth" and "mythology" to track something specific or general. In this book I will introduce greater precision by placing emphasis on the interpretation of past myths and the invention of new ones. For the romantics, the "old" mythologies, such as those of the Greeks, Celts, Scandinavians, or Indians, were given as works of the imagination in its original, unconscious mode of operation. The task of creating "new" mythologies then becomes one of raising these operations to a higher degree of self-consciousness, either by reinterpreting older myths or by creating new ones altogether.[34] As we will learn, the romantics can be divided into distinct subsets depending on which end of the interpretation-invention spectrum they found themselves on, with some tending toward interpretation (e.g., Schiller, Keats, Shelley) and others toward invention (e.g., Blake, Coleridge, Novalis).
- *Allegory and symbol*. Another distinction that has become central to the history of literary criticism is that between allegory and symbol, although explicit theorizing about the distinction itself did not rise to prominence until Schelling's lectures on the philosophy of art (1802–1805), A. W. Schlegel's lectures on dramatic art and literature (1808–1811), and Goethe's published correspondence with Schiller (1830).[35] It is curious

that the romantics of Britain and Germany used these terms interchangeably, sometimes under the more general concept of poetic or mythic representation. In the Appendix, we will see that the romantics were indebted to a technical notion of symbolism derived from the Platonic tradition, according to which symbols unite ideas and images (though it is important to bear in mind that in the 1790s this terminology was not fixed). I shall focus instead on the principle of symbolism, which the romantics often employed.[36]

- *Contraries and oppositions*. If anything deserves to be called a *key* to the new mythologies of Anglo-German romanticism, it is the principle of contraries (which, as I noted earlier, went by various names). In this study I will lay greater weight on the concept of this principle than on the terminology of symbolism, since it is the concept that helps to explain why the romantics placed so much importance on mythology itself. We shall see that the principle of contraries, broadly construed, is the law by which the romantics of Britain and Germany could effect a set of conceptual "marriages" between opposing terms, thereby giving concrete representation to the kind of unitive cognitions which they took to be paradigmatic of a whole self. As the coming chapters will show, the romantics considered this principle of the unity of opposites to be the governing law of the imagination in its higher power, and they viewed the poet or artist as someone who exercises this power in an exemplary fashion.
- *Higher and lower powers of imagination*. In speaking of a "higher" power of imagination, I mean to designate what many of the romantics regard as our capacity to combine images drawn from the sensible world with ideas pertaining to the intelligible realm. This differs from the "lower" power of imagination (sometimes called "fantasy"), which is under the sway of sensibility and so beholden to sensations and impressions. The concept of such a higher power has a Platonic origin as

well: for Plotinus and his successors, it is central to their view of the *phantastikon* as a mediating power that "joins" the lower and upper parts of the soul.[37] While it goes beyond the scope of this book to trace the history of this idea, what will be relevant here is (1) that the romantics often appeal to a notion of the higher imagination as the faculty, power, or capacity that informs poetic activity, and (2) that the imagination is an active and not merely passive power which serves to bridge the world of thought and the world of feeling.

- *Platonism and Neoplatonism*. I regard Platonism as a broad category inclusive of late antique thinkers such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Sallustius, and Proclus (to be discussed in the Appendix). The term "Neoplatonism" is an eighteenth-century neologism that risks distorting the continuity—or attempted continuity[38]—between the doctrines of Plato and his later interpreters. In what follows I shall use the term sparingly, only to refer to the Platonist thinkers who lived from the third to the fifth centuries CE. What is important to clarify is that for the romantics the term "Platonism" did not bear the set of associations it has today, such as strong rationalism, otherworldliness, or a denigration of art (nor did the label "Neoplatonism" bear connotations of irrationalism or mysticism). Rather, the romantics understood this tradition in the context of Platonic interpreters who assigned a central role to symbolism, allegory, poetry, and mythology, and who saw positive value in the human passions.
- *Art, poetry, literature, and religion*. This brings us to a final set of terms that the romantics use in their philosophical and literary work. Schlegel, for example, characterizes the function of mythology in terms of allowing us to participate in "spirit" or "nature." As Dalia Nassar rightly notes, however, "the key characteristics he ascribes to mythology are also shared by the novel, romantic poetry, and his understanding of an encyclopedia."[39] This point applies to many of the authors we will be

discussing, for whom mythology often overlaps with art, literature, and even religion.[40] As a result, a worry can arise that, because there is no univocal sense of mythology at play, there is little in the so-called turn to mythology that illuminates anything distinctive of romanticism itself. The view I shall defend, following Nassar's lead, is that the redemptive power of mythology is a capacity it shares with other modes of aesthetic representation, which is why the romantics can speak of a new mythology alongside a new poetry or even a new Bible.

