

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION: ROMANTIC MYSTICISM: THE “TREACHEROUS MOONSHINE” AND THE LABYRINTH OF THE INEFFABLE

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श्रीभगवानुवाच
पश्य मे पार्थ रूपाणि शतशोऽथ सहस्रशः
नानाविधानि दिव्यानि नानावर्णाकृतीनि च
पश्यादित्यान्वसूत्रुद्रानश्विनौ मरुतस्तथा
बहून्यदृष्टपूर्वाणि पश्याश्चर्याणि भारत
इहैकस्थं जगत्कृत्स्नं पश्याद्य सचराचरम्
मम देहे गुडाकेश यच्चान्यद् द्रष्टुमिच्छसि
न तु मां शक्यसे द्रष्टुमनेनैव स्वचक्षुषा
दिव्यं ददामि ते चक्षुः पश्य मे योगमैश्वरम्

Behold, O *Arjoon*, my million forms divine, of various species, and diverse shapes and colours. Behold the *Adeetyas*, and the *Vasooos*, and the *Roodras*, and the *Maroots*, and the twins *Afween* and *Koomar*. Behold things wonderful, never seen before. Behold, in this my body, the whole world animate and inanimate, and all things else thou hast a mind to see. But as thou art unable to see with these thy natural eyes, I will give thee a heavenly eye, with which behold my divine connection.

Bhagavad Gita, 11.5-8.¹

On the cold, wet evening of 4 January 1819, Samuel Taylor Coleridge gave the third of his lectures on the history of philosophy, standing on a table at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, in London.² The turn-out was poor, because it had been ambiguously advertised, there had been postponements, and the weather

I would like to thank Richard A. Nanian for his helpful comments on this introduction, and his able assistance as Assistant Editor. Thanks also to Olivia Christmann for her patient proof-reading.

¹ Charles Wilkins, *Bhagvat-geeta, or Dialogues of Kreesbna and Arjoon* (London: Nourse, 1785), 65. The Sanskrit version is taken from A.C. Baktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, *La Bhagavad-Gītā tell qu'elle est* (Paris: Bhaktivedanta, 1975), 539-42, though some ligatures could not be reproduced.

² This was not Coleridge's favoured location, as it was too much associated with political radicals, and he was at this stage of his life trying to put the image of radicalism behind him. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer, 16 vols (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971-2002), vol 8 (*Lectures 1818-1819: On the History of Philosophy*), part I, xxxvi.

was bad. The lectures had gone poorly anyway, because they were disorganised and Coleridge was wracked by poor health and nerves.³ He seems to have been intellectually brittle: his marriage had long since been abandoned; he was living more or less on the charity of others; he was wracked by opium addiction—his image of himself as a man of learning and special insight was one of his few remaining sources of dignity. And he seemed to be locked in an intellectual tango with W.G. Tennemann that involved imitation, distortion, and resistance—a real love-hate struggle. Many of the lectures were tacked together from his own marginal notes on Tennemann's *Geschichte der Philosophie*.

Tennemann's twelve volume epic history of philosophy was dedicated to showing that philosophy had a goal, despite its meandering path, a goal of self-consciousness or self-understanding of reason. Even the most primitive of thinkers shared the basic impulse towards this goal, while contemporary thought had achieved a more advanced stage, and yet the completion of this destiny was still to come.⁴ This vision and this structure helped Coleridge to organise and motivate his lectures, amongst other things.⁵

Coleridge's lecture was supposed to be on Socrates, the Sophists, and the rise of the Socratic method, but instead he began with Pythagoras, on the grounds—probably fabricated or delusional or both—that he had not been well understood in the previous lecture. Typically for Coleridge, he did not really discuss Pythagoras' thought anyway, but rather tried to defend Pythagoras'

³ These backgrounds are covered in similar terms by the editors of both editions. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer, 16 vols (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971-2002), vol 8 (*Lectures 1818-1819: On the History of Philosophy*), part I, xxxv-xl; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed Kathleen Coburn (London: Pilot, 1949), 21-30. See also Rosemary Ashton, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1996), 327-9; Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), 489-94.

⁴ W.G. Tennemann, *Geschichte der Philosophie* 12 vols (Leipzig: Barth, 1798-1819). But for a more concise and surprisingly entertaining and accessible introduction see W.G. Tennemann, *Grundriß der Geschichte der Philosophie* second, revised edition (Leipzig: Barth, 1816). Of course, Schelling and Hegel developed similar theories of cosmological history with the development of reason as its central theme: see F.W.J. Schelling, *Schellings philosophische Schriften* (Landhut: Krüll, 1809), Band I (*Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*); G.H.F. Hegel, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Bamberg: Goebhardt, 1807).

