

Nightmarish Romanticism: The Third Reich and the Appropriation of Romanticism

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Attempting to trace the intellectual history of any political movement is, at best, problematic. Humans construct political movements and the intellectual, philosophical underpinnings of those movements, and, in general, it is not one person who is doing the creating, but rather a multitude of people are involved; the circumstance of how politics is created is a web, which makes it difficult for researchers to trace the historical roots of movements. Nazi Germany has been the focus of numerous research projects to understand the intellectual roots of Nazism and the how and why they were successful in gaining and consolidating power. In line with popular theories in Sociology and History, earlier researchers have traced the intellectual roots of the Nazis in order to situate Nazi Germany as anti-modern, which by extension would situate their crimes against humanity and fascism in the same camp. In particular, Romanticism has been the movement that some historians have cited as a possible root for Nazism. The primary goal of this paper will be to disrupt the historical continuation argument, deconstruct the main parts of each of the camps, and provide support for the appropriation argument. This goal is designed to connect to the much larger debate of the state of anti-modern/modern of Nazism, and aid in showing Nazism as a modern movement. It is through researching and analyzing the how and why the Nazis appropriated Romanticism that allows academics to study the influences from the past in the development of National Socialism, while accounting for the frame that the Nazis used to read the Romantics and the purpose for the way that Romantic literature was framed within Nazi-Germany.

Attempting to trace the intellectual history of any political movement is fraught with issues; however, tracing the intellectual roots of Nazism is even more difficult and problematic. Previous historical research projects and historiographies have attempted to understand why and how Nazism spread and developed, and why the movement was so successful. Some researchers have placed the roots of Nazism within what they claim to be ‘anti-modern’ elements that had permeated through German culture, and by extension, Western culture; others have suggested that Nazism drew upon previous movements, selected elements that reflected, or could reflect their proposed worldview, and used them for their own purposes, such as adding credibility to their policies or ideology. In particular, Romanticism has been the movement that some historians have cited as a possible root for Nazism. It is not difficult to parse out why. Romanticism includes multiple factors that were certainly part of Nazism: an interest in mysticism (specifically German mysticism for German Romantics), ‘blood and soil’ nationalism, fascination with the Medieval past, and a focus on emotional experience, which researchers have ascertained that Nazism and Romanticism share.

The primary goal of this paper will be to disrupt the historical continuation argument, deconstruct the main parts of each of the camps, and provide support for the appropriation argument. This goal is designed to connect to the much larger debate of the state of anti-modern/modern of Nazism, and aid in showing Nazism as a modern movement. I will be utilizing George L. Mosse’s *The Crisis of German Ideology* to analyze how the continuation argument functions and what parts are essential; this section will include Hans Kohn and Robert W. Lougee’s articles to supplement and to provide a cross-section of the camp. Following, I will provide critiques of this approach and then outline the alternative, David B. Dennis’ appropriation argument. The primary sources that I will analyze in the final sections will be Alfred Baeumler’s “Nietzsche and National Socialism,” Heinrich Härtle’s “Nietzsche and National Socialism,” and Heinz Kindermann’s “The New Literary Values.” By placing Romanticism and Nazism in a continuous timeline with each other, there tends to be two consequences: one, a sense of inevitability to the development of Nazism in Germany, and two, the Nazis almost appear to be passive conduits for past politics, which they then expressed to the German people. However, if researchers focus solely on the two decades previous to the rise of Nazism then aspects, like the prominence of Romantic literature and writers, is left unexplained. It is through researching and analyzing the how and why the Nazis appropriated Romanticism that allows academics to study the influences from the past in the development of National Socialism, while accounting for the frame that the Nazis used to read the Romantics and the purpose for the Nazis’ framing of Romantic literature.

Romanticism is difficult to define as a single, cohesive, organized movement. The term ‘Romanticism’ was not even used by most, if any, of the artists that are considered canonical writers to the movement. In his anthology, Duncan Wu states that the concept of Romanticism was and remains ‘fluid’ and that when one studies Romanticism, “the pre-eminence of [the canon]” as “largely an invention of the twentieth century” must be taken into account when attempting to define it.¹ Even the dates for Romanticism are in flux. Some academics, such as W.R. Fryer, argue that Romanticism begins in 1798 with the publication of Coleridge and Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* and ends around 1850 when the ‘Age of Revolutions’ in Europe comes to a close.² Others suggest that 1798 through to 1830 is more appropriate, when older

¹ Wu, Duncan, ed. *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 4th edition (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell publishers Ltd., 2012) xxxii-iii.

