

# 1

## Defining the Romantic Symbol

Le seul nom de Symbolisme est déjà une énigme pour mainte personne. Il semble fait pour exciter les mortels à se tourmenter l'esprit. J'en ai connu qui méditaient sans fin sur ce petit mot de *symbole*, auquel ils attribuaient une profondeur imaginaire, et dont ils essayaient de se préciser la mystérieuse résonance.

Paul Valéry, 'Existence du symbolisme'

This is a study of a distinctive concept of the symbol articulated by a number of German writers and by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the period conventionally designated the age of Goethe in German literary history and the Romantic period in British literary history, the years falling between 1770 and 1830. This is not a study of poetic imagery. The albatross of Coleridge's ballad *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and the blue flower of Novalis's novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* may be called Romantic symbols, but not of the kind to which I am referring. What I am referring to was strictly a theoretical construct, the purpose of which, I shall argue, was not to describe objects of perception but to condition the perception of objects. In the symbol, according to Johann Wolfgang Goethe's canonical formulation of the concept, the particular represents 'the universal, not as a dream or shadow, but as a living and momentary revelation of the inscrutable [*lebendig- Augenblickliche Offenbarung des Unerforschlichen*]' . Consequently, 'the idea remains eternally and infinitely active and inaccessible [*wirksam und unerreichbar*] in the image, and even if expressed in all languages would still remain inexpressible [*selbst in allen Sprachen ausgesprochen, doch*

*unausprechlich bliebe*].<sup>1</sup> On the one hand the symbol was supposed to be the point of contact between the contingent and the absolute, the finite and the infinite, the sensuous and the supersensuous, the temporal and the eternal, the individual and the universal. On the other hand it was supposed to refer to nothing but itself, so that image and idea were inherently and inseparably connected in it. In short, it was supposed to be at once infinitely meaningful and incapable of being reduced to any particular meaning.

Students of modernist literature will recognize this concept, for it persisted under the name *symbol* into twentieth-century criticism. Although the Romantics' influence on W. B. Yeats, for example, was probably mostly indirect, mediated through his friend Arthur Symons's appreciation of the French *symboliste* writers of the second half of the nineteenth century, the Yeats of 1903 could easily be mistaken (as we shall see) for the Coleridge of 1816, not only in defining the symbol as he did, but also in distinguishing it from allegory: 'A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, and belongs to fancy and not to imagination: the one is a revelation, the other an amusement.'<sup>2</sup> It was precisely this adherence to the supposed prejudices of Romanticism that the critic Walter Benjamin, in his study of the German Baroque mourning play, was to criticize in Yeats.<sup>3</sup> Yet the Romantic valorization of the symbol at the expense of allegory did not lose its force in later criticism, as the following two citations will demonstrate. In 1929 D. H. Lawrence insisted that to fix

<sup>1</sup> Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen* (1827), nos. 314 and 1113, GA ix. 523, 639.

<sup>2</sup> Yeats, 'William Blake and His Illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*', in *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 116–45, at 116. Originally published in *The Savoy* in 1896, Yeats's essay was reprinted in his *Ideas of Good and Evil* in 1903, and this later version of the text is reprinted in turn in *Essays and Introductions*. Cf. Hazard Adams, *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1983), 140–50.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972–89), i. 203–430, at 339: 'Even great artists and uncommon theorists like Yeats persist in the assumption that allegory is a conventional relation between a signifying image and its referent.'

the meaning of a symbol is to ‘fall into the commonplace of allegory’, and in 1967 W. H. Auden repeated this sentiment: ‘analysis always tends to reduce symbolism to a false and boring allegory’.<sup>4</sup> One may also argue, as indeed I have elsewhere, that vestiges of the Romantic concept of the symbol, irrespective of its differentiation from allegory, play important methodological roles in the oneirology of Freud, the archetypal criticism of Northrop Frye, and even the ‘immanent critique’ of Benjamin, notwithstanding his explicit rejection of the concept.<sup>5</sup>

But to ask what this symbol is or was in actuality is to conflate the concept with the phenomenon. The few examples offered by the Romantics themselves are invariably inadequate to the concept, and sometimes indistinguishable from conventional tropes. When Coleridge informed his audience in a lecture of 1819, ‘Here comes a *Sail*—that is, a Ship, is a symbolical Expression’, he told them no more than they would have found in a rhetorical handbook under the entry for synecdoche.<sup>6</sup> August Wilhelm Schlegel maintained that the Greek gods were symbols because they had a ‘reality independent of concepts’, but his explanations of them were purely conceptual: ‘The Titans in general signify the dark, mysterious primal forces of nature and the mind ... The Furies are the dreadful powers of conscience. ... Pallas is sober wisdom, justice, and temperance.’<sup>7</sup> Assuming the ideal to have a material substrate, Schelling taught that Mary Magdalen was a specifically symbolic figure because she ‘not only *signifies* repentance but is living repentance itself’; but the instantially viewed universal had been common in, indeed integral to,

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, ed. Mara Kalnins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 101; Auden, *Secondary Worlds* (1968; London: Faber, 1984), 28.

<sup>5</sup> See ‘Why Coleridge Was Not a Freudian’, *Dreaming: Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams*, 7 (1997), 13–28; ‘The Metaphysical Foundation of Frye’s Monadology’, in Jeffery Donaldson and Alan Mendelson (eds.), *Frye and the Word: Religious Contexts in the Writings of Northrop Frye* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 97–104; and ‘Walter Benjamin’s Unacknowledged Romanticism’, *Lingua Humanitatis*, 2 (2002), 163–82.

<sup>6</sup> Coleridge, *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), ii. 414–20, at 417 (notes for lecture of 25 March 1819). Cf. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 8. 6. 19–22.

<sup>7</sup> Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (1811), lect. 6, *Kritische Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Edgar Lohner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1962–74), v. 72–87, at 81.

allegorical narrative until the Enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> Were we, therefore, to try to isolate and analyse the symbol as such, we should find ourselves in a position analogous to that of Pompey the Great when, after invading Jerusalem in 63 BC, he entered the innermost chamber of the Temple in Jerusalem—a chamber forbidden to all but the high priests—in the expectation of seeing the God of the Jews. What he found, of course, was an empty room.

To the extent that theory should call into question what has previously been taken for granted, a new theory of the Romantic symbol can advance upon its predecessors only by asking whether that object was not first constituted by the very act of describing it. This possibility has not been entertained even by theorists as incisive as Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man. Though unusual among their respective contemporaries in denouncing the Romantics, both were entirely typical in assuming (1) that the concept of the symbol was elaborated to account for an existing semiotic phenomenon, (2) that this phenomenon possesses an historically constant set of defining characteristics, and (3) that these characteristics would have been as recognizable to the Romantics as they are to us. In so far as the Romantics are understood to have maintained the essential identity of certain logically distinct categories—being and meaning, signifier and signified, art and nature, etc.—these assumptions limit the range of possible conclusions about their concept of the symbol to a pair of alternatives: it is either an accurate description of something that defies rational explanation, or a mystified description of something that can be comprehended rationally. According to the first, the object described is irrational; according to the second, the description itself is.