⁵ For discussions of the reliance on Tennemann, see Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer, 16 vols (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971-2002), vol 8 (*Lectures 1818-1819: On the History of Philosophy*), part I, lviii-lxiii; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Philosophical Lectures* ed Kathleen Coburn (London: Pilot Press, 1949), 18-9. Neither editor seems to see that Coleridge was drawn to Tennemann less by his convenience as a source of material, and more for his validation of the idea of a grand destiny for philosophy, which can be traced even in the thought and faith of the most ancient or primitive thinkers. Of course, all of this applied to Coleridge himself too, as a harried, under-resourced public lecturer with lofty philosophical ideals despite all of his personal problems. In this issue, Peter Cheyne discusses some of Coleridge's annotations on Tennemann relating to the noted mystic Richard of St. Victor. See Peter Cheyne, "S.T. Coleridge and the Varieties of Contemplation" *Journal of Romanticism* 1 (2016): 53-84.

character and general reputation (as he had in the previous lecture). He started by suggesting that Pythagoras, and for that matter the cabalists, were not so far from Plato and Kant as everyone thinks:

But to comprehend the philosophy of Pythagoras the mind itself must be conceived of [as *an act*]; and the numbers of Pythagoras and the Cabalist[s] with the equivalent ideas of the Platonists [are] not so properly acts of the reason, in their sense I mean, as they are of reason itself in act.⁶

Shortly later he tried another favourite technique of denying that a particular pantheistic-seeming claim really amounted to pantheism:

I wish I could as successfully and as confidently clear the character of Pythagoras from the charge of a pretended magician and imposter as I think I could from all charges of mere vulgar pantheism, or what may be called fanatical philosophy. He seems to me to have attempted at least the union of the two opposites which he distinctly understood, namely the objects of contemplation and the contemplative power itself.⁷

Coleridge is occasionally accused of plagiarising this distinction between two types of philosophy from Schelling or Goethe or others. But the truth is that these distinctions were so endemic and debated in German philosophy at the time that it is more a question of which particular versions of it he was taking up and why.⁸ What is more pertinent, is that this appropriation situates Coleridge's intellectual framework in relation to the debates in Germany over the mystical, and the attempts to defend various mystical figures from charges of pantheism or atheism or fatalism. It is therefore again characteristic that Coleridge continued by trying to defend Homer from similar charges, by dismissing "the [Samotheacian] mysteries and Eleusinian" as pre-Homeric and the Homeric hymns as deriving from "Orpheus ... and the other mystical poets".⁹

But the striking thing is that Coleridge then turned abruptly to the *Bhagavad Gita* and read out from Wilkins' translation, what seems to have been excerpts

⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer, 16 vols (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971-2002), vol 8 (*Lectures 1818-1819: On the History of Philosophy*), part I, 114.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁸ For discussion see Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Philosophical Lectures* ed Kathleen Coburn (London: Pilot Press, 1949), 51-5.

⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer, 16 vols (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971-2002), vol 8 (*Lectures 1818-1819: On the History of Philosophy*), part I, 120.

from Book 11, where Krishna reveals his multi-dimensional infinity to Arjuna. Coleridge concludes, as any decent showman would, with the infamous verse that is now famous as Oppenheimer's "I am become death, the destroyer of worlds". But that was not the translation Coleridge had before him, rather he read:

I am Time, the defstroyer of mankind, matured, come hither to feize at once
all thefe who ftand before us. Except thyfelf not one of all thefe warriors,
deftdined againft us in thefe numerous ranks, fhall live.¹⁰

Coleridge continues by doubling back to try to use the *Bhagavad Gita* as a way to understand the problems thrown up by the German debates over mysticism, before plunging back into the Greeks. The tango continues:

... the result is more serious and to us I think more comfortable, namely, that in the utmost attempts of a pantheistic philosophy to reduce religion to any objects of the senses ... the infinite of a something that works like gravitation works without consciousness. This it gives in the most striking manner; and when we find how anxious the ancient sages of India with this opinion were to impress a belief of an unity (for that the reason of man of itself necessarily tends to do) and yet to bring it down to the practical and moral point ... we begin to pay some compliment to those [theologians] who, by dropping the one part in [the] thing and hiding it altogether from the multitude, presented only to them fairies ... and for every object presented to them a sort of life and passions and motions attending it which affected themselves, for that, be assured, is the utmost height human nature has arrived at by its own powers, that first of all the highest and best of men felt by an impulse from their reason and necessity to seek an unity, and those who felt wisely like Plato and Socrates, feeling the difficulties of this, looked forward to that Being of whom this necessity and their reason was a presentiment to instruct them ...¹¹

He does finally get onto Socrates after this, but then spends an inordinate time discussing the *Wisdom of Solomon* and Socrates' "daemon".¹²

By any standard of contemporary scholarship in Romanticism, it is very difficult to explain this. Of course, all of the "sources" can be traced and have been. But that is like explaining a tango by a particular step, or a particular song.

¹⁰ Charles Wilkins, *Bhagvat-geeta, or Dialogues of Kreesbna and Arjoon* (London: Nourse, 1785), 68.

