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The Aesthetic Foundations of Romantic Mythology: Karl Philipp Moritz

Abstract: Largely neglected today, the work of Karl Philipp Moritz was a highly influential source for Early German Romanticism. Moritz considered the form of myth as essential to the absolute nature of the divine subject. This defence was based upon his aesthetic theory, which held that beautiful art was “disinterested”, or complete in itself. For Moritz, Myth, like art, constitutes a totality providing an idiom free from restriction in the imitation of the divine. This examination offers a consideration of Moritz’s aesthetics and mythography, before turning briefly to consider his influence on the authors of Early German Romanticism. An understanding of the role of Moritz’s thought supports a number of recent claims (Frank, Beiser, Bowie) that challenge the conventional reading of Romanticism. At the same time it allows us to see Romanticism’s unconventional realist theological programme, permitting us to overcome the problematic secularising readings of the movement. I would like to thank Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (Stanford), as well as Fredrick Beiser (Syracuse) and Lars Fischer (Cambridge) for their help with this project.

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In 1788 Schiller’s *Die Götter Griechenlandes* described an “entgötterte Natur,” contrasting an antique view of the cosmos, populated by the gods of polytheism, with that of his own age, where the divine was little more than the “todte Schlag der Pendeluhr,/Dient sie knechtisch dem Gesetz der Schwere.”¹ The active presence of the divine in the world of mortals had been consolidated into monotheism, institutionalised into an official canon of revelation, systematised into dogma, and abstracted into distant superlatives. In the theism of Schiller’s day, the way of Apollo’s chariot was barred, and with it the prophecy, music, and poetic inspiration that made the divine manifest. Yet by 1800, myth would once again come to play a central role in the theoretical and aesthetic production of all

¹ Friedrich Schiller, *Werke und Briefe in Zwölf Bänden*, ed. Otto Dann, et. al. (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1992), I, 165.

of the major figures of the *Frühromantik*. Largely neglected today, the work of Karl Philipp Moritz (1756–1793) was highly influential in bringing about this return to mythology.² Moritz directly influenced the work of Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, Schelling, Tieck, Wackenroder, Jean Paul, and later even Emerson.³ In 1802 Schelling commented: “It is a great credit to Moritz that he was the first, both among the Germans and in general, to represent mythology with the characteristic of poetic Absoluteness that is peculiar to it.”⁴

This poetic absoluteness which Moritz’s thought attributed to myth may be understood in two ways. Conventional readings place it within the context of Kant’s Critical Idealism and the philosophy which sought to develop it, particularly Fichte. In this understanding, myth is an expression of the free creativity of the self, and an assertion of its liberated individual power. This locates the creative myth-making of the artist within the context of secularisation: the poet, in the revolutionary spirit of the age, wrests power back from institutions and superstition and returns it to the individual subject to whose cognition reality must conform. This reading receives succinct expression in M. H. Abrams argument that in Moritz “the Platonic Absolute, and Augustine’s God, have been displaced by a human product, the self-sufficient work of art”.⁵ As an alternative to this conventional reading, we may understand the use of myth as a reassertion of the intelligibility of the divine to the subject. While myth is a product of human creativity, it expresses a totality to which humans are both subordinate and dependent, something emphasised in Louis Dumont’s reading of Moritz’s aesthetics.⁶ In this alternative reading myth stands not only in opposition to the idealist prohibition against realist speculation, but as an alternative, re-enchanting theological idiom capable of replacing the philosophical abstraction and ecclesial essentialism expressed in the desiccated religiosity of Schiller’s poem.

² There is only one full-length treatment of Moritz in English: Mark Boulby, *Karl Philipp Moritz: At the Fringe of Genius* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1979). For an overview of Moritz-research (now somewhat dated) see Albert Meier, “Quantité négligeable? Überlegungen zur Moritz-Forschung.” In *Karl Philipp Moritz und das 18. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995), 3–12.

³ Oskar Walzel, “Die Sprache der Kunst.” In *Jahrbuch der Goethe-Gesellschaft 1* (Weimar: Verlag der Goethe-Gesellschaft, 1914), 38–62; Ulrich Hubert, *Karl Philipp Moritz und die Anfänge der Romantik: Tieck – Wackenroder – Jean Paul – Friedrich und August Wilhelm Schlegel* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1971); Armin Paul Frank and Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, *The Internationality of National Literatures in Either America* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2000), 308–318.

⁴ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, “Philosophie der Kunst (aus dem handschriftlichen Nachlaß).” In *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart and Augsburg: J. G. Cotta, 1856–61), V, 412.

⁵ M. H. Abrams, *Doing Things With Texts* (New York: Norton, 1989), 168.

⁶ Louis Dumont, *Homo aequalis II. L'idéologie allemande* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 95–105.

It has often been the case, as with Abrams, that Moritz's aesthetics is treated without attention to his mythography, yet by understanding both together, as Moritz himself did, we can see that this second alternate reading is more reflective of his aesthetic programme.