But that both alternatives bring the explanatory process to an end does not in itself compel us to choose between them. Since they are founded on the same premise, it might be possible to withhold a final judgement and instead continue the process on a different premise. That is, by hypothesizing two types of rationality, one

<sup>8</sup> Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst* (1802–3), §87, SW v. 555. On self-instantiation and allegory see A. D. Nuttall, *Two Concepts of Allegory: A Study of Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' and the Logic of Allegorical Expression* (London: Routledge, 1967), ch. 2, from which I take the phrase 'instantially viewed universal'.

of function in addition to one of content, we could conceivably identify circumstances in which it is rational precisely not to be rational. Thus the question to be answered would no longer be whether Romantic theorizing about the symbol was necessarily or gratuitously irrational—a question whose answer would in any event be little more than an expression of sympathy or antipathy to the Romantics—but whether its irrationality did not serve some purpose for which reason was inadequate. In other words, what intellectual and social purposes might the concept of the symbol have served the Romantics? An answer to this question could not presuppose that an object corresponding to that concept ever existed.

Once the existence of the symbol itself can no longer be assumed, then neither can the semiotic function of the concept. This does not mean that it did not have such a function (although I do not in fact believe it did), but simply that neither this nor any other function can be inferred automatically from the fact that in the course of the nineteenth century ‘the word “symbol” tends to supplant other denominations for figural language, including that of “allegory”’.<sup>9</sup> Thus the first problem that Romantic symbolist theory poses for its interpreter is not semiotic but historical. By substituting a diachronic, genealogical mode of interpretation for the synchronic, analytic mode that has dominated previous discussion of the subject, I seek to avoid assuming the conformity of my object of study to a single disciplinary perspective, whether the discipline be literary history, literary theory, philosophy, theology, the history of science, or anything else. Even if it were true that, as M. H. Abrams maintains of Coleridge, the term *symbol* was restricted in its application to objects in nature and sacred scripture, that restriction would still leave open the question of the concept’s role in its historical context.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Paul de Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, in C. S. Singleton (ed.), *Interpretation: Theory and Practice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 173–209, at 173. Although a German translation of the first part of this article appeared contemporaneously under the title ‘Allegorie und Symbol in der europäischen Frühromantik’ in Stefan Sonderegger (ed.), *Typologia litterarum* (Zürich: Atlantis, 1969), 403–25, its influence on German discussions of the subject has been, as far as I can tell, negligible.

<sup>10</sup> See Abrams, ‘Coleridge and the Romantic Vision of the World’, in *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: Norton, 1984), 192–224, at 221.

Now semiotics is interested in previous definitions of the symbol only to the extent that they can assist it in formulating its own definition. That is the basis on which de Man judged the Romantics obfuscatory and sought to restrict the application of the term *symbol* to tropes in which image and meaning are analogically related. Of course the difficulty and importance of such definition must not be underestimated, especially in the case of the symbol. When the contributors to André Lalande's philosophical dictionary undertook this task, the result was what Umberto Eco calls 'one of the most pathetic moments in the history of philosophical terminology': not only does the article 'Symbole' itself contain three mutually exclusive definitions, but the appended discussion among the contributors adds a further eight.<sup>11</sup> To be of any practical use, a definition must be applicable to a single semiotic phenomenon, but in many different cultural contexts. (Eco accordingly criticizes Tzvetan Todorov for trying to accommodate all the different medieval and modern definitions, thus rendering the symbolic indistinguishable from the semiotic in general.)<sup>12</sup> What Eco himself defines as the symbolic is supposed to be identifiable in Neoplatonic negative theology, Kabbalistic hermeneutics, German Romantic philosophy, French *symboliste* poetry, and deconstructive literary criticism: a mode of producing or interpreting a text so as to preserve its literal meaning while suggesting its possession of another, indeterminate meaning. Precisely because this meaning is indeterminate, the interpretive process required to identify it is, in theory, endless. One can never know if one has finally got the right meaning, or all of it.

From the perspective of semiotics all instances of the symbolic mode are systematically equivalent, so that it makes no difference whether the unlimited semiosis encouraged by the mode is directed towards discovering a transcendent truth or towards keeping professors busy for a hundred years, as Joyce is supposed to have averred was his goal in writing *Ulysses*. In either case interpretation is legitimated by what Eco calls a 'theology', even if it is 'the atheistic theology of unlimited

<sup>11</sup> Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 130–1. Eco is referring to Lalande's frequently reprinted *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (Paris: Alean, 1926).

<sup>12</sup> Eco, *Semiotics*, 137, referring to Todorov's *Théories du symbole* (Paris: Seuil, 1977) and *Symbolisme et interprétation* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

semiosis or of hermeneutics as deconstruction',<sup>13</sup> Indifference to the content of these legitimating theologies is the condition that enables semiotics to construct an abstract model of the symbolic mode, and thus to support its claim to explain human semiotic activity from a unified and coherent point of view; but it is also the condition that prevents semiotics from being an instrument of historical understanding. Existing concepts of the symbol can be used but not explained semiotically, for the theoretical object of a semiotic approach to the symbol is the symbol itself. Although de Man considered 'historical clarification' to be a prerequisite to the systematic study of figurative language, he in fact subordinated the interests of the former to those of the latter in his assessment of the Romantics: having posited his own definition of the symbol as demystified, he was bound to reject the Romantic definition as the opposite.

A subtler example of this subordination of interests occurs in Eco's presentation of the secular symbolic mode, with its 'atheistic theology of unlimited semiosis', as a *secularized* form of the religious, secularization consisting in the transplantation or migration of something essentially religious (or at least theological) from its original context to a secular context.<sup>14</sup> For Eco is confusing identities of systematic function with those of ideological content when he assumes that the legitimating strategies of the symbolic are all essentially theological. Confusion of this kind only contributes to the widespread misunderstanding, which I try to rectify in Chapter 4, of the Romantic (and particularly Coleridgean) concept of the symbol as a figment of Christian theology.

I may have contributed to that misunderstanding myself when I proposed some years ago that the Romantics developed the concept of the symbol to compensate for allegory's loss of numinousness at the hands of Enlightenment critics. (By numinousness I mean the ability to suggest the presence of hidden meaning.) That is, once

<sup>13</sup> Eco, *Semiotics*, 163. Joyce's remark to Jacques Benoît-Méchin, one of his French translators, is recorded in Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce*, 2nd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 521.