¹¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer, 16 vols (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971-2002), vol 8 (*Lectures 1818-1819: On the History of Philosophy*), part I, 132-3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 138, 143.

The real question is why this intellectual tango of Coleridge's simultaneously involves Greek philosophy, cabalists, Kant, the Eleusinian mysteries, Orpheus and the "mystical poets", Hindu cosmology, German controversies over Spinoza and pantheism, the mysterious science of gravitation, fairies and superstitions, the *Wisdom of Solomon*, daemons, and finally—as if a panacea and answer to all the rest—reason, as represented by the Socratic method. A further question for us as scholars of Romanticism, is why contemporary scholarship has such difficulty in explaining, or even perceiving, this tango.¹³ Our task is to understand the dance, not to catalogue all of the steps in it.

Mysticism is at the heart of Romanticism, and epitomises its underlying emotional drama. The first experience of reading Coleridge, Blake or Goethe, or first seeing a painting by Caspar David Friedrich or Turner, often involves a sense of mystic expansion of perception, of the infinite and sublime and of the mystery of the individual in the face of that infinite. Yet this sense has been neglected, especially since the mid-twentieth century, for a variety of political reasons.

One of those reasons was that twentieth-century analytic philosophy became obsessed with the backwaters of symbolic logic and scientific rationalism, and used "mystical" straightforwardly as a term of abuse. This in turn led to the odd phenomenon of literary scholars trying to defend various Romantic authors from such accusations by denying their mystical tendencies or defining them away. Oddly, one method of doing this was to point to Kant as an influence, rather than one of his successors, despite the fact that Kant was the main target of such accusations. Another method was to allege that Coleridge (the usual example) had a philosophical "system", despite the facts that this already has an oddly cabalistic ring, and that none of the accusers thought that having a "system" was a valid goal for philosophy anyway.

Another of those reasons was that the nineteen sixties and seventies saw the burgeoning of a vaguely neo-Marxist movement in humanities studies. Within Romanticism studies, this led to a focus on the minutiae of localised and quotidian histories, and a focus on "material culture".¹⁴ One great benefit of

¹³ The editors of both editions are typical in trying to uncover and explain the sources of lecture three in relatively direct source-study terms. Accordingly, neither of them can find anything to say about the massive presence of the *Bhagavad Gita* quotation. They simply do not see why Tennemann would have provoked Coleridge to look at the *Bhagavad Gita*, or why that would follow naturally from trying to give recognition to a good impulse underlying Pythagoras' philosophical errors and limitations. See especially Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer, 16 vols (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971-2002), vol 8 (*Lectures 1818-1819: On the History of Philosophy*), part I, lxxxv-xc, especially lxxxviii.

¹⁴ Wunder points out that it became fashionable to reduce everything to contemporary material conditions in a strangely literal way. She particularly points to Abrams' warnings not to "philosophise" Keats, and Sperry's odd insistence that Keats' mystical elusiveness could be explained by the contemporary chemistry he had studied while a medical student. See Jennifer N.

this has been the ongoing reconsideration of the canon, and the resurrection of various neglected figures. However, this also placed a premium on archival material and those who control access to it (a peculiarly exclusionary result from a liberal programme). We now know a great deal about the quotidian and mundane aspects of life in the period, but much less about the intellectual milieu the Romantics actually experienced.

These two opposed camps were only dimly aware of each other, but were ironically united in a surprisingly anti-intellectual stance, combined with a general dismissiveness towards continental Europe. Between them they made it impossible to seriously contemplate the intellectual currents operating in Europe without running the risk of being accused of “mysticism” on the one hand, or complicity in “power relations” on the other. Even the observation that the Romantics were both “mystics” and “complicit in power relations”, was insufficient to justify researching such things. This situation has proceeded to the point where the nature of the Romantic impulse has become almost unrecognisable, and the study of it has become impoverished.

The tango that Coleridge was engaged in is indicative of a broader intellectual milieu that is no longer ready-to-hand for contemporary scholars. All of these factors I identified in Coleridge’s lecture were linked for these figures by the potential they held to evade or question or resist modern science and modern political realities. It does not matter what any particular Romantic knew about Greek philosophy in particular, or Hindu cosmology in particular—what matters is that all of these factors formed an interlinked intellectual matrix. They could see the connections, even if we cannot.

The purpose of this Special Inaugural Issue of the *Journal of Romanticism* is to put mysticism back on the table as a major factor in Romanticism. In this brief introduction, I argue that the focus on particular “sources” or “influences” has actually blinded us to the historical intellectual context. It is necessarily a survey of aspects of this matrix, a survey which is intended to provoke further study, and point to the connections between the articles and reviews that constitute this issue.