Moritz did not construe myth as a record of historical or rational fact obscured by allegorical embellishment, as had been the case with the Enlightenment's notion of natural religion. Instead, he argued that its form was essential to the absolute nature of the divine subject. This defence of myth was based upon the development of his aesthetic theory, which held that beautiful art was defined by the quality of being disinterested, that is, by being complete in itself. This totality was possible through Moritz's understanding of mimesis, which was not simply the imitation of nature's products, but also of the forces that constitute it. This insight into force allowed the artist to create "an impression in miniature [...] of the great whole of nature."⁷ Moritz extends this aesthetics to his mythography. Myth, like art, constitutes a totality that provides the imagination with a place free from restriction in its imitation of the divine. Even if myth becomes corrupted, as Moritz intimates it had in his own age, as a creative idiom it affords a freedom that makes possible a new realist articulation of the divine absolute. This examination aims to outline Moritz's development of this idiom. The realist influences at work in his thought are apparent in an examination of both his aesthetic and mythographical writing. The continuing significance of Moritz to scholarship arises from this influence on the major figures of the *Frühromantik*. An understanding of the role of Moritz's thought challenges the conventional reading of the *Frühromantik* as an extension of Idealism, and therefore supports the work of recent scholars on the period such as Frank, Beiser and Bowie. At the same time it allows us to see the unconventional realist theological programme operating behind it, permitting us to escape a secularising reading of the movement.

Before proceeding to an account of Moritz's thought, it is helpful briefly to contextualise the life and work of this relatively unacknowledged figure so as to place him in relation to the major currents that influenced him, and the significant figures with whom he came into contact. Moritz was born to parents of modest means in the town of Hamelin, in the Electorate of Hanover, in 1756. Most of what is known of Moritz's early life comes from his most important and well-known work of fiction *Anton Reiser: ein psychologischer Roman*, which appeared in four volumes (1785–1790). Moritz, like the novel's protagonist experiences an extreme form of

7 Karl Philipp Moritz, *Werke in Zwei Bänden*, ed. Heide Hollmer and Albert Meier (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1997), II, 969.

Pietist upbringing, and suffers a cruel apprenticeship. Having attracted the attention of a wealthy patron, he is then sent to a *Gymnasium*, from which he eventually runs away to indulge an ultimately fruitless fantasy of becoming an actor. He then spent periods at Erfurt and Wittenberg studying theology, and sojourned at a Moravian seminary. Following these wander-years, he took a position at a *Gymnasium* in Berlin, which afforded him some contact with the intellectual circle of the Berlin *Aufklärung*. He learned English, and travelled to England in 1782, publishing a somewhat commercially successful account of his journey, followed by the greater success of *Anton Reiser*. His publisher, hoping for another work of travel literature, financed Moritz's trip to Italy, where he met Goethe. This encounter introduced Moritz to key ideas that would come to structure his aesthetic and mythological considerations.

After Italy, through his new friend's influence, Moritz spent some time at Weimar where he tutored Duke Carl August in English. Partly through the influence of the connections he had established, Moritz received a professorship in fine art at the *Königlichen Akademie der Künste in Berlin*, where Ludwig Tieck, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Alexander von Humboldt numbered among those who attended his lectures. For a decade, from 1783, he edited the *Magazin für Erfahrungsseelkunde*, an important early psychology journal. In 1791 he was admitted to the *Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften*. Following a brief and unhappy marriage, he died in 1793. While Moritz was not one of the commanding intellects of late eighteenth century German letters, he is nevertheless a noteworthy reflection of his age, both in the company he kept, and the compass of his works. His creative output ranged through travel literature, drama, and two major novels, while his intellectual output included contributions to pedagogy, psychology, and most importantly mythography and aesthetics.

In 1785 Moritz found himself preoccupied with the problem of representation in art, particularly the representation of totality. He takes this up in an article in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* entitled *Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeteten*.⁸ In his essay, Moritz builds a distinction between the pleasure derived from the beautiful (*Schönen*) and the useful (*Nützlichen*). According to Moritz, the useful object has its end not within, but outside of itself, in its function, and that the pleasure associated with the useful arises in fulfilling this desired function. The completion or perfection (*Vollkommenheit*) of a useful object is not found within it, but in the individual who experiences the benefit of its utility. Alternately, in the case of the beautiful, perfection lies in the object itself. Moritz writes: "In the

⁸ Moritz, *Werke*, II, 943–949.

observation of the beautiful I roll the end back out of myself into the object itself: I observe it [the end], as something that is not in me, but rather as complete *in itself* [*in sich selbst Vollendetes*], that thus comprises in itself a whole, and that grants me pleasure *for its own sake*.”⁹ Elsewhere Moritz describes this as the task of the artist: “The artist must seek to roll back the end within the object itself [...] to make it complete in itself. Then we see a whole where we once saw nothing but divergent ended parts.”¹⁰