² Fryer, W.R., “Romantic Literature and the European Age of Revolutions.” *Renaissance*

Romantic authors begin leaving the movement or dying, as the dates for the period. And yet others, such as Wu, place the Romantic period from 1770, before the beginning of the American Revolution, to 1851, with the closing of Revolutions and the dwindling publications of explicitly Romantic authors.³ Wu may be primarily focusing on British Romanticism, but his understanding of how later periods shaped the definition Romanticism is fairly similar to the developments of other European Romantic movements, and why it is difficult to design a definition that can encompass the full scope of what Romanticism was and is. However, this is not to say or suggest that there are no shared factors within Romanticism, only that there are a wide variety of literature styles, philosophies, and ideas that factor into European Romantic movements. The historical and political realities of the era impacted the aesthetics of Romantic literature and language; it is the aesthetics and the subject matter interests that are, arguably, the closest to common factors amongst Romantic authors and their works.

It is in responding to past movements and the contemporary events that Romantic literature developed its aesthetics and philosophical interests. However, it is important to note that this does not suggest that Romanticism was “essentially related to politics,” but rather, that there is, as Fryer suggests, a “substantial, and not a merely fortuitous” connection.⁴ Romantics have been accused of dismissing the Enlightenment and reason, even to the point that some academics have put them in binary with each other. Instead of dismissing reason or the Enlightenment, the Romantics saw themselves as inheritors of the Enlightenment, and opened up critiques of previous thought.⁵ Fryer claims that Romantics were “individualists,” so their primary critique was not the idea of reason, but that “reason and good sense” were “products of traditional authorities” and were part of a “cultural unity imposed from above.”⁶ This is particularly poignant when one considers that these critiques are following the American Revolution, and flowering during the French Revolution.⁷ Ultimately, it is the concern for the individual that pushed emotion and individual experience into a central role within Romantic aesthetics. The interest in the individual did not have any particular politics, as Romantics from liberal and conservative camps used it within their writing. Nature was also an attractive motif for the Romantics. It embodied their interests in the nonsensical, the imaginative, and provided a flexible working space for aesthetic experience. Nature allowed for possibilities in critiquing the industrial revolution and expressing anxieties about industry and urbanization, but it also allowed for a space to explore ideas about nation and identity. Interests in folk language and songs, the medieval past, and fairytales perform similar roles as emotion, individual experience, and nature in that they developed as focal points in response to other movements and contemporary historical events, while remaining politically flexible, which explains the spectrum of politics expressed within Romantic literature.^{8 9} With this working structure of Romanticism, as well as the aesthetic and interests associated with it, one may begin to deconstruct previous studies on the connection between Romanticism and Nazism.

and *Modern Studies*, 8, no. 1 (1964): 53.

³ Wu, ii-xxix.

⁴ Fryer, 55.

⁵ Lougee, Robert W., “German Romanticism and Political Thought,” *The Review of Politics* 21, no. 4 (1959): 632, 634. Accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/stable/1405644>.

⁶ Fryer, 57.

⁷ Wu, xxxiii.

⁸ Wu, xxxiii-xxxvii, xxxviii.

⁹ Lougee, 636.

There are three main camps of thought about the connection that Nazism has with Romanticism: one argues that Nazi Germany inherited its anti-Semitism, nationalism, and politics from the Romantics, another argues that the Nazis highlighted some elements of Romanticism and appropriated others for their purposes, and a third argues that the immediate influences of the Weimar era and the first World War were far more significant. The third argument can be, in general, summarized via Robert Ericksen's understanding:

“The search across the centuries for broad historical explanation, although important, includes significant problems of ambiguity and uncertainty. It seems easier, more concrete, and more directly relevant to look closely at the tumultuous quarter-century that preceded the Holocaust...”¹⁰

For Ericksen, and other scholars in the same camp, research into connections to previous eras is problematic because there is the chance of creating a historically deterministic argument or isolating the phenomenon of Nazism to only Germany by suggesting that it was something that was coded into the German culture or character. The main concern for this paper will rest on the first two camps, and, in particular, in deconstructing the inheritance argument and providing support for the appropriation argument.