I. The Historical Matrix of Romantic Mysticism

During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the boundaries of what constituted human culture, thought and religion were pulverised. I say “pulverised” deliberately in the sense of being reduced to the finest particles and

Wunder, *Keats, Hermeticism, and the Secret Societies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008; reprint Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 1-21. See also respectively, Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973), 30-71. Abrams, M.H., “Keats’s Poems: The Material Dimensions” in Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (eds), *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1998): 36-53.

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wrong about this, but it was not a foolish guess: some of the other Ashokan edicts do include Greek inscriptions.

Egypt, the Rosetta Stone, and the deciphering of the Hieroglyphs

Another consequence of the Revolution was the change in the status of Egypt, and in the perceptions of ancient Egyptian culture and religion. In 1798, Napoleon invaded Ottoman-controlled Egypt and Syria with the declared objective of cutting off Britain's access to India through the Silk Road, and establishing a presence in the Middle East. However, it was also a campaign with a cultural objective, and Napoleon took with him 150 scientists and experts on the ancient world. Part of the purpose was to express France's dominance as the gate-keeper to the mysteries of the past, as well as the sciences of the future. And in particular, he sought to secure control of Egypt's antiquities.

Eventually British and Ottoman forces drove the French forces back to Alexandria, and the French capitulated in 1801. The French had discovered numerous antiquities, many of which were seized by the British, including the Rosetta Stone, which was put on display in the British Museum in 1802. The Stone was a crucial cultural symbol, because it contained the same text in Greek, demotic, and hieroglyphs, which eventually allowed hieroglyphs to be deciphered, suddenly opening up access to the entirety of ancient Egyptian civilisation, with its rich histories and exotic religious culture. Indeed, this religious culture was imagined to be dangerous, sinful and occult, and had therefore attracted all of the attention that forbidden fruit always does.

Hieroglyphs were the writing of the gods, and were probably not well understood even by most ancient Egyptians, who used demotic for everyday purposes. The ability to read them had been entirely lost by the Romantic era, because they were imagined to be purely symbolic, occult and abstract, and therefore indecipherable. This belief unravelled with the presence of the Stone in the British Museum, because Thomas Young realised that there were phonetic elements in the hieroglyphs, and that the oval cartouches represented names. He was therefore able to commence deciphering both demotic and the hieroglyphs.²¹ However, it was Jean-François Champollion who later finished the project after an unpleasant rivalry with Young, thus continuing the symbolic contest between England and France as to who would be the gate-keeper of antiquity. That rivalry continued even after Champollion's death, with arguments over how much of an advance over Young's work his decipherment had been.

²¹ For an account of the background and deciphering of the stone see John Ray, *The Rosetta Stone and the Rebirth of Ancient Egypt* (London: Profile, 2007).

Esoteric Mysticism

The hieroglyphs are a deeper issue than the symbolic contest between France and England over antiquities. In the late classical period, there was significant colonisation of Egypt by the Greeks, who brought their language and mythology with them. The Ptolemaic pharaohs spoke Greek, and thus the presence of Greek on the Rosetta Stone. One result of this was the fusion of traditions, so that the Greek Hermes was fused with the Egyptian Thoth, leading to the figure of Hermes Trismegistus, the legendary figure associated with supernatural, esoteric and magical.²² The legends surrounding him, and the texts attributed to him are at the core of occult and esoteric traditions. Indeed, even the name “alchemy” derives from the Coptic name for Egypt “Khem”.

These esoteric forms of mysticism also enjoyed a renaissance during the Romantic era, with Rosicrucian and Freemasons lodges multiplying, and attracting public attention. Many major figures during the period were Freemasons, or were widely believed to be, such as Goethe, Sir Walter Scott, and Schiller.²³ But regardless of actual influence, the reputation and imagery of the esoteric societies was widespread.²⁴ The presence of the Rosetta Stone in the British Museum obviously magnified this interest, but it also formed a link to the interest in classical Greek culture, and the mysteries.²⁵

Greek Culture and the Mysteries

Greece and Greek culture were major preoccupations for all the Romantics. Greece was a political issue because of the occupation of Greece by the Ottoman Empire, which of course provoked Byron’s attempt to raise a rebellion there. But Greek also had a special value for the Romantics within classical culture, because Latin and Roman culture were in some ways appropriated to the Revolution and therefore the Terror, so a knowledge of a culture older and more mysterious was in itself an emblem of some kind of capacity to resist this rationalistic world.²⁶ It is also notable that many of the Romantics had excellent

²² See John Ray, *The Rosetta Stone and the Rebirth of Ancient Egypt* (London, Profile, 2007), 1-37; Alexander Roob, *Das hermetische Museum: Alchemie & Mystik* (Köln: Taschen, 1996), 8-33.

²³ See Jennifer N. Wunder, *Keats, Hermeticism, and the Secret Societies* (Ashgate, 2008; reprint Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 35.

²⁴ See Ernst Benz, *Les sources mystiques de la philosophie romantique allemande* (Paris: Vrin, 1968), 55-67.