The experience of beauty, complete in itself, leads Moritz to the notion of disinterestedness. Whereas in the experience of the useful the self plays a role in the object’s completion, in the experience of the beautiful “I consider, not the beautiful object in relation to me, but rather myself in relation to it.”¹¹ Here, Moritz realises that in order for the beautiful work of art to be a whole the individual must subordinate himself and his feelings to it. Therefore, the beautiful work of art does not exhort either the artist who created it, or the individual who experiences it.¹² Indeed, in encountering its totality we are drawn away from the self, and experience “*an agreeable forgetting of ourselves*.”¹³ This is “the highest degree of pure and unselfish pleasure.”¹⁴ For Moritz, this disinterestedness was the result of the beautiful object’s completion to which we can add nothing. Instead, the beautiful is a realist objective being to which “we offer [...] our individual limited being [*Dasein*] to a higher type of being [*Dasein*].”¹⁵ Accordingly, Moritz offers a form of disinterestedness five years prior to that which Kant proposes in his third *Kritik*, and here based on a realist claim of totality, rather than an idealist claim of appearance.

Though the subject matter of the *Versuchsaufsatz* is not overtly theological, the disinterested totality that Moritz puts forward has a moral substratum that reveals its realist Platonic provenance. Moritz enjoins the artist to take a noble disposition that does not seek the approval which follows from the creation of beautiful art, but rather seeks the beautiful in itself. Those who succumb to such temptations of praise, will find themselves “seeking a false shimmer, that will perhaps momentarily dazzle the eyes of the rabble, but will vanish before the glance of the wise.”¹⁶ This injunction against the artist bears some similarity to

9 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 943.

10 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 952.

11 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 943.

12 Dumont, *Homo aequalis*, II, 98.

13 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 945.

14 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 945.

15 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 945–46.

16 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 948.

Plato's comments on poetry in the *Republic*, which maintain that poetry must appeal foremost to reason, whereas poetry that appeals mainly to the appetitive part of the soul is to be banished from the ideal state.¹⁷ Equally the idea of the selfless pursuit of the beautiful is central to the Platonic tradition, and can be found in the *Symposium* where the highest good is to ascend through particular beauty to the contemplation of the very essence of beauty itself.¹⁸ Augustine, developing and adopting the Platonic tradition, connects the contemplation of self-sufficient beauty with that of a self-sufficient God. In a distinction similar to that what we find in Moritz, Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* distinguishes between the use (*uti*) and enjoyment (*frui*) of things. For Augustine, all things are to be enjoyed only as a means to the highest good, which is the contemplation of God.¹⁹

Moritz initially encountered the disinterested pursuit of the highest good in a Christian context, but one that eschewed all created beauty for what he called a "dry metaphysical enthusiasm [*Schwärmerei*]." ²⁰ In the first part of Moritz's autobiographical novel *Anton Reiser*, published the same year as the *Versuchsaufsatz*, Moritz depreciatingly describes the particular form of Pietist quietism under which he was raised.²¹ It practised, according to Moritz, "entry into a blessed nothingness, the complete obliteration of all *selfhood* or *selflove*, and a complete disinterested [*uninteressierte*] love of God," the end of which was perfect quiet.²² Unlike the Platonic and Augustinian forms of disinterested contemplation, wherein creation was the means to ascend to the highest good, the form of spirituality Moritz describes stressed the absolute transcendence of God from creation, the result of particular Nominalist-influenced trends within Protestant theology, under which creation became not a means, but a hindrance to divine contemplation. As we shall see in *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen*, Moritz's aesthetics reverses this ascetic path, reclaiming the totality of creation as a means to contemplate an immanent God.

In 1786, Moritz travelled to Italy where in Rome Goethe introduced him to ideas that would become central to the development of his aesthetics. In August of 1787,

¹⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 603a–607d; 378a–c.

¹⁸ Plato, *Symposium*, 210a–212a.

¹⁹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 14–17.

²⁰ Moritz, *Werke*, I, 89.

²¹ For the relationship between Pietism and Moritz's writing see Robert Minder's *Glaube, Skepsis und Rationalismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974) and Boulby, *Karl Philipp Moritz*, 6–9.

²² Moritz, *Werke*, I, 88. Woodmansee, following Abrams, concludes that this objection led Moritz to displace the theological with the aesthetic (Martha Woodmansee, "The Interests in Disinterestedness. Karl Philipp Moritz and the Emergence of the Theory of Aesthetic Autonomy in Eighteenth-Century Germany," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 41.1 (1984), 32–33).

Johann Georg Herder sent his friend and fellow Spinoza enthusiast Goethe a copy of his newest text, *Gott. Einige Gespräche*.²³ Goethe shared the text with Moritz, who took to it as kindle to flame²⁴: “Moritz is really elated with it, almost as if this work was all that was needed to put the keystone to his thoughts.”²⁵ The work contained the important notions of immanent divinity and force (*Kraft*). Both of these prove invaluable in helping Moritz to develop the insights of *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen* (1788) which reversed the demands of Pietistic asceticism based upon the requirements of a transcendent divinity.²⁶