<sup>14</sup> Eco, *Semiotics*, 156–7.

allegory was conceived merely as a species of wit and a didactic instrument, it could no longer be regarded as the means by which the transcendent is revealed to humanity, and the symbol eventually emerged to take its place in performing this function.<sup>15</sup> The argument assumes exactly what I should now want to question, a functional continuity between allegory and the symbol. To be sure, however, the Romantics themselves encouraged this assumption by contrasting the two modes of representation as if one were simply an alternative to the other. And it is not difficult to pursue this line of reasoning to the conclusion that the Romantics developed their symbolist theory solely to mystify what in fact was allegorical practice, in which respect the theory constitutes ‘a veil thrown over a light one no longer wishes to perceive’—the light being, in de Man’s understanding, the inability of a sign to coincide with a meaning that is always anterior to it.<sup>16</sup> But as will become evident in a moment, the Romantics could not have suppressed that insight which de Man claimed to have recovered. Like the classical rhetoricians from whom they inherited the basic definition of allegory as a continuous metaphor or trope of sentences in which ‘one thing is related, and another understood’, Enlightenment critics postulated the *simultaneous* development of narrative and meaning.<sup>17</sup> If they emphasized the disjunction of literal narrative and figurative meaning in allegory, it was not because they considered the meaning irrecoverably anterior to the narrative but, on the contrary, because they wanted the literal to be subordinated as completely as possible to the figurative.

Allegory first began to be considered as a literary genre, rather than as a rhetorical figure, in Enlightenment aesthetics. With the notable exceptions of Robert Lowth, who referred to the typological interpretation of the Old Testament as ‘mystical allegory’, and Johann Gottfried Herder, who used the term *allegory* as a synonym for *natural symbol*, Enlightenment critics conceived allegory as a

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Halmi, ‘From Hierarchy to Opposition: Allegory and the Sublime’, *Comparative Literature*, 44 (1992), 337–60.

<sup>16</sup> De Man, ‘Rhetoric’, 191.

<sup>17</sup> The quotation is from John Hughes, *An Essay on Allegorical Poetry* (1715), in W. H. Durham (ed.), *Critical Essays of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1915), 86–104, at 88. This definition may be traced back to Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 8. 6. 44.



narrative that refers to a meaning outside itself, just as, according to Lockean psychology, the mind organizes within itself ideas derived from impressions of a world external to itself.<sup>18</sup> Because allegory communicates by what were invidiously designated ‘artificial signs’ (about which I shall say more in the next chapter), it risks confusing or deceiving the reader—that is, it risks inducing a condition analogous to madness—unless the narrative it presents to the eye is strictly and transparently separate from the meaning it presents to the intellect. Hence the widespread disapproval, among eighteenth-century critics, of Milton’s inclusion of the characters Sin and Death in the non-allegorical narrative of *Paradise Lost*, and the widespread confinement of allegory, among eighteenth-century poets, to didactic and satirical literature. ‘This of *Sin* and *Death* is very exquisite in its kind’, Joseph Addison judged, ‘if not considered as Part of such a Work’. Other critics, like Samuel Johnson, were less charitable.<sup>19</sup>

We when we encounter Coleridge’s well-known definition of allegory as ‘the employment of agents and images ... so as to convey, while we disguise, either moral qualities or conceptions of the mind that are not in themselves objects of the Senses’, we are apt to accept it unquestioningly because it (1) closely resembles the definitions offered by other critics of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and (2) posits an arbitrary and supposedly demystified relation between image and referent.<sup>20</sup> Yet precisely because Coleridge’s definition is so conventional, it must be recognized as the manifestation

<sup>18</sup> See Lowth’s *De sacra poesi Hebræorum*, lect. 11 (Oxford, 1753), 96–101; *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. G. Gregory (London, 1787), i. 235–49. On Herder see Bengt Algot Sørensen, *Symbol und Symbolismus in den ästhetischen Theorien des 18. Jahrhunderts und der deutschen Romantik* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963), ch. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Addison, *Spectator*, no. 357 (19 Apr. 1712), ed. D. F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), iii. 329–39, at 336; Johnson, ‘Milton’ (1779), in *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; with Critical Observations on Their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), i. 242–95, at 291 (and see Lonsdale’s commentary): ‘Milton’s allegory of Sin and Death [in *Paradise Lost*, 2. 648–889] is undoubtedly faulty. ... That Sin and Death should have shewn the way to hell, might have been allowed; but they cannot facilitate the passage by building a bridge, because the difficulty of Satan’s passage is described as real and sensible, and the bridge ought to be only figurative.’ For further examples of such criticism see Halmi, ‘From Hierarchy to Opposition’, 345 n. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Coleridge, *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, ii. 99–103, at 99 (notes for lecture of 3 Feb. 1818).

of a historically specific critical attitude, the effect of which was to increase the attractiveness of other modes of representation, or for that matter other conceptions of allegory itself. It was this definition from which Goethe and the painter Heinrich Meyer first distinguished the symbol, in jointly planned but separately written essays of 1797–8, each entitled ‘On the Subjects of Figurative Art’. Unlike Goethe, Meyer published his essay, in which, by distinguishing symbolic art as unifying expression and meaning, he implicitly advanced the symbol as a kind of non-discursive representation, such as the critic Karl Philipp Moritz had referred to recently in his essay ‘The Signature of the Beautiful’.<sup>21</sup> Goethe’s later, better-known distinctions between the symbol as intuitive and allegory as discursive (e.g. in *Maxims and Reflections*) followed chronologically and to a large extent conceptually the more theoretically significant elaborations by Schelling, Schelling’s disciple Friedrich Ast, the linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt, and the critic K. W. F. Solger. (The assimilability in many respects of Goethe’s reflections on the symbol to those of his younger contemporaries accounts for my departure in this book from the normal practice in *Germanistik* of respecting his own disinclination to be identified with the Romantics.) In England, probably influenced by a passing reference in A. W. Schlegel’s *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, Coleridge opposed symbol and allegory in terms similar to those used by the German Romantics.<sup>22</sup>

What was at issue in the Romantic discussion of the symbol was certainly not the adequacy, let alone intolerable clarity, of the Enlightenment conception of allegory. For otherwise the Romantics could scarcely have accepted as an objective description of allegory what their predecessors had laid down as rules for allegorical

<sup>21</sup> The essays of both Goethe and Meyer are anthologized in Sørensen’s *Allegorie und Symbol: Texte zur Theorie des dichterischen Bildes im 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt a.M.: Athenäum, 1972), and a translation of Goethe’s essay is appended to Adams’s *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic*, 395–7. For ‘Die Signatur des Schönen’ (1788), which does not itself use the term *Symbol*, see Moritz’s *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Poetik*, ed. Hans Joachim Schrimpf (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1962), 93–103.