²⁵ There has been much recent work on the influence of the esoteric on the Romantic era. See Kiran Toor, *Coleridge’s Chrysopeoetics: Alchemy, Authorship and Imagination* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011); Jennifer N. Wunder, *Keats, Hermeticism, and the Secret Societies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008; reprint Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Paul Kléber Monod, *Solomon’s Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2013); Davies, Paul, *Romanticism & Esoteric Tradition: Studies in Imagination* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1998). In this issue, see also Nicholas Reid, “Review of Kiran Toor *Coleridge’s Chrysopeoetics*” *Journal of Romanticism* 1 (2016): 109-16.

²⁶ Chris Murray, *Tragic Coleridge* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 13.

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itself should be rejected in favour of faith. Mendelssohn responded by trying to defend Lessing, or reason itself, but Schelling and many others responded by taking up Spinoza and the mystics, and actually defending them, which had the unexpected result that instead of Lessing's reputation being tainted by association with Spinoza, Spinoza's reputation was saved by association with Lessing.

This led to a massive controversy that essentially continued for decades, with Jacobi making accusations that Fichte and Schelling too were guilty of this kind of crypto-atheism. Fichte resigned his professorship over it, but Schelling responded with a series of bitter polemics, that themselves became classics of a certain brand of mystically infused German idealism.⁴⁰ In the end it was not so much an argument about whether Lessing had mystical or Spinozistic beliefs, as an argument about whether such beliefs could be defended as a legitimate intellectual identity capable of competing with the Enlightenment. Thus, the mystical was taken up and completely transformed into a weapon to fight for a place for emotion and faith, over against the brutalities of rationalistic reason, and the Revolution and Terror that seemed to have flowed from it. As such its impact was felt far beyond Germany.⁴¹

II. The Distinctiveness of Romantic Mysticism

In the previous section I used the words “historical matrix” in distinction from the “historical context”, because I wanted to emphasize the active and dynamic elements in the intellectual lives of the Romantics, and not just the passive background. Various mixtures of mystical thought were presenting themselves to the Romantics throughout Europe, and they formed a puzzle that each one of them had to decipher for themselves. Of course, this realisation is what underlies the importance of the Rosetta Stone in the rivalries between the French and English, because those who could decipher the mysteries, or the hieroglyphs or even just simply Greek, could immediately claim a special status as a gatekeeper of the wisdom of the past and the hopes of the future. It should be recalled that the word “mystic” originally meant an initiate in the mysteries, that is, in the Greek religious rites.

⁴⁰ See F.W.J. Schelling, *Schellings philosophische Schriften* (Landhut: Krüll, 1809), Band I (*Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*); F.W.J. Schelling, *Denkmal der Schrift von den göttlichen Dingen* (Tübingen: Cotta, 1812).

⁴¹ For accounts of the impact of the controversy on Coleridge, see Richard Berkeley, *Coleridge and the Crisis of Reason* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2007); Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1969).

I have elsewhere discussed the unhelpful history of “influence” studies in the field, so I will not belabour the point here.⁴² But I will add that the history of influence studies has been doubly misleading because on the one hand it allows scholars to simply assert an “influence” based on “echoes” or “correspondences”, and yet on the other hand it blinds us to historical realities by tying us slavishly to the incomplete and often irrelevant archive, and requires us to ignore the wood for the sake of counting the trees. Despite the talk of “demystification”, both the archive and the notion of influence can ironically become touchstones of obscurantism that are used to put bare assertions beyond criticism.

The central question is not whether Keats deliberately flirted with the imagery of Freemasonry, or whether Blake had read this or that Hindu text in translation or not, or how much Coleridge plagiarised from Schelling, or even whether Lessing was joking about being a Spinozist. These are all valid scholarly questions, but they are not the central question of Romanticism. This is obvious from the sheer fact that all these narrow and disparate issues, which we know were all connected for the Romantics, seem to have little connection when considered in isolation, or in connection to some local or quotidian detail, or in terms of their “material conditions”.

But what then is distinctive about Romantic mysticism as opposed to the historical mysticisms that it undoubtedly derived from?

Medieval Mysticism

Mysticism has been used within theological discourse historically, and specifically the Catholic church, and it acquired a specific set of meanings there. Some of these meanings are also specifically tied up with the concept of contemplation, as a practice of mentally approaching the infinite, which can be pursued in certain ways, and which can yield certain types of benefits (insights). This was often connected specifically with Neoplatonism, and there is a great tradition of theorising and analysis about this, which can be traced in figures such as Origen, Richard of St. Victor, and Dionysius.⁴³ Both the practice of contemplation, and the Neoplatonic extensions of that concept were important for certain of the Romantics, who were engaged with these traditions, such as Coleridge and Shelley.⁴⁴

⁴² Richard Berkeley, *Coleridge and the Crisis of Reason* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2007), 6-12; Richard Berkeley, “Review of Monika Class *Coleridge and the Kantian Ideas?*” *The Charles Lamb Bulletin* NS 162 (Autumn 2015): 144-7.