As for the pliable label of "romanticism," I am following in the footsteps of recent scholars who have worked to liberate this category from an overly narrow circle of writers.[41] Though I focus mainly on writers classified as "early romantics," my inclusion of Schiller and Blake shows that I am adopting a broader definition, as I want to demonstrate how their work was bound up with the development of romantic philosophy and literature. In part because of limitations of space, I will conclude my investigation of the German tradition with Novalis's novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (composed in 1800), before turning to two second-generation British romantics, Keats and Shelley, culminating in the latter's "A Defence of Poetry" (composed in 1821). My reason for this delimitation is that German romanticism after 1800 underwent a turn, the results of which played out in the writings of Schelling, the Schlegel brothers, and Hegel, not to mention the shifts one finds in the late Coleridge and Wordsworth. Just how these shifts speak to the original project of a new mythology is a topic of major significance, but one that falls outside the scope of our discussion.[42]

It should be clear from these opening remarks that this book will chart an interdisciplinary path, as we will be investigating romantic theories of mythology (Chapters 1–2) alongside actual examples of myth interpretation and mythmaking (Chapters 3–5). One quality that almost every romantic author had was a remarkable talent for switching between the roles of poet and philosopher, artist and

critic—and it is in keeping with the spirit of their work that the present study aims to give a balanced treatment of romantic philosophy alongside romantic literature.[43] My hope is for the philosophy to illuminate the literature and for the literature to illuminate the philosophy. As a guiding methodology, we will work to uncover lines of influence internal to the British and German sides of the movement, as well as to uncover their shared sources in earlier traditions. Yet the aim of this study is not merely genealogical, for I intend to show that this framework in the history of ideas clarifies the inner structure of romantic mythologies as so many stories and symbols organized around an ideal of wholeness, whose aim is nothing less than to discover (and create) unity within the self.

Notes

1. Schiller, letter to Christian Gottfried Körner, March 17, 1788, NA 25:29. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this book are my own.
2. Schiller, *Die Götter Griechenlandes* ("The Gods of Greece," 1788), NA 1:190–195.
3. Hereafter I write "romantic" and "romanticism" in lowercase, often in plural form (e.g., "romantic traditions"), as a means of indicating the internal variety and even discordance we find among authors brought under this category.
4. Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Institution, Design, and Progress of the Royal Society of London* (London: J. Martyn & J. Allestry, 1667), 414.
5. Louis de Jaucourt, "Mythologie," vol. 15 of *Encyclopédie, ou, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot et al., 17 vols. (Paris: Briasson, 1765), 924.
6. Dieter Sturma has offered a proposal that, while directed to the German side of the romantic movement, might apply just as well to British romanticism: that one relevant factor in the interest in mythology was the French Revolution. See Sturma, "Politics and the New Mythology: The Turn to Late Romanticism," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 219–238. But while there is no denying the influence of the French Revolution on the romantic movements across Britain and Germany, I am skeptical about the framing of the Revolution itself as an impetus to engagement with mythology, if only because it inspired very different reactions from nonromantic thinkers, poets, and artists at the time. In this respect, I agree with Alexander Regier that an "obsession with the French Revolution" has left scholars ill-equipped to understand the cross-national landscape of Anglo-German romanticism; see Regier, *Exorbitant Enlightenment: Blake, Hamann, and Anglo-German Constellations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 34.
7. For careful overviews of this theme in early German romanticism, see Charles Larmore, "Hölderlin and Novalis," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 141–160; Richard Eldridge, *The Persistence of Romanticism: Essays in Philosophy and*

Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy, 1795–1804* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

8. Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (composed in 1800), HKA 1:315.
9. See M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), 248, 183; Karl Ameriks, *Kant's Elliptical Path* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 296. Like Abrams, I prefer the metaphor of a *spiral*, not only because it reveals the romantics' link to Platonism—predating the modern astronomical allusion to planetary orbits—but also because the image lends itself to the idea of progression through complexity, and not mere eccentricity. At the same time, there is no denying that for many writers of the period, the spiral-like journey of the self is characterized by "going off course," which fits well with mythic patterns of waywardness such as in the Prodigal Son or the journey of Odysseus. For discussion, see the excellent essays by Ameriks in *Kant's Elliptical Path*.
10. Karl Ameriks, *Kantian Subjects*: *Critical Philosophy and Late Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 170–171.
11. Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (*On the Aesthetic Education of Human Beings*, 1795), NA 20.1:395.
12. Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), E 38.
13. This speaks to an important distinction drawn by Northrop Frye in *A Study of English Romanticism* (1968), in *Northrop Frye's Writings on the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Imre Salusinszky, vol. 7 of *Collected Works of Northrop Frye* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 102: "Romanticism, besides being a new mythology, also marks the beginning of an 'open' attitude to mythology on the part of society, making mythology a structure of imagination, out of which beliefs come, rather than directly one of compulsory belief." We shall see that Frye's hypothesis gains much from a comparison with the romantics of Germany.
14. See "Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus" ("Oldest System-Program of German Idealism," c. 1796/1797), in GSA 4:309–311. Scholars have continued to debate the question of the text's authorship for the past century, and there is a large literature devoted to defending, attacking, or modifying Rosenzweig's original thesis of Schelling's authorship. I intend to move in a new direction by situating the fragment in the context of its sources of influence (see §2.4). For discussion of the "Systemprogramm," see the papers in Christoph Jamme and Helmut Schneider, eds., *Mythologie der Vernunft: Hegels ältestes Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984). For recent accounts of the "new mythology" of German romanticism, see Eckart Förster, "'To Lend Wings to Physics Once Again': Hölderlin and the 'Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism,'" *European Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (1995): 174–198; Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and George G. Williamson, "'In the Arms of Gods': Schelling, Hegel and the Problem of Mythology," in *The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought*, ed. Karl Ameriks, 246–273, vol. 1 of *The Impact of Idealism*, ed. Nicholas Boyle, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
15. Another advantage to reading the romantics' poetry and works of fiction is that we can appreciate the fact that they were engaged not merely in promising new mythologies but in creating them, either by giving new meaning to old myths or by inventing new myths altogether. On this point I disagree with the view Nicholas Halmi expresses in his perceptive study, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*. Halmi argues that the "new mythology envisaged by the early Romantics remained

unrealized less because of their unacknowledged dependence on a particular myth than because of their ambivalence towards myth in general" (152). We shall see, however, that the romantics were not as ambivalent as Halmi claims.

16. The topic of mythology, for instance, receives only passing treatment by Mark Kipperman in his study *Beyond Enchantment: German Idealism and English Romantic Poetry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).
17. Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 49. One also finds this same tendency at work in Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), and Jochen Fried, *Die Symbolik des Realen: Über alte und neue Mythologie in der Frühromantik* (Munich: Fink, 1985). For an important exception to this trend, see Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*. Another exception, which I only became aware of while this book was in production, is Manfred Engel, "Neue Mythologie in der deutschen und englischen Frühromantik: William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* und Novalis' *Klingsohr-Märchen*," *Arcadia* 26, no. 3 (1991): 225–245.
18. Leonard M. Trawick, in "William Blake's German Connection," *Colby Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1977): 229–245, identifies three shared sources of influence linking Blake, on the one hand, and Schlegel, Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schelling, on the other: (1) the mystical writings of Jacob Böhme; (2) a growing family of dissenting Christian sects (the Pietists of Germany; the Methodists, Quakers, and Ranters of Britain); and (3) Henry Fuseli and Johann Caspar Lavater, two German-Swiss contemporaries. Trawick lays greater weight on the third group, "because they link Blake with the main currents of German literature of his time and confirm the lines of parallel development from earlier sources" (2). What is missing from this list, however, is the much older Platonic tradition, to be sketched out in the Appendix.
19. By "ordinary thought," I mean thought bound by (a) inferential chains of reasoning, (b) object-oriented categories, or (c) sensible representations of discrete "parts." The relevant contrast is to what I call "unitive cognitions," designating representations that are not inferential, categorial, or focused on parts. Unitive cognitions bear a likeness to "intellectual intuitions" in being immediate, noncategorial, and focused on "wholes"; the difference is that unitive cognitions are essentially mediated through symbols, allegories, or myths that refer to sensible particulars. Thanks to Naomi Fisher for conversations on this topic.
20. See Manfred Frank, *Der kommende Gott: Vorlesungen uber die neue Mythologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982); Heinz Gockel, "Herder und die Mythologie," in *Johann Gottfried Herder: 1744–1803*, ed. Gerhard Sauder, 409–418 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987); and Daniel Greineder, *From the Past to the Future: The Role of Mythology from Winckelmann to the Early Schelling* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007).
21. Greineder, *From the Past to the Future*, 12.
22. This also gives us grounds to challenge Christoph Jamme's assertion that the eighteenth century is a "barren epoch for research in mythology"; see Jamme, *Einführung in die Philosophie des Mythos: Neuzeit und Gegenwart*, vol. 2 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991), 19.
23. Using the mid-eighteenth century as a foil, in line with the studies of Frank and Gockel, Williamson observes in *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), that for many artists and intellectuals "the experience of the ancient gods was a kind of aesthetic idyll, with no direct connection to the wider world. Over the next few years, however, the Jena Romantics would develop a vision of mythology that was at once more political, more religious, and more ambitious