<sup>22</sup> See Nicholas Halmi, ‘Coleridge’s Most Unfortunate Borrowing from A. W. Schlegel’, in Christoph Bode and Sebastian Domsch (eds.), *British and European Romanticisms* (Trier: WVT, 2007), 131–42. For a balanced discussion of Coleridge’s various statements concerning allegory, see John Gatta, ‘Coleridge and Allegory’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 38 (1977), 62–77.

writers to follow. I want to emphasize this point by juxtaposing the following two passages, chosen to illustrate the prevailing attitude rather than the personal influence of one writer upon another. The nineteenth-century passage is from Hegel: ‘The opposite of the riddle is ... allegory. Although it too seeks to make particular features of a general concept more capable of being perceived by means of related features of sensuously concrete objects ... it does so with exactly the opposite goal of achieving the utmost clarity, so that the external object [*Äußerlichkeit*] it uses must be of the greatest possible transparency to the meaning that is to appear in it.’<sup>23</sup> The eighteenth-century text is from the English poet and translator John Hughes: ‘That the Allegory be clear and intelligible, the Fable being design’d only to clothe and adorn the Moral, but not to hide it, should methinks resemble the Draperies we admire in some of the ancient Statues; in which the Folds are not too many, nor too thick, but so judiciously order’d, that the Shape and Beauty of the Limbs may be seen thro them.’<sup>24</sup>

Even the Romantic disparagement of allegory, though demanded by the logic of its opposition to the symbol, was by no means novel. Early in the eighteenth century Jean-Baptiste Dubos no sooner praised allegory’s didactic power than conceded its inevitable dullness.<sup>25</sup> Late in the century Hugh Blair, whose Edinburgh lectures on rhetoric were reprinted a dozen times and translated into four foreign languages by 1804, observed that ‘there are few species of composition in which it is more difficult to write so as to please and command attention, than in Allegories’.<sup>26</sup> These diminished expectations of allegory produced their own fulfilment—namely the general confinement of allegory to didactic works and political satires—and account for the hostile reception of the antiquarian Johann Joachim Winkelmann’s attempt to defend the necessity and aesthetic value of allegorical representation

<sup>23</sup> Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (1828), in *Werke*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), xiii. 511.

<sup>24</sup> Hughes, *Essay*, 100–1. For further examples of such rules see Halmi, ‘From Hierarchy to Opposition’, 345–6 and n. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la Poésie et sur la Peinture*, 6th edn. (Paris, 1755), i. 226–8: ‘Quant aux actions allégoriques ... on peut s’en servir avec succès dans les Fables & dans plusieurs autres ouvrages qui sont destinés pour instruire l’esprit en le divertissant. ... D’ailleurs il est impossible qu’une pièce, dont le sujet est une action allégorique, nous intéresse beaucoup.’

<sup>26</sup> Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2nd edn. (London, 1785), i. 399.

in the visual arts.<sup>27</sup> So although it is perfectly true that some of the Romantics used the concept of allegory as a foil for that of the symbol, as Benjamin insisted, they did not need to invent a concept for that purpose.<sup>28</sup> They had only to adopt the one that lay before them in eighteenth-century aesthetic treatises.

Important as the concept of the symbol itself was in Romantic thought, its opposition to allegory was in fact, contrary to the impression fostered by the preoccupation of twentieth-century critics with the subject, neither widely nor consistently maintained. That Goethe affirmed the opposition did not prevent him from being receptive to Winckelmann's ideas about allegory in ancient art; that Schelling and Coleridge did so did not prevent them from admiring allegorical writers, particularly Dante. A. W. Schlegel, as we have seen, labelled the gods of classical myth symbolic while interpreting them as if they were, by his own definition, allegorical—that is, personified abstractions with fixed meanings—and eventually, in the spirit of linguistic patriotism, he abandoned the two 'foreign' labels altogether for the single, authentically German word *Sinnbild*, which translates literally as 'sensuous image'. His brother Friedrich, whose patriotic inclinations found a less benign outlet, often used the terms *symbol* and *allegory* synonymously, as did Ludwig Tieck. Others distinguished them along the vertical rather than the horizontal axis of taxonomical classification, Arthur Schopenhauer treating the symbol as a species of allegory, Solger (according to the posthumously published transcript of his lectures on aesthetics) treating allegory as a species of symbol. In his dialogue *Erwin*, published in his lifetime, Solger followed Schelling, to the detriment of his conceptual clarity, in distinguishing symbol and allegory both generically *and* historically. (In the last chapter I shall consider this confusion of classificatory schemata in connection with Schelling's idea of a 'new mythology'.) For his part

<sup>27</sup> Winckelmann, *Versuch einer Allegorie* (Dresden, 1766). Cf. Carl Justi, *Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen*, 3rd edn. (Leipzig: Vogel, 1923), iii. 281–96.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, 337: 'Classicism [in the specifically German sense, here referring primarily to Goethe] develops simultaneously with the concept of the profane symbol its speculative counterpart, the concept of the allegorical. A genuine theory of allegory did not emerge at that time, nor had one existed previously. It is nonetheless legitimate to describe the new concept of allegory as speculative, for it was in fact chosen [*abgestimmt*] to be the dark background against which the world of the symbol would stand out brightly.'

Hegel retained only the historical distinction, identifying the art of ancient Egypt and India as symbolic: this lack of interest in the contemporary viability of the symbol is the reason for his almost complete absence from the present study. Since my purpose here is to demonstrate that the formation of the Romantic concept of the symbol was *not* crucially dependent on a corresponding denigration of allegory, I shall not prolong this survey but proceed to state the conclusions that may be drawn from it.<sup>29</sup>

First, the Romantics' hostility to allegory must not be exaggerated: what they objected to was not allegory in general, but allegory as defined and practised in the Enlightenment. Second, to the extent that they defined the symbol in opposition to allegory, they did so because allegory—in its restrictive Enlightenment conception—epitomized to them all that passed under the name of artificial signs: arbitrary, motivated, discursive, and contextually dependent representation. If the Middle Ages had possessed a *culture* of the sign, meaning a network of iconographic conventions and interpretive contexts whose ideological coherence was guaranteed by their reference to and assumed derivation from the divine Logos, then the Enlightenment possessed a *philosophy* of the sign, meaning the reductive analysis of culture in semiotic terms—and precisely in the absence of the ideological coherence that had characterized medieval culture.<sup>30</sup> Semiotics, like aesthetics a product of the Enlightenment, gave voice to the loss of certainty of which it was a consequence, the loss of certainty in a transcendental signified standing outside and ensuring the integrity of the order of signs. To redeem representation, for reasons that remain to be identified, from this corrosive scepticism about the conditions

<sup>29</sup> For those who are interested in the various permutations of the distinction between symbol and allegory, I recommend the surveys by Todorov, *Théories du symbole*, 235–59; Sørensen, 'Symbol und Allegorie', in Manfred Lurker (ed.), *Beiträge zu Symbol, Symbolbegriff und Symbolforschung* (Baden-Baden: Koerner, 1982), 171–80; Adams, *The Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic*, ch. 3; and esp. Michael Titzmann, 'Allegorie und Symbol im Denksystem der Goethezeit', in Walter Haug (ed.), *Formen und Funktionen der Allegorie* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1979), 642–65.

<sup>30</sup> I take the phrase 'culture of the sign' from Gordon Teskey, whose *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996) attributes the emergence of allegorical writing in the West to the semiotic assumptions of medieval culture.

of its possibility, the Romantics had to redefine those conditions, not epistemologically but—more fundamentally—ontologically.