Gott was Herder’s contribution to the Pantheism Controversy. A rejoinder to Jacobi’s attack upon Spinoza, the work defends the sixteenth century philosopher, but in so doing offers a number of substantial revisions which brought Spinoza’s thought more into line with realist Platonism, rather than showing it in terms of the rational Cartesianism of its original author.²⁷ Herder argues that many of the difficulties arising out of Spinoza’s system “are the consequences of the pernicious Cartesian explanations,”²⁸ particularly the geometric method, and the notion of substance, which reflect the period’s need for philosophical inquiry to take mathematical form.²⁹ Spinoza’s substance monism, famously expressed in the formula “*Deus sive Natura*” had, according to Herder, failed to fully express Spinoza’s *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* distinction.³⁰ The notion of substance made it seem as if God and nature were identical, whereas for Spinoza the divine is the eternal self-sufficient substance in which all being in time exists.³¹ Herder replaces

23 Johann Gottfried Herder, *God, Some Conversations*, trans. Frederick Burkhardt (New York: Veritas, 1940); *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan, (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877–1913), XVI. All references to *Gott* cite both editions in this order.

24 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Italian Journey.” In *Goethe’s Collected Works*, ed. T. P. Saine, J. L. Sammons, trans. Robert R. Heitner (New York: Suhrkamp, 1989) XI, 314 (1 Sept., 1787).

25 Goethe, “Italian Journey,” 316 (6 Sept 1787).

26 A detailed account may be found in Gotthilf Weisstein, “Drei Briefe von Karl Philipp Moritz an Herder.” In *Freundesgaben für Carl August Hugo Burckhardt zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1900), 171–179.

27 For a detailed treatment see David Bell, *Spinoza in Germany from 1670 to the Age of Goethe* (London: Institute of Germanic Studies, 1984), 97–146.

28 Herder, *Gott*, 119; XVI, 474.

29 Herder, *Gott*, 90–91; 16, 431. In *Die romantische Schule* (1835) Heine would make a similar proposal: “If, some day, Spinoza is freed of his rigid, old Cartesian, mathematical form and made more accessible to the general public, then perhaps it will be clear that he more than any other has the right to complain about the theft of ideas.” Heine, *The Romantic School*, 139–195, 187.

30 Baruch Spinoza, *Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Winter, 1972–1987), II, 206.

31 Herder, *Gott*, 99–100, 107; XVI, 444–445, 457.

“substance,” with “substantial forces”³² in which the divine “reveals himself in an infinite number of forces, in an infinite number of ways,”³³ allowing for “an ever-new and ever-renewed source of divine beauty.”³⁴ In a formulation that would have appealed to Moritz in light of his negative evaluation of quietism, Herder contrasts this immanent God with the transcendent God of philosophy, “a phantom of the imagination” and “a fathomless object of knowledge.”³⁵

Moritz works from Herder’s ideas in his understanding of the relationship between artistic creativity and nature. The artistic genius is inspired by natural beauty to “imitate it, strive after it, eavesdrop in its secret workshop, and form and create, with blazing fire in his breast, as nature does.”³⁶ In order to explain this, Moritz identifies and names certain forms of force that play a role in the creative process. Nature itself is possessed of a creative force (*Schöpfungskraft*)³⁷, which impresses itself upon the artist’s perceptive force (*Spähungskraft*), which can “penetrate the core of beings [*Wesen*],” thereby seeing beyond the products of nature to their productive origin.³⁸ This insight into the source of natural beauty allows the artist to disassemble the beautiful in its natural instantiations, divide it from its surroundings, and through his own formative force (*Bildungskraft*), reassemble reality through the medium of art.³⁹

According to Moritz, what art creates is not a reproduction of the beautiful that we already find in nature, since this would be merely to copy the product of a force without engaging it. Earlier in the *Versuchsaufsatz* Moritz rejects the notion that the aim of art was the imitation of nature. Instead, the role of the artist is to take his insight into true immaterial reality and give it appearance (*Erscheinung*) by joining it to material reality through what Moritz calls his formative power (*Bildungskraft*).⁴⁰ In this case what beautiful art reproduces is the active force of the beautiful in a product of the artist’s own making. True artistic imitation of the beautiful constitutes beauty both as a product and as a process. Furthermore, by virtue of this

32 Herder, *Gott*, 97, 103; XVI, 441, 451. Herder had already made a similar move in an attempt to overcome Cartesian mind-body dualism in *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele* (1778).

33 Herder, *Gott*, 103; XVI, 451.

34 Herder, *Gott*, 105; XVI, 454.

35 Herder, *Gott*, 99; XVI, 444.

36 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 969.

37 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 969.

38 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 969.

39 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 969.