than anything in the *Aufklärung* [Enlightenment]" (23). For Williamson, the central context for understanding the German romantic turn to mythology points to "Protestant intellectual life in the late eighteenth century" and more specifically to "debates over the status of the Bible" (24). Like other scholars, however, Williamson omits the all-important influence of Platonism.

24. This also speaks to Schlegel's notion of "irony," to be discussed in §4.5.
25. In the post-Kantian tradition, the faculty of "reason" (*Vernunft*) comes to acquire an increasingly positive role as a source of objective and unifying insight, exemplified most clearly in the work of Hegel. For the romantics, however, reason alone is not capable of yielding such insight because (1) it lacks a connection to felt experience and so lacks resources to exhibit the unity of the infinite and the finite, and (2) reason on its own can only *reveal* unity, whereas another power (the "higher" imagination, or "poetic" intuition) is needed to *create* unity. This latter idea underpins the Orphic ideal of the poet as one who creates harmony in the world, a theme we will encounter repeatedly in the coming chapters. While a full rejoinder to Hegel falls outside the scope of this study, it is helpful to clarify the source of their disagreement in these terms. For discussion of the Hegelian context, see Bruno, *Facticity and the Fate of Reason after Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), chap. 3.
26. Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 565–566. We shall see that this idea of unitive cognition (that serves both to discover and create) has a Platonic pedigree as well. See the Appendix for discussion.
27. One might wonder if this puts my reading of romanticism on the side of what Frederick Beiser calls a "postmodernist" (or "antirationalist") interpretation, insofar as I emphasize the incompleteness of any representation of the absolute; see Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, chaps. 2 and 4. I agree with Beiser, however, that proponents of the postmodernist interpretation tend to overlook two core features of early romantic philosophy: (1) its demand that we forever *strive* to attain such a representation of the absolute (or to attain a complete "system"), and (2) the role that *Platonism* plays in the romantic conception of reality. I take my project to be building upon Beiser's effort to develop a holistic interpretation of romanticism that understands the impossibility of a "system" to reflect the limitations of human *thinking* and not an expression of something irrational in reality *as such*.
28. For a detailed study of the Orpheus myth in German romanticism, see Walther Rehm, *Orpheus: Der Dichter und die Toten: Selbstdeutung und Totenkult bei Novalis, Hölderlin, Rilke* (Düsseldorf: L. Schwann, 1950).
29. Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, HKA 1:224–225.
30. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, PS 4.415–417.
31. The phrase comes from Thomas Carlyle, later adopted as the motto for M. H. Abrams's highly influential secularizing reading (see *Natural Supernaturalism*). See Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh in Three Books* (1831), eds. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
32. I thank a reviewer with the Press for encouraging me to bring this topic to the foreground.
33. Hans Poser offers a threefold distinction among "myths" (*Mythen*), "mythology" (*Mythologie*), and "myth" (*Mythos*). On this scheme, "myths" refers to the specific symbols and stories that make up a system of mythology, whereas "mythology" designates an organizing cultural framework of terms and references (e.g., Greek mythology or Indian mythology). By *Mythos* (in the singular), Poser means a foundational story or symbol (e.g., a solar myth or a Jungian archetype) from which particular myths derive. See Poser, "Mythos und Vernunft. Zum Mythenverständnis

der Aufklärung," in *Philosophie und Mythos*, ed. Hans Poser (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979), 130–153. For a different take on this threefold distinction, see Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), chap. 2.