For the inheritance camp, the similarities in ideas are the key factors in establishing the connection of a continuous thought tradition between Nazism and Romanticism. Fryer argues that the interest in German mysticism, language, and the development of ‘blood and soil’ nationalism is what lead to an “anti-liberal” and “backward-looking attitude within German Romanticism”, which he claims was the root of “the Romantic revolutionaries of Germany [sowing] for a bitter harvest.”¹¹ Kohn similarly argues that Romantic nationalism is the area of concern, though he stresses the lack of modernity as the source of the problem. Kohn states that “Romantic nationality was based not upon a modern constitution but upon traditional customs which grow organically.”¹² He elaborates that this form of nationalism is part of a mystic nationalism which stressed the “peculiarity of the German mind” and a “consciousness of German uniqueness.”¹³ It is these sets of ideas and philosophies that Kohn claims that Romanticism “prepared the rise for German nationalism.”¹⁴ In comparison, Lougee places the emphasis on the conservatism that he claims was central to Romanticism. He states that the high value that Romantics placed on the individual, as well the group, created a structure in which the individual and the group were conceived as “completely and necessarily complementary,” which he argues is unlike dominant Western thought, which placed the two in opposition, and defined one as anti-modern and the other as modern.¹⁵ Lougee argues that Romantics, particularly conservative ones, are “anti-liberal” and “in opposition of nineteenth century political development,” as well as in opposition to “the whole tendency of Modern culture to rationalize, systematize, [and] mechanize.”¹⁶ For Fryer, Kohn, Lougee, and Mosse, it is the similarities that are the indicators that there has been a historical continuation of Romantic ideas through to the Nazi era.

¹⁰ Ericksen, Robert P. *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 12.

¹¹ Fryer, 72.

¹² Kohn, Hans, “Romanticism and the Rise of German Nationalism.” *The Review of Politics* 12, no. 4 (1950): 454. Accessed March 12, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/stable/1404884>

¹³ Kohn, 443, 456-7.

¹⁴ Kohn, 443.

¹⁵ Lougee, Robert W., “German Romanticism and Political thought,” 638.

¹⁶ Lougee, 634.

Following 1945, the trend within historical study into Nazism and its connection to Romanticism tended to lean towards an argument of historical continuation, where Nazi ideas were a continuation of past structures, or a Pandora's box type event, where previous eras introduced ideas that the Nazis subsequently picked up. George L. Mosse's *The Crisis of German Ideology* argues that there was a 'crisis' in German culture that fermented ideas that would develop into National Socialism or made National Socialism more easily accepted. Mosse states that "what differentiated [the] Germany of [the Nazi era] from other nations was a profound mood, a peculiar view of man and society which seems alien and even demonic to the Western intellect."¹⁷ Mosse goes on to argue that the root of the "profound mood" was the New Romanticism and Volkish movements, arguing that "their link with National Socialism may, at times, have been indirect, but that the Nazi movement developed out of this context" and that the Nazi event was "the logical culmination of all of German history."¹⁸

The Pandora's box-esque portion of his thesis is that the 'Volkish moods' encouraged nationalistic emotions that 'ripened' over time. Mosse warns that "however low the fires may be burning at a given time, we can only hope, but not predict, that nowhere in the world will the Volkish ideology again serve as a solution to a crisis in human thought and politics."¹⁹ Mosse expands on the movement from Romanticism to Volk culture, and how these aspects influenced the rise of National Socialism. Mosse describes that "the intellectual and ideological character of Volkish thought was a direct product of the Romantic movement," and that Volkish culture, "like Romanticism," tended "towards the irrational and the emotional."²⁰ Mosse argues that:

"In essence, it was an ideology which stood opposed to the progress and modernization that transformed 19th century Europe. It used and amplified Romanticism to provide an alternative to modernity."²¹

Central to Mosse's argument, and frequently repeated through out his piece, is that aspects of the Nazis, such as their racial ideas or their nationalism, were ideas that "thrived within the Volkish movement and eventually ripened for the Nazi harvest."²² While the two men did not work from each other's studies, this allusion, and metaphor, to harvest is reminiscent to Fryers' statement that the Germans had sowed a "bitter harvest." Mosse does note the difference and does not argue that the racial ideas of the Nazis are the exact same as the Romantics, but he does argue that the similarities are where research focus should be, because it is the similarities that reveal the trend.²³ Mosse makes a compelling argument and he is deft at analyzing where the similarities are and why they are significant, particularly for why they are significant in relation to how previous Volkish ideas appear in Nazi rhetoric, and how these ideas relate to the crimes that the Nazis committed. Yet the question that still remains, why are there differences? And what do those difference mean for researchers trying to link Romanticism and Nazism?