When we consider more closely what the Romantics designated as symbols, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that they were seeking not to continue a philosophical aesthetics or semiotics by other means, but to transcend it altogether. According to Schelling, the category of the symbolic, as opposed to that of the schematic or the allegorical, embraces myth, organic nature, art, philosophy, sculpture, and drama.<sup>31</sup> What necessitates the inclusion of the last two items in this list is the use of one set of terms to classify concepts at different levels of generality, so that the class to which art as a whole is assigned is but one of three classes into which it can be subdivided. While sculpture and drama are included in the same class as their genus, other species of art are excluded from it: painting and epic poetry are classified as schematic, music and lyric poetry as allegorical (see Figure 1). In assuming the repeatability of a set of terms throughout his scheme, Schelling conflates two incommensurable relations, one quantitative and one qualitative: the species is conceived not only as *part* of its genus, but as *identical* to or *different* from it. In other words, the same relation that governs the horizontal development of the classificatory tree is now made to govern its vertical development as well. This absurdity is more readily appreciable in Figure 2, where Schelling's three categories—the symbolic, schematic, and allegorical—are reduced to the symbolic and non-symbolic.

To be sure, as Eco has shown, it is an inherent limitation of classificatory schemes like Schelling's, known as Porphyrian trees and consisting of hierarchical arrangements of genera and differentiae, the relation of which to one another is purely formal, that a set of differentiae can appear repeatedly under different genera.<sup>32</sup> The hierarchical order of the Porphyrian tree is strictly illusory because, its differentiae

<sup>31</sup> Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, §39, SW v. 410–11. For a less involved summary of Schelling's scheme, see James Engell, *Forming the Critical Mind: Dryden to Coleridge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 95–6. Titzmann, 'Allegorie und Symbol', 647–8, demonstrates (with corresponding tables) that the same kind of recursive logic, or rather illogic, underlies Solger's taxonomy of the symbol.

<sup>32</sup> Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, ch. 2. I shall return to this point at the beginning of the next chapter, in connection with the *Encyclopédie*.

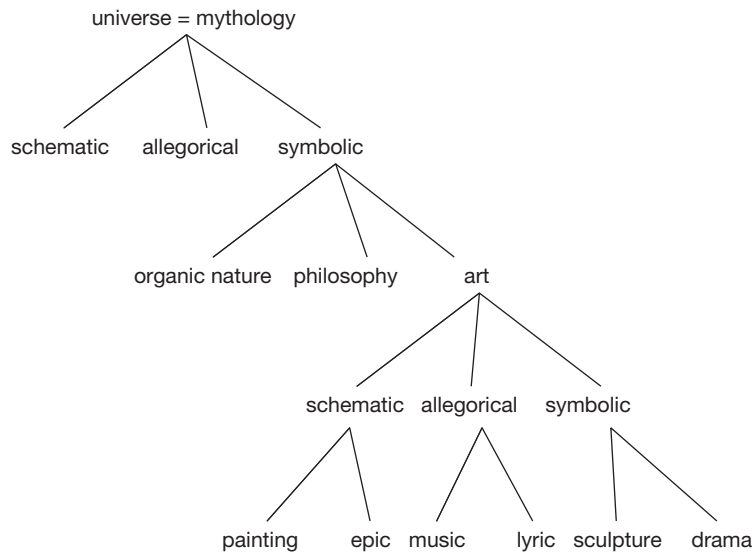


Figure 1.

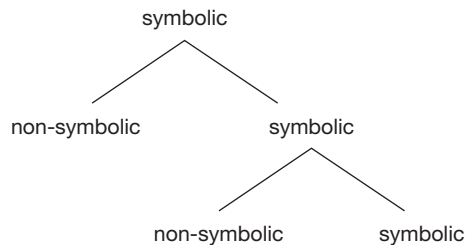


Figure 2.

being uncontainable, there is no guarantee of the tree's finiteness. But normally this limitation becomes evident only from a comparison of differing classifications of the same object, a fact that enables us to accept the validity of any given classificatory scheme considered in isolation. By undermining the logical integrity of his scheme on his own, Schelling thus renders obviously nugatory its value as a contribution to the systematic study of figurative language or of anything else; but he also prompts us to ask whether it was ever intended

to be such a contribution. Just here de Man failed to recognize the implication of his own insistence that the symbol can no longer 'be considered a "solution" to the problem of metaphorical diction'.<sup>33</sup>

To the extent that Schelling's faulty logic—which applies to his historical as well as to his systematic schemata—is typical of Romantic treatments of the symbol, it may be understood as the basis of an attempt to use a classificatory model to demonstrate the irrelevance of aesthetic classifications to the symbol. In order to comprehend this paradox, we must first recognize how radically the Romantic concept of the symbol differs from that with which it might seem to have most in common, the pseudo-Dionysian concept of the 'incongruous symbol' which reveals the divine in the form of the profane, the celestial in the form of the terrestrial: 'divina et caelestia ... per dissimilia symbola manifestantur'.<sup>34</sup> The Romantic departure from the apophatic tradition may be divided, logically if not historically, into two stages. In the first, representation is grounded in participation; in the second, participation is equated with identity. Whereas the pseudo-Dionysius and his successors had defined the relation between the image and its referent as one of *dissimilarity*, the Romantics defined it as one of *partialness*: 'by a symbol', said Coleridge, 'I mean, not a metaphor or allegory or any other figure of speech, but an actual and essential part of that, the whole of which it represents'.<sup>35</sup>

From this one might conclude that the Romantic theory was a modern variant of the Gnostic, as opposed to Neoplatonic, doctrine of

<sup>33</sup> De Man, 'Rhetoric', 176.

<sup>34</sup> I quote from Joannes Scotus Eriugena's translation of the second chapter of the pseudo-Dionysian *De caelesti hierarchia*, in Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1844–64), cxxii. 1039c; the Greek original is available in *La Hiérarchie céleste*, 2. 3. 141a, ed. Günter Heil and Maurice de Gandillac (Paris: Cerf, 1958), 79. On the concept of the *anomoion symbolon*—to which I return in Chapter 4—and its transmission to the Middle Ages in Eriugena's translation, see Jean Pépin, 'La Théorie du symbolisme dans la tradition dionysienne', in *La Tradition de l'allégorie de Philon d'Alexandrie à Dante* (Paris: Études augustinienes, 1987), 199–221. In 1215 the fourth Lateran Council decreed that the similarity between the Creator and his creatures could not be greater than their dissimilarity: 'inter creatorem et creaturam non potest similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notando' (Heinrich Denzinger and Adolf Schönmetzer (eds.), *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 36th edn. (Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 1975), 262).

