

The Longing for Myth in Germany

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For decades, observers of German culture have noted a nineteenth-century predilection for the “mythical, primitive, and poetic spirit.” Williamson’s *Longing for Myth in Germany* documents how thinkers as disparate as Jacob Grimm, Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, David Friedrich Strauss, Georg Friedrich Creuzer, Christian Hermann Weisse, and others grappled with what we might superficially term an “identity crisis.” This book expounds on that German penchant for clinging to the mythical dimension in art, while so many British and French counterparts in the nineteenth century proceeded in diametrically opposite directions and “produced art rooted in social and political reality” (1).

Williamson has written a superb work of scholarship, examining trends in German cultural thought from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the death of Nietzsche in 1900. He has also provided an insightful epilogue to the body of his book that develops the longing for myth into the twentieth century. The book’s greatest value lies in the background Williamson provides for the best known (to English-speaking readers, at least) manifestations of myth in both aesthetic and intellectual life, specifically in the work of Wagner and Nietzsche.

“Myth” for Williamson is a generic category that denotes a sacred narrative of gods, heroes, or cosmology that in turn reflects the fundamental values and beliefs of the community or nation (6). “Mythology,” on the other hand, denotes a system of sacred images, narratives, and rituals that reflect the values of the community or nation. The premise of his book is that nineteenth-century German discourse on myth is significant for what it says about German cultural and intellectual life. The extraordinarily contentious debates about myth and mythology among intellectuals in nineteenth-century Germany also have curious parallels in the raging debates in late twentieth-century America about modernism, postmodernism, and theoretical approaches to theatre and drama.

There were also important religious/nationalist ramifications to the debates in nineteenth-century Germany. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, mythology began to take on nativist tendencies, as new readings of medieval epics, gathering folk songs and fairy tales, excavating pagan burial mounds, and reinterpreting Nordic gods, began to attract a more serious interest. The study of Old High German began to appear in the

syllabi of many professors, and some intellectuals began to look upon the Bible as the work of a foreign people. Others wondered if the ancient Germans must at one time have possessed their own deities and myths. Such efforts were not exactly new. As early as the fifteenth century, humanist scholars in German territories took up the reading of Tacitus's *Germania* in an effort to find out just who the Germanic tribes were. In the context of the Napoleonic wars, however, "postcolonial aspects of this argument had special salience for nationalist scholars like Jacob Grimm, who treated ecclesiastical Christianity as an occupying power on an originally pagan German soil" (14). By the 1830s, there was general scholarly acceptance that ancient *Germanen* had possessed a system of gods closely woven within their language, literature, and legal customs. The figures of Wotan, Brünnhilde, Freya, and Hertha became the subject of poems, paintings, and plays, and most obviously, the central characters in Wagner's *Ring* cycle of operas.

Germanic obsessions gave rise to vigorous re-evaluation of Greek mythology and aspects of Christian doctrine. Academic debates about the origins of the Homeric epics ensued: was "Homer" an historical personage who authored *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, or were "Homeric" epics passed down orally through various schools into the Hellenistic period? Creuzer adumbrated a kind of symbolic dualism in Greece that remained present in European culture, a dualism between Apollo and Dionysus that presaged Nietzsche. Williamson traces such mid-nineteenth-century debates, including those that intertwined the myths of Dionysus and Christ, with special attention to Christ's miracles with wine, his virgin birth, and his healing powers. More provocative still were "revisionist" claims of Strauss, who attempted to dismantle Jesus as the Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds. Strauss also denied the historical value of the Gospels, asserting they were "historical myths" that embodied the hopes of Christian writers during the second century CE. Weisse was the first theologian to propose the Gospel of Mark as the first of two sources for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The other source, he speculated, was a document called "Q" (for the German *Quelle*, or "source"), a lost collection of Jesus' sayings. Weisse's speculations went so far as to include Hellenistic prophecies about the third coming of Dionysus in the person of Christ.

Germany was not the only place where "national" mythologies took root; legends of King Arthur abounded in England, the French "rediscovered" the legends surrounding Joan of Arc, and the Russians resurrected the medieval Song of Igor. What made German longing for myth so interesting were attempts to bring gods and heroes of German "national mythology" to contemporary life. In this regard, Richard Wagner succeeded beyond even his own immodest expectations. Though, to some observers, Wagner's work was the final Romantic attack on the spirit of the Enlightenment, Wagner was a revolutionary because he revitalized myth rooted in the *Volk*, he appropriated both Protestant and Catholic imagery, and he advocated a mystical illusionism in stagecraft (180). To Wagner, the music drama was not simply an aesthetic phenomenon. It was a vehicle of religious experience. Nietzsche, speaking both for himself and for his contemporaries, declared that Wagner's "idea," not his music, had conquered young people by mid-century.

Wagner, like August Wilhelm Schlegel before him, saw a progression in European culture that was analogous to events in ancient Athens. The development of knightly romances in the Middle Ages resembled Homeric tales of heroes, culminating

in the work of Shakespeare. In Germany, similar cultural dynamics had culminated in the work of Goethe and Schiller. Nietzsche was at first a Wagner devotee, but he later broke with Wagner, ultimately because Nietzsche became convinced that debunking myth was more important than embracing it. Though Nietzsche had dedicated himself to becoming mythic debunker *nonpareil* in German intellectual life, numerous scholars and thinkers had provided him with ample precedent. Adalbert Kuhn, for example, had created a modest sensation with his 1859 book on the connections between “firebringers” in Aryan myth and the Prometheus myths in Greek. Kuhn reduced mythic heroes like Prometheus to individuals shivering around a primordial campfire.