40 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 970.

representation of process, the artistic object has the quality of always being in a state of becoming, making it inexhaustible, in essence opposing its own particularity. This reflects the character of totality by which Moritz designated the beautiful earlier in the *Versuchsaufsatz*. We can bring nothing conceptual to bear upon the beautiful: because “the beautiful cannot be recognised, it must be produced – or felt,”⁴¹ our perception of it is instead possible through “taste or the capacity for feeling [*Geschmack oder Empfindungsfähigkeit*].”⁴²

Moritz realises that the beautiful object cannot, of course, be a consummate totality, but instead must be an impression of it:

Any beautiful whole from the hand of the formative artist is thus an impression in miniature of the highest beauty of the great whole of nature, that after all still indirectly recreates [nature] through the formative hand of the artist, that which was not directly part of its great plan.⁴³

Since the beautiful object stands at a distance from that which it represents, yet nevertheless reduplicates its totality, it causes a momentary forgetting of the self on account of its disinterested nature. This cancelling is not a form of self-annihilation, as had been the case with Moritz’s Pietism, rather it is momentary, only occurring when we are in the presence of the beautiful creation. In words that echo the creative spirit of God hovering over the waters in Genesis, Moritz describes the beautiful artistic object as “hovering and flitting” (*schwebend und gaukelnd*) over reality, appearing more charming to the eye than nature itself.⁴⁴

In emphasising totality Moritz was not advocating a new position. The completeness of a work of art had for a long time been the measure of mimetic perfection. Rather, the important shift that he affects lies in his redefinition of the nature of this completion. No longer was this measured by the correspondence between the products of natural beauty and those depicted in a work of art, but rather by the representation of the creative power active within beautiful nature itself. Once more, the relation of Moritz’s aesthetic to the Platonic tradition becomes apparent. The artistic object is in essence a microcosmic representation of the macrocosmic whole, in both a sensory and metaphysical manner. Herder’s notion of *Kraft* can be traced through his own reading to Shaftesbury’s artist as “second maker,” and Cudworth’s notion of “plastic nature”, and then further

⁴¹ Moritz, *Werke*, II, 974.

⁴² Moritz, *Werke*, II, 975.

⁴³ Moritz, *Werke*, II, 969.

⁴⁴ Cf. Genesis 1:2. Schlegel similarly describes Romantic poetry this way in the famous *Athenäumsfragment* 116.

back to earlier Renaissance and Neoplatonic notions of the mimetic.⁴⁵ Here in Moritz this perennial idea takes the form of the notion of the formative artist.

Following his return to Berlin, Moritz extended the central thesis of his aesthetic work to mythology thereby making the somewhat implicit theology of his aesthetics emphatic. In quick succession he published the influential *Die Götterlehre* (1790) and *ANΘΟΥΣΙΑ oder Roms Alterthümer: Ein Buch für die Menschheit* (1791). In these works he considers Greek and Roman mythology in the same way he conceives of the work of art – as something complete in itself. In mythology, the imagination (*Phantasie*) of the people appears through the creative power of a genius artist, which transcribes actuality into anthropological images. In comparison to his aesthetic considerations, Moritz mythological works are characterised more by a popular and commercial aim, yet they contain within them some important elaborations of his aesthetic theory into the area of religion.

The *Götterlehre* is something of a conventional mythological textbook, however it rests upon an understanding of myth as poetry elaborated in an introductory essay entitled “Gesichtspunkt für die Mythologieschen Dichtungen.”⁴⁶ Employing his notion of artistic totality, Moritz explains that “mythological poems must be regarded as a language of imagination (*Phantasie*): Taken as such, they amount to, as it were, a world of their own lifted out [*herausgehoben*] of the context of actual things.”⁴⁷ Because myth borders upon nothing it can “rest and hover over reality,”⁴⁸ free from the demands usually associated with the articulation of the divine.

Moritz contrasts the classical mythological mode of expressing the divine with contemporary theology. In an assessment reminiscent of Schiller’s *Die Götter Griechenlandes* and his critique of Pietist quietism in *Anton Reiser*, he points negatively to the imposition of metaphysical necessities which require the divine to be abstracted into a catalogue of superlative attributes, or reduced to a first cause. Such abstract notions have no purchase on the imagination, and stifle any meaningful articulation of the divine. Myth avoids this “desolate desert” of abstraction, freeing the formative power (*bildende Kraft*) of the imagination into a place of pure play (*Spielraum*), wherein “everything is genesis, procreation and giving birth.”⁴⁹ In order to further secure this freedom, Moritz explains that we

45 Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. D. den Uyl (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), I, 82–83; Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (New York: Gould and Newman, 1837), 208–254. The relationship of Cudworth’s thought to Herder’s is the subject of my forthcoming paper on plasticity and *Kraft*.

46 Moritz, *Werke*, II 1049–1055.

47 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 1049.

48 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 1049.

49 Moritz, *Werke*, II, 1049.

often find myth set in the dark history of a distant past. For Moritz, therefore, the theological is best left to the mythological idiom.

Moritz opposed any allegorical understanding of myth, which presumed it merely to be a mediating form for something that reason could convey more clearly and directly. The Enlightenment understanding of myth in particular, based upon a belief in natural religion, considered the mythological and the supernatural to be the historical accretions of a more primitive past upon rational truths.⁵⁰ Opposing this, Moritz maintains that myth must be treated as art, with all the connotations of totality which that term possessed for him: “A true work of art, a beautiful poem, is something consummate and perfect in itself; that exists for its own sake, and whose value lies in itself and in the well-ordered relationship of its parts.”⁵¹ As a totality, myth is complete unto itself, or disinterested. To interpret or abstract from it is to turn a supreme work of art into a hieroglyph or dead letter whose only worth is that it means something other than itself.

