



Analysing European Romanticism

Romanticism and the religious crisis

Of the political and philosophical revolutions at the end of the 18th century promoted Romantic self confidence. Now perhaps the decisive factor in boosting their self belief was the potential to resolve something even more fundamental to the temper of the Romantic age, the religious crisis inherited from the Age of Enlightenment. It's a truism to say that the rationalistic 18th century thought little of traditional or positive Christianity. Of course the rationalistic destruction of traditional religion did not remove a general need for religion in the economy of the human psyche. Kant had drunk deeply of David Hume's religious scepticism, but more important for the young lions of Romanticism was the late Enlightenment philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's brief tract on the education of the human race, for here Lessing argued in untypically passionate and, in truth, slightly devious rhetoric for a reconciliation between the competing claims of historical religion and modern reason. Lessing's argument goes like this: the Bible, despite everything the secular Enlightenment mind objected to in it, was certainly a book of authentic religious revelation, but only insofar as with its irrational talk of miracles and suchlike it had been adapted by the all-wise divine mind to the primitive cultural level of the early Jewish nation. God educates his people through the process of history and the Bible, whilst it is an authentic handbook of religion, is only the first handbook of religion in this process. It is valid only to this extent. It is unsuitable for modern enlightened humanity. But as the New Testament followed the Old so it has been, or will be superseded by other new 'new testaments' in a process of continuous, successive revelations, each better adapted to the cultural level of their users, and inevitably more conformable to the precepts of modern reason. A new handbook, Lessing concludes prophetically, is due. The religious fever of the French Revolution culminates, of course, in the foundation of a religion of pure reason. This was no coincidence and it seemed to the German Romantics in the late 1790's that the hour of the new religion and the new bible had come. One of its apostles was Friedrich Schleiermacher. This founding member of the early Romantic circle was a reformed Berlin cleric who had been strongly influenced by pietism. His striking and widely read tract on religion addresses to its cultured despisers defends religion in the modern post Enlightenment age by systematically applying the ideas of Lessing to its history. The beloved rational religion of enlightened secular moderns, he says dismissively, is no religion at all, merely a baggage of abstract moral precepts. This he follows up with a Lessenian defence of the Bible. There is not one bible, but many. The revelations of Moses and Mohammed too have a just claim to legitimacy. Together they are successive, pro-blessive manifestations of religion, none in their earthly manifestation entirely adequate to the thing itself. And even if Christ may for Schleiermacher be the chief mediator of religion to humanity others, too, indeed any religiously gifted individual, may claim an authentic revelation worthy of being passed on creating another new religious community. Indeed, any person possessed by such a religious revelation must pass it on, is compelled to evangelise. What links and validates all of these revelations as authentic, says Schleiermacher, is that all are founded on a single trans-historical constant of human religious experience. An intuition within the self of the infinite, that which transcends the bounds of normal consciousness, and communicates a deep sense of dependency, a deep sense of lost and restored connection with the totality. This, beyond any bible, is religion.