⁴³ For general reference see Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: a History of Western Christian Mysticism* 5 vols (New York: Herder & Herder, 2004-12); Danielle Cohen-Levinas, Géraldine Roux et Meryem Sebtî (eds), *Mystique et philosophie dans les trois monothéismes* (Paris: Hermann, 2015).

⁴⁴ In this issue, Joseph O’Leary analyses Shelley’s Neoplatonic interests, and Peter Cheyne analyses Coleridge’s engagement with contemplation and thought about contemplation. See Joseph O’Leary,

Yet in broader usage, mysticism is often seen as specifically anti-theological or anti-established-religion. It is perceived as an alternative approach to the spiritual world of the theologians, one that does not rely on what is impliedly criticised as “the establishment” or “the tradition”. These tendencies, and this usage of the concept of “mysticism” continues to this day. I would suggest that one of the interesting features of Romanticism is precisely this change in ideas, and the extraordinary fact that the Romantics somehow confiscated the concept of the mystical from the traditional religious authorities and then turned it on them. Of course, they did so precisely by drawing attention to independent or rebellious mystical figures, such as Böhme and Swedenborg, as well as mystics who were condemned as heretics, such as Meister Eckhart and Giordano Bruno.

Just the same, this is the point that leads Denys Turner into seeing a complete disconnect between the medieval tradition and the modern appropriations of that tradition that started with the Romantics, and continues even onto the silver screen. He goes as far as to say:

For what, in the end, characterizes the mystical theology of the Middle Ages is its commitment to the dialectical strategies of Neoplatonism as the epistemic strategies equally of theology as a whole and of Christian life. And the central imagery of that theology and practice ... is the metaphoric repertoire of that dialectic, at once embodying it and subject to its negativity. What characterises the practical spiritualities of our times is that same repertoire of imagery evacuated of that dialectic and its corresponding hierarchies and, instead, filled with the stuff of supposititious “experience”. Between that mediaeval and our modern employment of the imagery there is little case for continuity, other than the merely verbal.⁴⁵

In a strict sense he may be right about the effects of this change, though it is less clear that he can justify his pejorative tone. But either way, if our task is to evaluate the impact of this change on the historical phenomenon of Romanticism, and further perhaps, to consider the ramifications of that change even into our own times, then it is precisely this change itself that we must study. Dal-Yong Kim is more generous in making the same point, for example:

Mysticism and occultism in the post-Enlightenment age have led to the opening of new religious pathways in the Western mind to the apprehension of a spiritual reality that eludes everyday secular consciousness. The mystical and occult ways of seeing and

“Shelley and Plotinus” *Journal of Romanticism* 1 (2016): 29-50; Peter Cheyne, “S.T. Coleridge and the Varieties of Contemplation” *Journal of Romanticism* 1 (2016): 53-84.

⁴⁵ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 267.

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through the medium of his body had acted on his mind; and by application of received and ascertained laws I can satisfactorily explain to my own reason all the strange incidents, which the writer records of himself As when in broad day-light a man tracks the steps of a traveller, who had lost his way in a fog or by treacherous moonshine, even so, and with the same tranquil sense of certainty, can I follow the traces of this bewildered visionary.⁵⁰

The Romantics took the basic impulses of the mystics to be right, and to be an emblem for some kind of resistance to the past, or the establishment, or modern science, or the Revolution. All that was required was for the Romantics themselves to recognise and take up this basic right instinct, to develop it to its destined potential, and use it to victoriously overthrow the tyrannies of both modernity and the past. The circle surrounding Schlegel, for instance, latched onto the figure of Böhme, a radical German mystic, as an emblem for the virtues of German-ness, and as the “poet of poets”, despite the fact that he wrote no poetry. Meister Eckhart, Spinoza, Swedenborg, and of course Bruno, also received similar treatment in Germany eventually, but Böhme was the original emblem of both German-ness and mysticism.

All of this was plainly, and somewhat consciously, an attempt to define a mystical German identity that could contend with the rationalistic revolutionary identity of contemporary France. Given the bouts of warfare between Revolutionary France and the Germanic powers (Austria and Prussia), including invasions and occupations of Alsace, this was driven by an urgent need to reinforce a sense of German identity. But given the Revolution’s ability to link itself to enlightenment reason, and thereby lay claim to the fruits of modern science, political theory, and even philosophy, it was also driven by a need to reinforce a sense of a viable anti-rationalistic intellectual identity. The mystics became emblems of these identities.