Not only do such attempts to interpret myth rob it of its intrinsic meaning, they make the mythological appear nonsensical: “the hand that wants to wholly pull back the veil that covers these poems [...] encounters, rather than the hoped for discoveries, nothing but contradictions and inconsistencies.”⁵² Since myths represent “the whole of nature with all its lavish excesses and its entire swelling abundance, it is exulted as such a representation over all concepts of morality.”⁵³ Moritz explains, just as one cannot judge the abundance of nature immoderate, or the wrath of a lion savage, neither is myth subject to such judgments. For this reason, a rationalistic interpretation of myth will always make it seem unsophisticated, barbaric, or even immoral. According to Moritz everything in myth is subordinate to poetic beauty, and for this reason myth teaches better than any other form. Because teaching is not its purpose and doctrine is not its aim, myth has a grace of communication beyond the didactic and discursive that is able to bring immaterial reality into appearance.

In *ANΘΟΥΣΑ oder Roms Alterthümer. Ein Buch für die Menschheit*, Moritz presents the folk customs of ancient Rome, and again, somewhat implicitly,

⁵⁰ In Moritz's day the *Neologen*, who included August Friedrich Sack, Johann Joachim Spalding and Johann Salomo Semler, argued that revelation was restricted to the rationally accountable, viz. moral teachings. Consequently they aimed to represent Christianity as a rational ethic. Religious supernaturalism could be accounted for by the need to accommodate the Christian message to historical circumstance.

⁵¹ Moritz, *Werke*, II, 1049.

⁵² Moritz, *Werke*, II, 1049.

⁵³ Moritz, *Werke*, II, 1052.

compares the ritual of Roman religion favourably to that of his own less sensate, and more abstract age. In his articulation of classical civilisation, Moritz makes claims not unlike those of his near contemporaries, such as Winkelmann and Schiller, which laud a certain antique simplicity that allowed divinity to pervade all aspects of life. The free and uncomplicated antique religious imagination had the quality of heightening the mundane and making the moral beautiful.

Moritz's aim becomes most clear in his conclusion, which explains the title of his work. The term *ANΘΟΥΣΙΑ* refers to a Greek-derived tradition in the Roman religion. When one required the protection of gods, but felt their actual name had become defiled, one could use a secret name, and one of these was *ANΘΟΥΣΙΑ*, the *flowering* [*Blühende*].⁵⁴ Moritz proposes a return to this creative re-invention of myth in his own age:

The glory of ancient Rome is now faded, and time has long since drawn its furrow over its great fates. But all the same, from the rubble and ash there again pushed up on this very spot a delicate flower, the flower of art. Beneath its youthful glow and its fresh scent now rise up the majestic ruins of the past, like a barrow, decorated with violet.⁵⁵

By titling his text “a book for humanity,” Moritz is here considering the religious creativity of the ancient world as the organic material from which to call forth a renewed religious imagination, one that could rise from the ashes of discredited metaphysical arguments and uncertain historical testimonies. Almost prophetically Moritz envisions these new mythologies as symbolised by a flower, like the flower that would appear in the dreams of Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, yet here purple rather than blue.

In these claims, Moritz contributed to the nascent field of comparative mythography. Though he is not explicit about historical context, the concept of *Blühende* understands myth contextually. Although the context of a myth may change, requiring an alteration in the form it takes, its subject matter of totality remains the same. Moritz's call to creative mythologisation again has resonances with the Platonic tradition, particularly with the *Timeaus*, where Plato describes the cosmogony he sets out as a “probable myth” (*εἰκὼς μῦθος*).⁵⁶ In terms of form, myth cannot claim to be a definitive statement. Rather, its very

⁵⁴ Karl Philipp Moritz, *Werke*, ed. Horst Günter (Frankfurt: Insel, 1993), II, 526.

⁵⁵ Moritz, *Werke*, ed. Günter, II, 526.

⁵⁶ Plato, *Timaeus*, 29 d, 68 d, 69b.

nature allows for limitless interpretation in a manner that is reflective of the irreducible quality of its divine subject matter. In this way, readers participate in the generation of meaning, as opposed to having it discursively articulated for them.⁵⁷ Myth is contingent in its expression, and relative to the narrative structure in which it is expressed. At the same time, however, it is absolute in its ultimate subject matter and eternal in its meaning. Accordingly, the appeal of myth to the *Frühromantik* as a new idiom for the divine is clear. It sets out a form that seemed capable of making realist claims, yet also appeared able to account for the role of the subject as revealed by Idealism. Additionally, making allowance for the developments of historicism and biblical criticism, it appeared as an alternative to the authority of doctrine and the inherency of scripture.