<sup>35</sup> Coleridge, *Lay Sermons* (1816–17), ed. R. J. White (Princeton: Princeton University, 1972), 79.



emanation (*aporroia*), according to which the divine essence is present but quantitatively diminished in whatever emanates from it.<sup>36</sup> But such a conclusion would be premature. Gnosticism's emanationism was a consequence of its radical dualism, which had presented the problem of explaining how man could be saved by a God who had not even created him. Romanticism's symbolist theory, in contrast, was a consequence of its desire precisely to overcome dualism, as will be discussed in the second and third chapters of this book. By means of the conflation we observed already in Schelling's classificatory scheme, the Romantics could maintain that being a *part* of what it represents makes the symbol *identical* to that whole: 'Meaning here is simultaneously being itself, passed over into the object and one with it.'<sup>37</sup> This is what Coleridge meant when he called the symbol 'tautegorical'—expressing the same thing as itself—a neologism that Schelling later adopted enthusiastically in his lectures on mythology (with an acknowledgement that made light of the English writer's plagiarisms from him).<sup>38</sup>

When Hans-Georg Gadamer proposed that symbols must be humanly instituted (*gestiftet*) because their significance does not derive from their ontological content, he reversed the Romantic view that their significance not only derives from but is actually equivalent to that content. That he did so in order to clarify the ontological distinctiveness of the symbol also suggests what the Romantics sought

<sup>36</sup> Heinrich Dörrie, 'Emanation: Ein unphilosophisches Wort im spätantiken Denken', in Kurt Flasch (ed.), *Parusia: Festgabe für Johannes Hirschberger* (Frankfurt a.M.: Minerva, 1965), 129–41.

<sup>37</sup> Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, §39, SW v. 411. Although Schelling's lectures on the philosophy of art were not published till 1856, they were attended in 1802–3 by Henry Crabb Robinson, whose detailed notes Coleridge may (or may not) have seen: see Ernst Behler, 'Schellings Ästhetik in der Überlieferung von Henry Crabb Robinson', *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, 83 (1976), 133–83, esp. 148–51.

<sup>38</sup> Coleridge, 'On the *Prometheus* of Aeschylus' (1825), in *Shorter Works and Fragments*, ed. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), ii. 1251–301, at 1267–8; Schelling, *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie* (1842–8), lect. 8, SW xi. 175–98, at 195–6 and n. (See Nicholas Halmi, 'Greek Myths, Christian Mysteries, and the Tautegorical Symbol', *Wordsworth Circle*, 36 (2005), 6–8.) A more accessible definition appears in Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 206: 'tautegorical (i.e. expressing the *same* subject but with a *difference*) in contra-distinction from metaphors and similitudes, that are always *allegorical* (i.e. expressing a *different* subject but with a resemblance).'

by denying it an instituted character: to extend the symbol's domain from aesthetics to the whole of reality. Gadamer has justly remarked that for Goethe 'the opposition between symbol and allegory in art theory is only a special instance of the general tendency towards significance [*das Bedeutende*] which he seeks in all phenomena', and the wider applicability of this remark is confirmed by Schelling's classification of organic nature (along with art) as symbolic.<sup>39</sup> More important than the differentiation of the symbolic from the allegorical or the schematic, then, was the definition of it in terms that made such differentiation irrelevant, as in Goethe's declaration that 'everything that happens is a symbol, and by fully representing itself refers to everything else', or as in Coleridge's proclamation that 'all that meets the bodily sense I deem | Symbolical', or yet as in Novalis's notes for his abortive encyclopedia project: 'Symbolism of the *human body*—of the animal world—of the plant world—(Everything can be a symbol of something else—symbolic function.)—*of nature*—of minerals—of atmospheric elements—of meteors—of stars—of sensations—thoughts—of souls—of history—of mathematics.'<sup>40</sup>

Such statements, which by universalizing the application of the term *symbol* deprive of it any specificity, are meaningless from the perspective of semiotics, according to which (as Eco reminds us) '*not everything can be a symbol*'.<sup>41</sup> But they are very meaningful from the perspective of intellectual history, in so far as that discipline seeks to identify the social functions of concepts in the contexts of their historical formation. The Romantics' claim that the symbol, defined as inherently and inexhaustibly meaningful, existed equally and equivalently in diverse ontological and temporal realms—art and nature, antiquity and modernity—indicates that the principal concern of their symbolist theory was not in identifying, still less in

<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, in *Gesammelte Werke* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986–95), i. 82, 158–60.

<sup>40</sup> Goethe to K. E. Schubarth, 27 Apr. 1818, *GA* xxi. 286; Coleridge, 'The Destiny of Nations' (1817 version), ll. 18–19, in *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), i. 279–99, at 282; Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon* (1798–9), in *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe*, ed. Richard Samuel and Hans-Joachim Mähl (Munich: Hanser, 1978–82), ii. 637.

<sup>41</sup> Eco, *Semiotics*, 157 (emphasis in original).

interpreting, actual symbols, but instead in establishing an ideal of meaningfulness itself. Once it was determined that symbols did not have to be instituted—that is, they did not have to be recognized as symbols in order to function as such, or at least be declared to do so—then the concept of the symbol could be used as the theoretical justification of a disposition to discover meaning precisely where it was not intuitively evident: man, says Thomas Carlyle’s Professor Teufelsdröckh, ‘every where finds himself encompassed with Symbols, recognised as such or not recognised’.<sup>42</sup> Naturalizing the symbol as a mode of representation in which being and meaning were one and the same was the prerequisite to making nature symbolic.

Theory is a reaction against self-evidence. If the world had been self-evidently meaningful to the Romantics, in the sense of being interpretively assimilable into a comprehensive and coherent structure of meaning whose relevance to humanity was beyond question, they would not have needed to claim that, on account of the identity of being and meaning, it cannot be anything but meaningful. The very ingeniousness of the demonstration, which as we shall see in Chapter 3 relied for its philosophical underpinning on Enlightenment organicism and Spinozan monism, betrays its function as a theoretical wish-fulfilment. Because any symbol must be recognized as one before it can be interpreted, Romantic symbolist theory had to be institutive rather than interpretive: it was itself the act of institution, or what Eco would call the act of textual production, that it denied its object. It is indicative of Goethe’s affinity with the Romantics in this respect that a lyric from his *Sturm-und-Drang* period anticipated their characteristic view of nature as a collection of not-yet-interpreted symbols. In the ‘Send-schreiben’ of 1774, nature is described as a living book whose meaning is not understood, yet not impossible to understand: ‘Sieh, so ist Natur ein Buch lebendig, | Unverstanden, doch nicht unverständlich.’