It is therefore both insightful and convincing when Paola Mayer argues that even Friedrich Schlegel himself barely understood Böhme at first, despite lauding him, and that he took the time to understand Böhme properly only much later, during his years in Paris.⁵¹ Mayer therefore describes the use that the German Romantics made of Böhme as an “appropriation”, and more importantly explores the fact that their understanding of these figures was selective and partial, and dominated by the Romantics’ deeper political and artistic visions.⁵²

⁵⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer, 16 vols (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971-2002), vol 7 (*Biographia Literaria*), part I, 232-3.

⁵¹ Paola Mayer, *Jena Romanticism and its Appropriation of Jakob Böhme: Theosophy, Hagiography, Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1999), 119-28.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 23-5.

Kurt Flasch makes a similar point, arguing that even Meister Eckhart, the epitome of a philosophical church mystic branded as a heretic and then taken up by the German Romantics, was far from the received image of a medieval mystic:

Wer je eine *Begründung* für den Titel «Mystiker» versucht hat, mußte allerhand Einschränkungen vornehmen. Denn *Extatische Visionen* finden sich bei Eckhart nicht. Vom «Erlebnis» inniger Gottesnähe ist bei ihm nicht die Rede, er schreibt ungefähr so «scholastisch» wie andere Zeitgenossen auch. Er *argumentiert*; er schildert keine Erfahrungen ...⁵³

Thus, it is important to observe that the Romantics had specific types of motivations for their uses of mysticism and the mystics. For the most part, the Romantics did not want to actually be mystics; rather they wanted to take the basic impulse of mysticism and exceed it by dint of greater insight, or greater prophetic or intellectual or moral force.

Richard A. Nanian rightly dismisses the question of whether a particular poet was a genuine mystic as moot. Instead he considers William James' definition of the mystical experience as requiring the four elements of transience, passivity, ineffability, and a noetic quality, and argues that these are all true also of the theories of the sublime in the Romantic era.⁵⁴ Thus he shows, not so much that the sublime was yet another reflection of the ineffable, but rather that in talking about the sublime, the Romantics were using terms already inscribed with the mystical past. He goes on to argue that much of the Romantics' technical innovation was driven by the attempt to capture that kind of experience in poetry, or to cause that kind of experience in readers. Likewise, D.J. Moores in turn focused on the mystical "rhetoric" of the Romantics, and argued that it is a mistake to see them as actual mystics. Instead, they are using a form of mystical rhetoric, which he tries to define as "cosmic" in contradistinction.⁵⁵ Similarly, Reuven Tsur treated the mystical, or mystical qualities in poetry, as virtually the central problem of poetry, or of cognition and language altogether. His work operated within a particular linguistic or psychological methodology—cognitive poetics—and has therefore not attracted as much attention amongst

⁵³ Kurt Flasch, *Meister Eckhart: Die Geburt der "Deutschen Mystik" aus dem Geist der arabischen Philosophie* (München: Beck, 2013), 17. [Anyone who has ever searched for a *ground* for the title "mystic" must deal with many problems. One does not find *ecstatic visions* in Eckhart. He never speaks of inner "experiences" of God's presence. And his writing is about as "scholastic" as his contemporaries. He *argues*, he does not describe experiences.]

⁵⁴ Richard A. Nanian, *Plerosis/Kenosis: Poetic Language and its Energies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 85-9.

⁵⁵ See D.J. Moores, *Mystical Discourse in Wordsworth and Whitman: A Transatlantic Bridge* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 205-19.

Romanticism scholars as it might have.⁵⁶ Clearly the spectre of mysticism was capable of fulfilling a variety of technical and rhetorical purposes, but I would further suggest that it also becomes internalised as an hermeneutic strategy.

Hermeneutic Mysticism

The word “hermeneutics” is sometimes said to derive from the name Hermes, though it is unclear whether it is really that simple. It generally means a method of deciphering the message of the divine, but is now used more broadly, as in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. Romantic mysticism is not simply a transformation of religious experience, or simply a rhetorical or technical literary strategy, it is also a strategy for understanding the world, and in particular problems of the ineffable, such as the sense of destiny of mankind.

To say that Romantic mysticism is hermeneutic is to say that it provides a framework for understanding. This framework is itself marked by its historical situation, and that is a large part of what I have already discussed. But it is also marked by its focus on the most fundamental of all hermeneutic problems: the relationship between the finite and the infinite.⁵⁷ To say that Romanticism involved a “secularisation” of this fundamentally religious question is misleading, because in the movement away from established religion (or the establishment itself), the very thing that was being claimed and appropriated was the sense of religious insight.