Schelling, in his aforementioned lectures on aesthetics, praises Moritz for recognising the “poetic Absoluteness” of mythology.⁵⁸ Similarly, in his own aesthetic lectures August Wilhelm Schlegel maintains that Moritz’s aesthetics understood the nature of art better than Kant.⁵⁹ For both, the *Götterlehre* provided some of the guiding principles for their consideration of mythology.⁶⁰ Yet it is in the work of Friedrich Schlegel, arguably the central figure of the *Frühromantik*, that we see the concept of *Blühende* put into action in the *Gespräch über die Poesie*.⁶¹ Schlegel writes of myth as a creative idiom that consciously pursues the Absolute. As a form it acts “to suspend [aufzuheben] the progression and laws of rationally thinking reason, and to transfer us once again into the beautiful confusion of imagination, into the original chaos of human nature, for which I know as yet no more beautiful symbol than the colourful throng of ancient gods”.⁶² Schlegel then goes on to expand Moritz’s thesis, subsuming both philosophy and literature under the mythological idiom. Fichte, Spinoza, Shakespeare and Cervantes are all seen by Schlegel as engaged in the mytho-poetic task of representing totality. The idiom of myth is not static, but evolving and unfolding, possessed of the qualities of being original (*Ur-*

57 Plato, *Republic*, 401d–402a.

58 Schelling, *Werke*, V, 412.

59 August Wilhelm von Schlegel, “Vorlesungen über schöne Literature und Kunst.” In *Kritische Ausgabe der Vorlesungen*, ed. Ernst Behler, (Paternborn: F. Schönigh, 1989), I, 258–59.

60 Albert Meier, *Karl Philipp Moritz* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), 196.

61 Friedrich Schlegel mentions Moritz several times in correspondence with his brother. Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler und Hans Eichner (Munich: Schönigh, 1958–2002), XXIII, 156–157 (13 November 1793). See also XXIII, 21, 122.

62 Schlegel, KA, II 319; 86.

sprüngliches), inimitable (*Unnachahmliches*), and absolutely insoluble (*schlechtlich unauflöslich*).⁶³ As such it takes the place of systematic philosophy or doctrinal theology as the genre for considering the Absolute.⁶⁴ Similar claims concerning the religious power of art were made by Wackenroder and Tieck in *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders*, and the *Phantasien über die Kunst, für Freunde der Kunst* concerning the mythologization of art and music.⁶⁵

Earlier we set out the conventional understanding of Romanticism as a reflection of subjective Idealism. This reading has its source in the movement's earliest detractors, particularly Hegel, Heine, Goethe and Kierkegaard.⁶⁶ It was Hegel who first characterised Romanticism, particularly Friedrich Schlegel, as adopting an extreme Fichtean absolute egoism where the ironic artist reaches the point of "*divine genius*."⁶⁷ Having no criterion beyond itself, the movement constituted a corruption of the Kantian inheritance. This Romantic sickness, as Goethe called it,⁶⁸ was marked by its self-destructive, capricious literary indulgence of idealist subjectivity, undisciplined by philosophical rigour.⁶⁹ This characterisation had a long and powerful *Nachgeschichte*. In the twentieth

63 Schlegel, KA II 319; 86.

64 For a consideration of Moritz's influence on Schlegel see Carl Enders, *Friedrich Schlegel: Die Quellen seines Wesens und Werdens* (Leipzig: H. Haessel, 1913), 38–40, 80–108; Edwin H. Zeydel, "The Relation of K. P. Moritz's *Anton Reiser* to Romanticism," *Germanic Review* 3 (1928), 295–327, 300–304.

65 Lilian R. Furst, "In Other Voices: Wackenroder's *Herzensergießungen* and the Creation of a Romantic Mythology." In *The Romantic Imagination: Literature and Art in England and Germany*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Jürgen Klein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 269–85; Paul Gerhard Klussmann, "Andachtsbilder: Wackenroders ästhetische Glaubenserfahrung und die romantische Bestimmung des Künstlertums." In *Festschrift für Friedrich Kienecker zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Gerd Michels (Heidelberg: Julius Gros, 1980), 69–90.

66 We can see Hegel's influence on Kierkegaard, who writes of Romantic "divine freedom that knows no bonds, no chains, but plays with abandon and unrestraint, [and] gambols like a leviathan in the sea" (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With Continual Reference to Socrates*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 279. See also Heinrich Heine's *Die romantische Schule* (1835), which opposed de Staël's *De l'Allemagne* (1813) (*On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany and Other Writings*, trans. Howard Pollack-Milgate [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 141, 146–152, 190–195, *passim*).

67 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer, K. A. Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970–1999), XIII, 95.

68 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens* ed. Karl Richter (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1986), 300.