De-bunking myth, as Williams makes clear, did not replace the longing for myth. Some scholars explored the idea of *Völkerpsychologie* (ethnic psychology) in an effort to find hidden within language the development of a national ethic—much as feminists and others have tried to invent a “pre-Oedipal” linguistic phase known (in postmodernist jargon) as the “Imaginary.” Convinced that “language formed the innermost core of the folk spirit,” Mortiz Lazarus, Hermann Cohen, and others combined language with psychology to forge frightening paradigms of identity, even by nineteenth-century German standards. Heymann Steinthal was, along with the aforementioned, one of several Jewish intellectuals who joined the demystifying process, usually within the context of comparative mythology. He concluded that the Old Testament figure Samson was actually a pagan god who strongly resembled Siegfried; like Siegfried, Samson had a physiological weak spot and “a penchant for trickery” (225).

Many of these efforts prepared the way for Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900); Of course, Nietzsche did not see himself as a mere demystifier or deflater of accepted values and ideas about myth. He regarded himself as a “cultural warrior,” involved “in the transformation of German culture,” though he rarely acknowledged his numerous intellectual debts to predecessors. Nietzsche was also fortunate to enjoy acceptance of his ideas at a time when readers seemed amenable to his aphoristic writing style. His good fortune continued with an appointment as “extraordinary professor” of philology at the University of Basel at age twenty-four, even though he had never completed a dissertation nor a *Habilitationsschrift*, the second work of scholarship usually required for such an appointment. In 1869, on the strength of several published articles and the support of his mentor, Friedrich Wilhelm Ritschl, Nietzsche got the job.

Nietzsche’s first major contribution to the “struggle for culture” was *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), which he claimed would set forth the “secret doctrines” of Greek aesthetics. It did not do so, but it did provide new impetus to theories about the Greeks floating around in German intellectual discourse during previous decades. Nietzsche claimed that Greek dramatic art reached its pinnacle with Aeschylus and descended rapidly afterwards. Euripides was actually a mask for Socrates, Nietzsche said (even though Socrates was only fourteen years old at the time Euripides wrote his first play), and Dionysus wanted nothing to do with either of them. So he left, and with him Apollo left Greek art as well. The only thing remaining was a “barren, abstract, mythless existence in Athens” (239). Where did Dionysus go? To Germany, where a “Protestant-Dionysian longing for myth” afforded a possibility, Nietzsche said, of “a rebirth of German myth” altogether. *The Birth of Tragedy* was a professional fiasco for Nietzsche, shunned by students and colleagues in Basel. He was forced to cancel one of his seminars when

no one signed up for it, and attendance at his lectures remained meager. Nietzsche's subsequent writing on myth included attacks on Christianity as both "barbaric" and "Asiatic," and ultimately resulted in his rejection of myth as an illusion. Nietzsche's writing in the 1880s also led to a permanent break with his former idol Wagner. "I took his slow, crawling return back to Christianity and the church [with *Parsifal*] as a personal insult," Nietzsche said in 1883, the year Wagner died.

At the same time, Nietzsche came to admire the Jesuits as "a fine example of a moral and political elite," though Nietzsche expressed contempt for the Eucharist and the papacy. Yet, he admired the "custom-laden, and therefore 'pagan' nature of Roman Catholic liturgy, which he thought was an effective antidote to Wagnerian idealism and its cult of pity and suffering. By the time Nietzsche began writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, poor health had forced him to give up teaching at Basel, and he began living anywhere he could, moving alternately from Italy to Germany to Switzerland. Nietzsche had by that time abandoned any pretense of a connection between "man" and a universal "idea" or "God." With this abandonment so likewise disappeared much of any longing for myth in German intellectual circles.

In chapters preceding his Epilogue, Williamson uses disparate strands of thought from Grimm, Schelling, Strauss, Creuzer, Weisse, Lazarus, Cohen, and Steinthal to weave together a fabric of comprehensibility which in many ways prefigured the aphoristic assumptions of Nietzsche. In the Epilogue itself, Williamson notes that by the outbreak of World War I the longing for myth had effectively disappeared. While some German university students were observed reading Nietzsche as they perished in the trenches, it remained for the National Socialists to resurrect a longing for myth, however briefly, in German thinking. Alfred Rosenberg's *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930) is perhaps the most well known example of Nazi ideology masquerading as serious thought on the subject. Hitler's devotion to Wagner is likewise well documented—but that did not make Wagner's hopes for a national mythology a matter of state policy under the Nazis. The most unusual writing on myth in the twentieth century actually came from Horkheimer and Adorno, who managed to link myth and the Enlightenment as a kind of "animistic magic" that produced, they claimed, the horrors of the twentieth century (293).

Williamson concludes that the longing for myth in nineteenth-century Germany reflected a society fragmented along social, confessional, and territorial lines, lacking a common national or religious tradition, while facing dislocation and disorientation brought on by the experience of political upheaval, economic transformation, and the rapid expansion of a market-driven culture. But a society infused with myth tended to harden already existing divisions of class, religion, and ethnicity. It tended to rule out the "transfer" or "translation" of one mythic tradition to another epoch, or one nation, or one "race" to another. Nobody could really agree upon, much less decide, which myths were applicable, which myths were relevant, or even which myths were actually myths. Instead, nineteenth-century Germans "simply longed for 'myth,' swaying between memory of a past that never was and anticipation of a future that would never be" (299).

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