What was peculiar to the age of Goethe was certainly not its assumption of nature’s meaningfulness to humanity, but rather its

<sup>42</sup> Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1833–4), 3. 3, ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 166; cf. 168: ‘It is in and through *Symbols* that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works, and has his being ...’.

inability to secure any actual meaning from a purportedly infinite store of potential meaning. One way in which this peculiarity manifested itself was the emphasis on the mysteriousness of the language in which the book of nature was written. It was one thing to know *that* ‘everything we experience is a communication’, and something else entirely to know *what* was being communicated: ‘The world’s meaning has been lost,’ lamented Novalis. ‘We are left only with the letters.’<sup>43</sup> The obvious model for such a language was hieroglyphics, not only because its characters had yet to be deciphered at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but also because they had long been thought to have, on account of their pictorial quality, an inherent relation to the natural order of things.<sup>44</sup> Thus Coleridge, who sought to convince the English middle classes that ‘True natural philosophy is comprized in the study of the science and language of *symbols*’, observed that ‘the vegetable creation’ in its internal structure symbolizes the unity of nature and in its external variety ‘inchases the vast unfolded volume of the earth with the hieroglyphics of her history’.<sup>45</sup> Novalis’s reference to nature’s hieroglyphics was more laconic: ‘Once everything was a spiritual phenomenon [*Geisteserscheinung*]. Now we see nothing but dead repetition [*todte Wiederholung*], which we

<sup>43</sup> Novalis, [*Vorarbeiten zu verschiedenen Fragmentensammlungen*] (1798), fr. 316, *Werke*, ii. 383: ‘Alles, was wir erfahren, ist eine *Mittheilung*. So ist die Welt in der That eine *Mittheilung*—Offenbarung des Geistes. Die Zeit ist nicht mehr, wo der Geist Gottes verständlich war. Der Sinn der Welt ist verlohren gegangen. Wir sind beym Buchstaben stehn geblieben.’

<sup>44</sup> See Lieselotte Dieckmann, *Hieroglyphics: The History of a Literary Symbol* (St Louis, MO.: Washington University Press, 1970); Don Cameron Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), ch. 5; Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, trans. James Fentress (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 154–8, 162–8; and Thomas Singer, ‘Hieroglyphs, Real Characters, and the Idea of Natural Language in English Seventeenth-century Thought’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 50 (1989), 49–60. Even eighteenth-century thinkers like Vico and William Warburton, who ascribed no arcane significance to hieroglyphs, assumed their primitiveness on the grounds that pictures must have preceded alphabetic characters in the development of language. (On the other hand, Diderot referred in the *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets* (1751) to all motivated signs in poetry, painting, and music as hieroglyphs, while Moritz used the term as a synonym for *allegory*: see Todorov, *Théories du symbole*, 166; and Sørensen, *Symbol und Symbolismus*, 83–4, as well as Ch. 5 below at n. 43.) Only in 1822 did Jean-François Champollion first succeed in deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs.

<sup>45</sup> Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, 79, 73.

don't understand. The meaning of the hieroglyphics is missing.<sup>46</sup> This insistence on nature's illegibility is all the more remarkable in following, by almost two centuries, Galileo's categorical assertion of the opposite.

That Galileo and the Romantics used the same metaphor to express their respective conceptions of nature attests to the continuity of its *use*, but not to that of its *content*: the two books were written in different languages. In his contribution to the controversy over the comets of 1618, Galileo maintained that although philosophy is to be found in that 'vast book which stands continuously open before our eyes'—namely the universe—'it cannot be understood until one learns the language and recognizes the characters in which it is written'. The obstacle to doing so was the belief, which Galileo detected in his opponents, that philosophical truth is founded on tradition rather than reason. Since it was inconceivable that the most rational of beings had failed to create the universe according to the most rational of principles, which could only be mathematical, that so-called book must have been written in the language of mathematics, whose characters are 'triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures'. Only if we fail to recognize that language do our attempts to understand nature lead us into a 'dark labyrinth'.<sup>47</sup> Mathematizing natural science would therefore secure for human reason the assurance that Galileo's telescopic discoveries had decisively denied to the senses: assurance of the world's complete accessibility. That the cosmos had long withheld some of its objects from our unaided view, and doubtless continued to withhold others, would become a matter of indifference when its fundamental principles were comprehended in their necessity and immutability.

Obviously, then, nature's comprehensibility to Galileo was different in kind from its incomprehensibility to the Romantics, and the protestations of the latter condition evince a discontent with the

<sup>46</sup> Novalis, *Vorarbeiten*, fr. 104, *Werke*, ii. 334.

<sup>47</sup> Galilei, *Il saggiaiore* (1623), §6, in *Opere*, ed. Franz Brunetti, 3rd edn. (1996; Turin: UTET, 1999), i. 631–2: 'La filosofia è scritta in questo grandissimo libro che continuamente ci sta aperto innanzi a gli occhi (io dico l'universo), ma non si può interderne se prima non s'impara a intender la lingua, e conoscer i caratteri, ne' quali è scritto. Egli è scritto in lingua matematica, e i caratteri son triangoli, cerchi, ed altre figure geometriche, senza i quali mezzi ... è un aggirarsi vanamente per un oscuro laberinto.'

former, which entailed, as I shall elaborate in the next chapter, the disenchantment of the world. Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* proceeded from the proposition that although the natural sciences (by which he meant mathematics, physics, and chemistry) teach us how to *read* nature, only philosophy teaches us how to *interpret* what we have read.<sup>48</sup> Detaching that proposition from its immediate context, we can redefine the difference between the two activities as follows: 'reading' posits the indifference of its objects to their observer, 'interpretation' their significance.

I use the term *significance* in a specific sense derived from Wilhelm Dilthey, in whose universalization of hermeneutics it pertained to the categories through which life is comprehended in its coherence. Because 'these categories are not applied a priori to life as something external to it, but reside in the essence of life itself', Dilthey taught, they are fundamentally different from the categories through which a knowledge of nature (*Naturerkennen*) is achieved.<sup>49</sup> The structural continuity of life manifests itself in the significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*) of individual experiences, and the relation between these parts and the whole of life constitutes the comprehensive category of meaning (*Bedeutung*). Following from Dilthey and Heidegger, who identified significance with the world's 'worldhood' (*Weltlichkeit*), the philosophical anthropologist Erich Rothacker articulated a principle according to which 'the relation of significance is what first *constitutes* a comprehensible perceivable *world*'. Without this relation, 'perceptions are neutral and soulless'.<sup>50</sup>

The understanding of life satisfies what the knowledge of nature leaves unsatisfied, for it emerges not from an intersubjective, trans-historical process to which the individual's limited lifespan denies

<sup>48</sup> Schelling, *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* (1797), SW ii. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Dilthey, *Plan der Fortsetzung zum Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1914– ), vii. 232–41. The categories of *Naturerkennen* are the twelve that Kant, in the transcendental analytic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B106), organized under the classes of quantity, quality, relation, and modality.

<sup>50</sup> Rothacker, *Zur Genealogie des menschlichen Bewusstseins*, ed. Wilhelm Perpeet (Bonn: Bouvier, 1966), 46: 'Ohne Bedeutsamkeitsbezug sind auch Anschauungen neutral und seelenlos. Erst der Bedeutsamkeitsbezug *konstituiert* eine verständliche anschauliche Welt.' Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §18 (1927; Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986), 83–9, at 87–8.

him or her more than partial access, but instead from the individual's own experience. And significance is the quality that makes this understanding possible: 'Only in a "world" constituted by relations of significance [*Bedeutsamkeitsbezüge*] can empty insights into things [*leere Sacheinsichten*] again become serviceable to life.'<sup>51</sup> In other words, Wordsworth's to be exact, significance is what lightens 'the heavy and the weary weight | Of all this unintelligible world'.<sup>52</sup> But while significance is, as Rothacker pointed out, 'always related to a subject to whom something appears significant', it for this very reason cannot be subjectively imparted to something: 'As a contrived valence [*ausgedachte Wertigkeit*], significance would have to break down.'<sup>53</sup> This means not that significance cannot in fact *be* purely subjective, but that to the subject in question it must not *seem* so. The force of its apparent objectivity is what renders significance impervious to the aspersions that rationality may cast upon it: knowing perfectly well, for instance, that the mass-produced and randomly distributed messages in fortune cookies can have no inherent relevance to my life has never prevented me from reading those messages as if they had exactly such relevance. Whatever its content, the message is always imprinted with significance.