69 Hegel, *Werke*, XIII, 93–98.

century we see it in the attempt to associate Romanticism with destructive irrational modernism⁷⁰ and later with National Socialism.⁷¹

More sympathetic readers rejected the negative side of this criticism, seeing the movement as more nuanced and constructive, yet they have retained the identification of Romanticism with subjective Idealism.⁷² Therefore we see in the work of M. H. Abrams, perhaps the most influential English-language Romantic scholar in the latter half of the twentieth century, the characterisation of Romanticism as an aesthetic movement toward the subject. In *The Mirror and the Lamp* he describes a shift in aesthetic focus from the mimetic, where the truth of the artistic object is measured by its correspondence to an objective reality, to an expressive form, where truth is measured by correspondence to the artist's subjective state of mind.⁷³ In this context Romantic mythmaking is to be understood as an imaginative expression of the artist, a revelation of the subject in a new age of the individual. This understanding of myth-making also betrays the implicit assumption of secularisation that operates behind the conventional

70 E.g. Pierre Lasserre, *La romantisme français* (Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1907); Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919); T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber, 1933); René Gerard, *Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961). Romanticism was not, however, without defenders. E.g. Benedetto Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono* (Bari: Laterza, 1932); Jacques Barzun, "To the Rescue of Romanticism," *The American Scholar*, 9 (1940), 147–58; *Classic, Romantic and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

71 E.g.: Frank Laurence Lucas, *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936); Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics* (New York: Knopf, 1941); Paul Roubiczek, *The Misinterpretation of Man* (London: Routledge, 1949); Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 2000); György Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. Peter Palmer (London: Merlin Press, 1980). More recent work has opposed this association: Ralf Klausnitzer, *Blaue Blume unterm Hakenkreuz* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1999); Manfred Frank, "Wie reaktionär war eigentlich die Frühromantik? (Elemente zur Aufstörung der Meinungsbildung)." In *Athenäum. Jahrbuch für Romantik* 7 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1997), VII, 41–166.

72 The post-structuralist reading of Romanticism, which considers it a reflection of the fragmentation of the subject in language and history, may also be considered under the conventional interpretation as it shares the same basic assumption of subjectivity (e.g. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Absolu littéraire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978); Azade Seyhan, *Representation and its Discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). However, it is not possible to adequately consider this scholarship here.

73 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1953). Abrams repeats this thesis in *Doing Things With Texts* (New York: Norton, 1989), 160.

interpretation of Romanticism,⁷⁴ wherein the movement is part of a process of modernisation and rationalisation that disassociates society and religion, rather than the development of an idiom for the expression of religion.

Recently, the secularisation thesis itself has been challenged from a number of perspectives, thereby questioning our conventional understanding of Romanticism and religion.⁷⁵ This has been the subject of attention by Colin Jager, who clearly expresses the situation: “Tied to a secularisation narrative, Romanticism thus becomes an alternative to religion. Disentangled from the plot of secularisation, however, that very same conceptualization of literary representation can appear as an alternative not to religion but to the increasingly stressed secular spaces that have sought to displace religion.”⁷⁶ Extending this insight, we can understand Romantic myth-making not as an abandonment of the mimetic for the revelation of the subject, and as a literary extension of the development of Idealism, but as an alternative path for realist religious discourse.⁷⁷

That the *Frühromantik* represents an alternative is supported by the recent reconstructive philosophical work carried out upon the movement, which has lent it a philosophical legitimacy of its own.⁷⁸ Romanticism rejects Fichtean

74 E.g. Abrams writes: “Much of what distinguishes writers I call ‘Romantic’ derives from the fact, that they undertook [...] to save traditional concepts, schemes, and values which had been based on the relation of the Creator to his creature and creation, but to reformulate them within the prevailing two-term system of subject and object, ego and non-ego” (*Natural Supernaturalism* [New York: Norton, 1971], 13).

75 E.g. *The Desecularization of the World*, ed. Peter Berger (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap, 2007); Jürgen Habermas, “Die Dialektik der Säkularisierung,” *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, 4 (2008), 33–46.

76 Colin Jager, “After the Secular: The Subject of Romanticism,” *Public Culture*, 18.2 (2006), 301. See also Colin Jager, “Romanticism/Secularization/Secularism,” *Literature Compass*, 5.4 (2008).

77 Fred Berwick argues for the importance of mimesis in *Mimesis and its Romantic Reflections* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2001).

78 For a recent review see Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, “The Revival of Frühromantik in the Anglophone World,” *Philosophy Today*, Spring (2005), 96–117. Major works include: Dieter Henrich, *Konstellationen. Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie (1789–1795)* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1991); Dieter Henrich, *Der Grund im Bewußtsein: Untersuchungen zu Hölderlins Denken (1794–1795)* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992); Dieter Henrich, *Grundlegung aus dem Ich* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004); Manfred Frank, “Philosophische Grundlagen der Frühromantik.” In *Athenäum. Jahrbuch für Romantik* 4 (Paderborn: Schöningh 1994), 37–130; Manfred Frank, *Unendliche Annäherung*. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997); Fredrick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1987); Fredrick C. Beiser *German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Fredrick C. Beiser *The Romantic Imperative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

subjective foundationalism, but equally it retains key elements of subjective Idealism, as expressed in the central role given to the creative genius. The key to this renovated understanding of Romanticism is Realism, which places it in concord with the Platonic-Christian tradition, and distinguishes it fundamentally from the goals of philosophical idealism. The continued theoretical significance of Moritz is to show us how aesthetics and mythography play a central and illuminating role in this renewed understanding of Romanticism as a movement that seeks to assert the possibility of expressing a divine Absolute, thereby restoring the presence of the gods to the “entgötterte Natur”.