Though Mosse, and others, insist that the important aspects are where Nazism and Romanticism collide, it remains that there is rarely a full explanation or analysis of why differences exist and what is the significance in the differences that do appear. Mosse even states in his book that "[Romantics and Volkish thinkers] would have deplored...the crude racial ideas

¹⁷ Mosse, George L., *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of The Third Reich*, (New York: Universal Library, 1964) 1.

¹⁸ Mosse, 6, 8.

¹⁹ Mosse, 10.

²⁰ Mosse, 13.

²¹ Mosse, 16-17.

²² Mosse, 66.

²³ Mosse, 66.

of the Nazis,” however, he then goes on to state that the “ideas...nonetheless had thrived within the Volkish movement and eventually ripened for the Nazi harvest.”²⁴ If thinkers of the movements that Nazism is drawing from would find the ideas deplorable, then is it reasonable to argue that there is a clean and clear line from Romanticism to Nazism? If there is a difference, then it might be worth suggesting that the Nazis were editing or, at least, reading Romanticism in a particular way.

For the appropriation camp, the differences between the movements and eras are the key elements because they are indicators of how the Nazis were reading, or appropriating, Romanticism, while the similarities are the ideas that appealed to the Nazis with little editing. In her article “Political Distortion of Philosophical Concept: A Case History–Nazism and the Romantic Movement,” Christa Kamenetsky argues that there was a “distortion of values” and “that what began as theory and philosophy culminated in a perverted ideology.”²⁵ Kamenetsky notes that though Herder, a proto-Romantic author who worked in Folk culture and literature traditions, at times privileged German culture over others, he also insisted that “every nation...had not only a “worthy language,” but also a “worthy folk culture” that gave it universal human significance.”²⁶ She goes on to elaborate that the later Romantic period did move away from a type of universalism and into a more “cultural and political nationalism,” but that the Nazis reinterpreted the metaphysical Volk, which was part of Romantic nationalism, into a biological Volk. Kamenetsky argues that the Nazis, especially Nazi literary critics, read the Romantics through the lens of a biological Volk concept, and not on the metaphysical terms that the Romantics had set. This resulted in distortions of Romantic texts and editing of the Romantic canon, which included the exclusion of earlier Romantics who tended towards the universal. Rudiger Safranski highlights the movement from the metaphysical to the scientific and the biological as the point of distortion. Safranski cites Goebbels’ March 25th, 1933 speech to highlight how the Nazis configured the Volk: “...The single individual has been replaced by the community of the Volk...the Volk as the thing-in-itself.”²⁷ Safranski notes that “the thing-in-itself” is meant to symbolize the Romantic conception of the Volk being invoked. However, he goes on to state that the Romantic, metaphysical, “linguistic” Volk was rejected in favour of a Volk that had a “biological and racial grounding of nationality.”²⁸ Both Kamenetsky and Safranski argue that there was, in fact, a distortion of Romanticism and that the Nazi created the distortions through purposefully misreading and editing of the texts to reflect their politics. David Dennis also rejects the notion that Nazism was simply a continuation of Romanticism or that the Nazis were fulfilling Romantic goals and ideals; however, instead of focusing on the distortions of Romantic ideas of the Volk, he focuses on the psychological aspects and how the Nazis edited and then presented Romantic authors and their texts to the public.

In his book *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture*, Dennis argues that the “Nazis were selective in their borrowing, and resisted inclusion of certain “modernist” aspects of Romanticism that they saw as fostering luxuriation in psychological self-indulgence.”²⁹ He uses how Nazi papers, official, and academics framed Heinrich von Kleist in the public sphere as an

²⁴ Mosse, 66.

