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Jeffrey Einboden
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The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol
(Oxford University Press, 2007)
by Nicholas Halmi

THIS brief, densely-written monograph seeks to shift our critical approach to the Romantic symbol, endorsing a “genealogical” rather than “analytic” mode of interpretation. Although indebted to foregoing criticisms of Romanticism offered by Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, Nicholas Halmi opens this ambitious study by rejecting his predecessors’ continued treatment of the symbol as a stable, semiotic phenomenon. According to Halmi, the synecdochical, self-referential symbol espoused by Goethe, Schelling and Coleridge—the symbol which “fully represents within itself the whole of which it is a part”—is comprehensible only in terms of its historical purpose and production, not in terms of its purported meaning.

Halmi’s study is thus wholly unconcerned with identifying and interpreting specific Romantic symbols (the futility of which he vividly likens to Pompey’s discovery of the emptiness within the Temple sanctuary); nor is it interested in juxtaposing symbol with allegory (Halmi denies a “functional continuity” between these traditional contraries). Instead, the book is devoted to questioning the intellectual, cultural and political circumstances which gave rise to the Romantic symbol—an approach which prompts Halmi first to consider the Enlightenment’s role in shaping the concerns and anxieties of Romanticism. His second chapter is an elegant treatment of these inherited “burdens”, recruiting an impressive range of disciplinary perspectives to expound the dualisms inherent within Kantian critique and Enlightenment semiotics (subject/object; aesthetics/natural philosophy; intuitive/discursive)—dualisms which, Halmi argues, the Romantics will strive to overcome, developing the symbol as a means of resolving these antitheses.

The remainder of the book addresses Romantic symbolist theory within a tripartite structure, chapters three through five arranged according to discipline: philosophy, theology and mythology. Halmi devotes the first of these respective chapters to what he understands to be the intellectual context for the Romantic symbol—*Naturphilosophie*—depicting this movement as aligning Spinozist monism and organic vitalism, providing the Romantics a means of escaping the dualistic, mechanistic universe advanced by the Enlightenment. Prefacing discussion of Halmi’s primary *Naturphilosophen* (Goethe and Schelling), this chapter interweaves a remarkable array of precursors to the Romantic symbol, including Herder’s natural sign, Moritz’s aesthetics and Bovillus’s analogy of macrocosm-microcosm.

It is chapter four which offers the book’s principal treatment of Coleridge, critiquing previous efforts to align his symbolist theory with Christian theology. Although Coleridge himself characterizes the symbol as “consubstantial”, Halmi rejects both J. Robert Barth’s appeal to Christian doctrine and M. H.

Abrams's secularization theory as appropriate means of approaching this concept; instead, Halmi contends the Coleridgean symbol to be wholly antithetic to the primary tenets of Christian orthodoxy—the Trinity and the Incarnation. In relating signifier to signified (nature to God) in terms of synecdoche (part to whole), the “tautegorical” symbol proposed by Coleridge represents not an extension of Christian theology, but rather its very contradiction, a trope which excludes the historical singularity of the Incarnation, replacing “the Son” with “the universe” (121). Although Coleridge himself fails to acknowledge contradictions between his symbology and theology, Halmi suggests these contradictions are nevertheless evident in his inconsistent characterization of the Eucharist. Despite affirming the symbolic quality of the sacrament, Coleridge also denies that it is consubstantial—a denial which allows him to avoid deifying the Eucharistic elements, but which also gives rise to two, mutually exclusive definitions of the symbol: one tautegorical, the other, sacramental.

Halmi concludes his study by offering a fresh appraisal of myth and symbol in the age of Goethe, reassessing the intriguing, ineffectual call for a “new mythology” voiced by the German Romantics. Chapter five convincingly sketches the background to this movement, charting its evolution from Bacon's myth interpretation, through Vico's mythology, to Herder's “idea of mythology”—this latter development anticipating Schelling's ideal of a mythology which is both modern and socially constructive. Consistent with his genealogical approach, Halmi again contextualizes Romanticism in terms of Enlightenment dualisms, seeing the renewed interest in myth as an aesthetic attempt to reconcile morality and sensibility. The first articulations of this “new mythology” are traced to the so-called “Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism”, a 1796/7 document of disputed authorship, translated by Halmi and included as an appendix to his study. Identifying the fatal contradictions and circular logic of Romantic myth, the book concludes with a compelling treatment of Friedrich Creuzer, as well as some enticing intimations of the Romantic legacy down to Freud.

The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol is punctuated throughout with acute reflections on critical method, juxtaposing its historiography with the mere “historical substantialism” identified as the basis of previous scholarship in the field. Stressing the importance of intellectual context and change, Halmi devotes less attention to a few topics and texts which some readers may expect to find prominently featured here (topics such as the Imagination, for example, or texts such as Coleridge's “On the Prometheus of Aeschylus”). The study is remarkably successful, however, in broadening the historical and disciplinary parameters of its primary subject, locating the Romantic symbol within an expansive history of ideas. Demonstrating an extraordinary facility with a range of European traditions (philosophic, cultural, artistic), Halmi is particularly innovative in paralleling the natural sciences with the humanities, identifying valuable correspondences between scientific discovery and the

development of semantics and symbol theory. Despite the complexity of its content, the book is never obscure in its approach, critiquing the most intricate topics with precision and clarity. The structure of Halmi's argument is particularly effective in this regard, arranging its discussion of Romanticism not only according to discipline but also in a broadly chronological manner, supplying a genealogy of the relevant antecedents to the Romantic symbol while also indexing changes within Romanticism itself, narrating the subtle shifts within intellectual currents and climates between 1770 and 1830. Exceptionally learned, forcefully argued, and original in its research and method, Halmi's book represents not only a substantial contribution to the study of the Romantic symbol, but also a potent challenge to the norms and conventions of this field of scholarship.