34. This is why the distinction between old and new is not drawn strictly on historical periods. If a chronologically older expression of mythology exhibits the self-conscious dynamics of the imagination, such as we find in the work of Shakespeare, then by the standards of romanticism it is "new." By the same token, if a current expression of mythology masks these dynamics (intentionally or not), then it is "old" in its very structure.
35. The distinction between symbol and allegory was formulated earlier by Goethe in "Über die Gegenstände der bildenden Kunst" ("On the Objects of Fine Art"), an essay he wrote in 1797 but never published. As Daniel Whistler observes, it is likely that Goethe shared his views with the Schlegel brothers, Schelling, and others, but it is unknown whether anyone had access to the draft itself. See Whistler, *Schelling's Theory of Symbolic Language: Forming the System of Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8, 10, 15, 23. See also Ernst Behler, *Studien zur Romantik und zur idealistischen Philosophie*, vol. 2 (München: Schöningh, 1993), 249.
36. For an example of how slippery these terms were at the time, we need only consider Schlegel's *Gespräch über die Poesie* (*Dialogue on Poetry*). As Friedrich Strich observes, Schlegel's new edition of the *Gespräch über die Poesie*, revised for vol. 5 of his *Sämmtliche Werke*, shows subtle yet significant modifications, signaled above all by the expanded title of Ludoviko's speech, which in the 1800 edition is simply "Rede über die Mythologie" ("Speech on Mythology"), but in 1823 becomes "Rede über Mythologie und symbolische Anschauung" ("Speech on Mythology and Symbolic Intuition"); see Fritz Strich, *Die Mythologie in der deutschen Literatur von Klopstock bis Wagner*, vol. 2 (Niemeyer: Halle, 1910), 351. Commenting on this shift, Liselotte Dieckmann observes in "Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Concepts of the Symbol," *Germanic Review* 34, no. 4 (1959): 276–283, that the second edition qualifies the concept of myth with expressions like "symbolic art, symbolic legend, symbolic world of ideas, symbolic knowledge, a symbolic science of the whole universe" (276).
37. For discussion, see Murray W. Bundy, *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Medieval Thought* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1927); Edward W. Warren, "Imagination in Plotinus," *Classical Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1966): 277–285; and Marieke J. E. van den Doel, *Ficino and Fantasy: Imagination in Renaissance Art and Theory from Botticelli to Michelangelo* (Leiden: Brill, 2022). For histories of the concept of *phantasia* (Greek) or *imaginatio* (Latin)—precursors to *imagination* (English) and *Einbildungskraft* (German)—see the contributions in Lodi Nauta and Detlev Pätzold, eds., *Imagination in the Later Middle Ages and Early Modern Times* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004). For discussion of the romantic context, see the contributions in Richard T. Gray et al., ed., *Inventions of the Imagination: Romanticism and Beyond* (Seattle: University of Seattle Press, 2011), and in Gerad Gentry and Konstantin Pollok, eds., *The Imagination in German Idealism and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
38. Late antique Platonists considered themselves faithful followers of Plato, even if their conclusions sometimes differed from Plato's own views. But the perception of a great divide between Plato and these Platonic traditions was not commonplace during the time in which the romantics worked.
39. Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 141.

40. In his *Gespräch über die Poesie*, Schlegel writes that mythology and poetry are "one and inseparable" ("Mythologie und Poesie, beide sind eins und unzertrennlich") (FSKA 2:313).
41. I am sympathetic to the claim of Nassar that the category of romanticism has often been unduly restricted to the Jena writers of the late 1790s, in particular "the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis), Ludwig Tieck, and at times Schelling"; see Nassar, *Romantic Empiricism: Nature, Art, and Ecology from Herder to Humboldt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 4.
42. Three such shifts that belong to later developments in romanticism include (1) a growing interest in historical systems of mythology, (2) a growing interest in national systems of mythology, and (3) a growing mistrust of pagan mythology in favor of traditional forms of Christianity. While these are important topics of investigation, they lie outside the purview of our discussion here. I examine (1) at greater length in *Indian Philosophy and Yoga in Germany* (New York: Routledge, 2024). I put aside topics (2) and (3) for future research.
43. In this way the romantics challenge the widespread assumption—to use a distinction drawn by Hannah H. Kim—that philosophy constitutes the "message" and literature the "vehicle" of ideas. For discussion, see Kim, "Metaphysics as a Means in 'Burnt Norton,'" *Philosophers' Imprint*, forthcoming.