

Owen Ware, *Return of the Gods: Mythology in Romantic Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. 280. £25.99. ISBN 9780197763964.

Middlemarch readers will tell you that a key to all mythologies is no light undertaking. Yet Ware sets out, in an ambitious book, to explain how Romantic authors proposed that new mythologies would resolve the crisis of the fragmented self. A humanity alienated from its world would lead Schiller to cry (as Sally Rooney fans know), ‘Beautiful world, where are you?’ Romantic primitivists envied humanity’s lost sense of wholeness, but Romantics knew that the progress of the Enlightenment should not be set aside to embrace naivety. The old mythologies would not serve a humanity that had been altered irreversibly by monotheism, science, and philosophy. Hence, Ware writes, ‘the romantics were working towards a hybrid theory of mythology, rewriting narratives of the self’s journey to wholeness, such that the “truths” of mythology become explicit at higher levels of self-knowledge and self-understanding’ (41). This hybridity is a Romantic attempt to reconcile primitivism—in which the ancients devised myths that articulated their interpretation of existence—with the later Platonism, which recognises such myths as projections of the mind rather than incontrovertible truths. Platonism is the dominant influence, as understood in Ware’s examination of canonical Romantics.

Ware sets out the crisis of an alienated generation and the apparent solution lucidly and provides helpful definitions of his terms at the outset. ‘Mythology’, to Ware, encompasses not solely narrative that offers supernatural explanations for natural phenomena, or otherwise encodes aspects of our understanding of existence in stories, but also includes symbol in a general sense. For that reason, this book posits Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ and Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’ as myth-making texts alongside more obvious candidates that rework Graeco-Roman material, as in Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*. The commonality is that these works aspire to recover wholeness, with Unity of Being envisioned as the purpose of myth.

In showing us that, among key British and German Romantics, the project of a new mythology was a central preoccupation in response to the problem of self-estrangement, Ware establishes that works by Blake, Friedrich Schlegel, and Percy Bysshe Shelley seek to negotiate instances of contrariety in order to reunite the fragmented self. Accordingly, Ware demonstrates that conflict is key to Romantic mythology, although so too is sex, as in the racy turns of Schlegel’s *Lucinde*. Irony functions as a metanarrative tool by which the reader reflects on the task of myth-making. The ascending spiral emerges as a *leitmotif* of Ware’s study, as poetic figures undertake ostensibly circular journeys in which they achieve elevated perspectives on their origins. This journey occurs in various senses in Romanticism: as phantasmagoria in Novalis’s fiction, the creation of new archetypes in Blake’s work, Coleridge’s identification of symbols, and the adaptation of Greek myth in texts by Hölderlin and Keats. Restorative myth is a goal towards which Romantics strive without always reaching it; the difficulties are such as Shelley foregrounds in *Prometheus Unbound*, of which Ware writes that the inscrutable character of Demogorgon represents the ‘ineffable One at the basis of reality’ (180).

Inevitably, the surveying approach of Ware’s book takes in some literary realms which he seems to know more intimately than others. In asserting a concern with new mythology to be common among diverse writers, he displays a keener interest in German prose than in Anglophone poetry and its critical tradition. *BARS Review* readers might wonder whether a study of Keats’s *Lamia*, or *The Fall of Hyperion*—which reflects on the replacement of old myth with new—might have been offered instead of close attention to *Endymion*, why the account of the ‘Ancient Mariner’ omits entirely the supernatural aspects that make the poem memorable, or why Blake is presented as though he wrote conventional texts for conventional presses. This last point is important because Ware might have pursued the question of audience.

The curious textual histories of Blake's works and Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' invite consideration of how their myth-making might serve a social purpose in comparison with, say, the egalitarian ideology Ware notes in *Lyrical Ballads*. Another avenue might take in the revival of interest in mystical inspiration during the eighteenth century, perspective on which would complicate the notion that there was a supercilious aspect to the Romantics' opinion of the ancients, which seems implicit in the proposal that they saw primitive myth as naive. While a list of omitted Romantic texts on myth that might have warranted inclusion would be a long one—Byron's and Coleridge's works on Cain, for instance—it is clear that Ware has learned from Casaubon's example by choosing a manageable dataset. The value of the book lies in the way it joins the dots and delineates a mode of thought that pervades Romanticism.

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