Its background gave Romantic mysticism distinctive features. The pulverisation of traditional authority in Europe, combined with a simultaneous explosion in knowledge and understanding of other cultures, both ancient and contemporary, allowed Romantic mysticism a scepticism about particular forms of religious statement (as opposed to religious sentiment). And this in turn problematized the traditional symbolic means for grasping the relationship between the finite and the infinite, because any specific symbol used ran the risk of being exposed as local and limited. All that seemed to remain was to see the world with a kind of double-vision, as both finite and infinite at once, and our own identities are one of the prime examples of that: as though waves on the ocean had to imagine themselves separate from that ocean, in order to be waves. Mysticism was an obvious way to cope with this (if felt), or to propose it (if intended as a political or rhetorical point), or to provoke it (if intended to convey something incommunicable in words), or understand it (if confronted with a

⁵⁶ See Reuven Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness: A Study in Cognitive Poetics* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003); Reuven Tsur, “Kubla Khan” – *Poetic Structure, Hypnotic Quality and Cognitive Style* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006).

⁵⁷ Dobie discusses “mystical hermeneutics”, literally as a strategy for reading sacred texts. But he was not dealing with Romanticism, and does not extend it meaningfully beyond sacred texts. See Robert J. Dobie, *Logos and Revelation: Ibn ‘Arabi, Meister Eckhart, and Mystical Hermeneutics* (Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 2010).

new or problematic situation). To describe this as a “secularisation” with Bloom, Abrams and others, or even to criticise it with Turner is not so much wrong as it is unilluminating.

The idea of a double-vision, or of the ability to accept the ambiguity between unity and distinctness, is a key characteristic of Romantic mysticism or Romanticism in general, as can be seen for instance in Keats’ concept of “negative capability”.⁵⁸ Benz argued that Meister Eckhart wound up creating a new kind of mystical vocabulary because he was faced with a dilemma in that the abstract Latin concepts in which he was trained to think theologically had no equivalent in the German of the time, which was “une langue d’images”.⁵⁹ More recently Roob traced the roots of alchemy and mysticism precisely in a “highly cryptic, pictorial world”, and a scepticism about the expressive possibilities of normal language.⁶⁰ Both Benz and Roob seem to be suggesting that the deliberate creation of an ambiguity between word and image can be a strategy for communicating or provoking certain types of inexpressible ideas, or even that it can be an accidental way to become entangled in such ideas. But of course, there are a thousand ways that this kind of double-vision can be created: frame narrators (especially unreliable ones), translations (especially partial or imperfect ones), fragments that imply a greater text, ruins that imply a greater structure, tensions between form and content, the use of poetic forms and rhythms from another language or tradition, or even simply allusion. The key feature is not some particular kind of content or stylistic convention, but the transformation of the act of expression or understanding into a puzzle to be deciphered.

III. Re-opening the Question of Mysticism ...

The reason that we promoted this Special Inaugural Issue of the *Journal of Romanticism*, and the reason for this introduction, is that one of the central dramas of Romanticism has been lost sight of. Yet mystical practices, forms of thought, expression, and understanding were all-pervasive in the Romantic era. The sheer fact that many scholars have been trying to define this fact away for the last forty years, is faintly ridiculous. The study of Romanticism seems, like the Mariner, cast adrift on an ocean of irrelevant detail, and yet there never

⁵⁸ For discussion of the relationship between Keats’ negative capability and Coleridge’s negative faith, see Richard A. Nanian, “Positive Ambiguity: or, Why Keats’ ‘Lamia’ Did Not Become a Fragment?” *Prism(s): Essays in Romanticism* 15 (2007): 51-84. Republished as “Positive Ambiguity: The Case of Keats” in Larry H. Peer (ed), *On Theorizing Romanticism and Other Essays on the State of Scholarship Today* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2008): 197-234.

⁵⁹ Ernst Benz, *Les sources mystiques de la philosophie romantique allemande* (Paris: Vrin, 1968), 16.

⁶⁰ Alexander Roob, *Das hermetische Museum: Alchemie & Mystik* (Köln: Taschen, 1996), 11.

seems to be an opening to start a new conversation about the meaning or scope of Romanticism.

The question at this level is not whether some particular text, image, or idea had any particular “influence” on any particular Romantic figure, or whether such an “context” might be proven mechanically by some happenstance printed in a newspaper or some grocery list found in the bottom of an archive box. For the Romantics, mysticism was most of all a labyrinth of thought and influences connected by their convergence on the ineffable, and this labyrinth was as inescapable as it was insoluble. This labyrinth was in some ways a jumble of ideas, mostly defined by their rebellion against the tyrannies of modernity and of European history, or their capacity to be used as an emblem in such a rebellion. However, this jumble, this labyrinth of portentous intellectual problems, became a distinctive intellectual characteristic of the times.

These elements may seem disparate to us, but for the Romantics they were obviously connected. To focus on minutiae in an attempt to evade the consequences of this is an error. Thus, it now seems reductive and implausible when Patterson proposes that there is such a thing as “daemonic experience” that is completely different from “mystical experience”, or when Sperry tries to dismiss alchemical influences on Keats, in favour of whatever questionable chemistry Keats learned as a medical student. The point is that there was a common language, a common vocabulary of texts, images, and ideas that arose from this intellectual matrix. And we now stand in need of a new Rosetta Stone to decipher it.

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