Perhaps I can strengthen this important point about the nature of significance by referring to a Romantic poet who, like Wordsworth, did not address the concept of the symbol as such in his critical writings. In a remarkable reversal of the position of the modern mechanical philosophy, Percy Bysshe Shelley accused the world of theoretical objects of having exactly the kind of deceptiveness that theory accuses the world of sensory experience of having: the deceptiveness of self-evidence. When philosophy renounces the goal of systematic coherence for that of genuine insight, it will discover beneath 'the solid universe of external things' something wondrous and more useful for human self-comprehension: 'such stuff as dreams are made of'.<sup>54</sup> Shelley's emphasis here was not on imagination's power to transform

<sup>51</sup> Rothacker, *Genealogie*, 46.

<sup>52</sup> Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' (1798), ll. 40–1.

<sup>53</sup> Rothacker, *Genealogie*, 348; Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (1979; Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), 77.

<sup>54</sup> 'On Life' (1819), in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd edn. (New York: Norton, 2001), 505–9, at 506.

a world indifferent to human needs, but on the superficiality of that world in relation to the invisible but *already existing* one that, were it only fully recognized, would succeed in meeting those needs.

If the concept of a significant, as opposed to an indifferent, world had to await the development of an historicist philosophy of life for its theoretical elaboration, it had already found inchoate expression in Romanticism. Roughly two decades before Shelley adumbrated his own philosophy of life, another poet who was not to live beyond his twenty-ninth year had insisted that ‘stones, trees, animals must speak in order for man to feel himself, to recollect himself’.<sup>55</sup> The role of philosophy and art alike in this context, and more particularly of the so-called ‘new mythology’ which I discuss in the final chapter, was to decipher nature’s hieroglyphs so that humanity might find itself more truly and *less* strange. But that role was more easily defined than performed.

To summarize the argument: the theorization of the symbol in the Romantic period may be understood as an attempt, however illogical and methodologically dubious in itself, to foster a sense of the harmony of the human mind with nature, of the unity of seemingly disparate intellectual disciplines, and of the compatibility of individual freedom with a cohesive social structure—all for the sake of reducing anxiety about the place of the individual in bourgeois society (especially in the aftermath of the French Revolution and ensuing European wars) and about the increasing dominance of mechanistic science (which, by opposing mind to nature as subject to object, undermined the traditional basis on which the world’s meaningfulness had been assumed). To the extent that it sought to effect a re-enchantment of the world by reforming perception, the symbolist theory of the philosophically minded Romantics, for the most part Germans, was closely related to the poetic project of English poets like Wordsworth and Shelley, who sought to reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary and thereby transform human understanding of the external world. Wordsworth’s true affinity with the theorists of the symbol, including his collaborator on the *Lyrical Ballads*, lay not in his notion that tautologies and repeated words can act on the mind ‘as *things*, active

<sup>55</sup> Novalis, *Vorarbeiten*, fr. 214, *Werke*, ii. 360.



and efficient, which are themselves part of the passion', but in his view of the intellectual and moral purpose of poetry.<sup>56</sup> The theorists and the poets are complementary by virtue of responding to the same needs and discontents.<sup>57</sup>

What present-day critics recognize as the self-mystified and self-contradictory characteristics of Romantic symbolist theory—its differentiation of symbol from allegory, its refusal to distinguish between image and meaning, its conflation of the relations of part and whole and of identity and difference, its denial of the possibility of interpreting the symbol—follow from particular burdens that the Romantic theorists inherited from the Enlightenment: confronted with the challenge of claiming the naturalness of a symbolism whose very existence was not intuitively obvious, they resorted, by the conceptual means examined in Chapter 3, to a reciprocally affirming metaphysics of participation and semiotics of identity. That is, the symbol was supposed to be identical to, by virtue of being part of, its referent, and vice versa. The corollary of this line of argument was that anything whatever was inherently capable of bearing meaning, and that any seemingly atomized individual was in fact an integral part of an harmoniously structured whole. 'In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering thro' the dewy window', confided Coleridge to his notebook in Malta in April 1805,

I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing any thing new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phænomenon were the dim Awakening of a forgotten or hidden Truth of my inner Nature/It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! It is Λογος, the Creator! <and the Evolver!><sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Wordsworth, Note to 'The Thorn' (1800), in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797–1805*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 351; and cf. 'Essays upon Epitaphs' (1810), no. 3, in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), ii. 80–96, at 84.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Christoph Bode, 'Europe', in Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 126–36, at 135: 'even the apparent contradictions and seeming incompatibilities within European Romanticism have common roots in that they form responses to the same set of cultural challenges'.

<sup>58</sup> Coleridge, *Notebooks*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge, 1957–2002), ii. 2546. The pointed brackets indicate a later insertion by Coleridge.

Since evidence of symbols so defined was predictably unforthcoming, some Romantics eventually sought it in classical antiquity (particularly Greek myth) and others in dreams, both of which had the advantage of being traditionally receptive to fanciful interpretations. (This is the subject of the last chapter.) But at that point the unanimity of purpose that had characterized early Romantic theorizing about the symbol ceased.

In general, the present study is concerned less with categorizing and differentiating the various manifestations of symbolist theory in the Romantic period (a task that has already been performed admirably by Sørensen) than with asking what lay beneath the phenomena under analysis. What cultural questions or needs motivated the formulation of symbolist theory, and what cultural conditions (philosophical, scientific, political) affected the forms that that theory assumed? If the concept of the symbol performed a kind of compensatory function, much as the celebration of the imagination by Romantic poets is supposed to have compensated for their disillusionment with the course of the French Revolution and the despair at the possibility of meaningful social reform, then to what extent was it successful?

To answer these questions, as noted earlier, I replace a synchronic archaeological mode of analysis with a diachronic genealogical mode. While an archaeology exposes complexities within the texts of a given discourse, a genealogy recovers the origin and development of the discourse itself and makes its social function comprehensible. By genealogy, therefore, I do not mean the specific origins of any one writer's reflections on the nature of the symbol. *Quellenforschung* has its uses, but its explanatory power is strictly limited by the fact that it always produces further material in need of explanation.

If, as I have here proposed, the concept of the symbol is to be understood as the attempted solution to a given problem, then it can scarcely be examined in isolation from that problem. Recognizing what preceded and conditioned the development of the concept is the prerequisite to understanding the concept itself. What made that concept attractive and what made it possible are the twin subjects of this study.