²⁵ Kamenetsky, Christa, “Political Distortion of Philosophical Concept: A Case History–Nazism and the Romantic Movement, *Metaphilosophy* 3, no. 3 (1972): 198.

²⁶ Kamenetsky, 199.

²⁷ Safranski, Rudiger, *Romanticism: A German Affair* (Northwestern University Press, 2014) 241.

²⁸ Safranski, 241-42.

²⁹ Dennis, David B., *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge university Press, 2012) 176.

example of the editing process that Romantic texts were subjected to. Dennis states that Kleist's works were largely ignored, with exception to *Hermann's Battle*, in favor of highlighting his military background. In particular, Kleist's mental illness and subsequent suicide were treated to nationalist reasoning, such as "attributing [his] suicide to his depression over the state of Germany," which was repeated several times and received support from authorities on literature, like Hellmut Langenbucher, principal of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association.³⁰ Beyond the papers, the nationalistic emphasis of Kleist was broadcasted during events, like Kleist Week that marked the author's 125th anniversary of his death.³¹ Dennis acknowledges that nationalistic interpretations of Kleist were not new, but he places them as part of a reading practice that would read nationalism into less politically defined and dreamier texts and authors. He focuses on the Nazi interpretation of Hölderlin as an example of how this reading practice "revealed" nationalism. A paper, *Völkischer Beobachter*, argued that Hölderlin, against contemporary and earlier readings, was a political writer, and that his focus on nature was one that expressed a type of 'Germanness'. Dennis, however, states that this reading was limited by Hölderlin's own life; his apparent mental instability made him an unsuitable candidate for Nazism's 'steel Romanticism'. For Dennis, the root of these attempts at rereading and repackaging of the Romantics is the fact that the Nazis saw their Romanticism as different. To illustrate this aspect, Dennis cites a speech that Goebbels gave in the Heidelberg Stadthalle on July 9th, 1943:

Every time has its Romanticism, its poetic presentation of life – ours does as well. It is harder and crueler than the earlier version, but it is just as romantic. The Steel Romanticism of our time manifests itself in intoxicating actions and restless deeds in service of a great national goal...We are all more or less romantics of a new German form.³²

It is the case that it might be prudent to take the Nazis's statements and words seriously. If they, themselves, see their Romanticism as different from previous generations, then it is possible that Nazi Romanticism is not a continuation of Romanticism, but instead a new form that reinterprets and distorts the texts from the previous movement to correspond with their political structures and goals.

With consideration to building upon the argument that the Nazis were creating a new Romanticism that borrowed from the original movement, analyzing both Alfred Baeumler's "Nietzsche and National Socialism" and Heinrich Härtle's "Nietzsche and National Socialism" is necessary. It will provide context and additional support that the Nazis, in fact, conceived of a different form of Romanticism, and it is on that premise that it is arguable that Nazism is not a continuation of Romanticism, but instead a different movement that appropriated texts and ideas from others. Both of the pieces are primarily concerned with Nietzsche and the application of his theories and philosophies to Nazism. Though there are distortions of Nietzsche's theories, because of his appearance after the Romantic period, I will not focus on that aspect, but instead, I will focus on the smaller portions where the author directly references or defines Romanticism. Early in his essay, Baeumler makes two statements:

"In contrast, Romanticism saw man again in the light of his natural and historical ties. Romanticism opened our eyes to the night, the past, our ancestors, to mythos, and to the *volk*. The movement...is the only spiritual movement that is still fully alive..."

³⁰ Dennis, 182-83.

³¹ Dennis, 187.

³² Dennis, 176.

In a word, we have discovered new possibilities for understanding the essence of German existence. Precisely in this, Nietzsche has preceded us. We hold a view of Romanticism that is different from his.”³³

The key portions of this excerpt are that the author points to a portion of Romanticism that is central for him. He claims that Romanticism allowed or opened the possibilities for Germans to reclaim the Volk; it made a connection for Germans to the mythical past. This statement may seem to support the continuation theory, but his later statement, that the current view of Romanticism is different from Nietzsche’s suggest that there are differences. I would suggest that if there are differences that Baeumler is willing to admit, then it is possible that Nazi intellectuals and officials were consciously participating in creating a new form of Romanticism. Heinrich Härtle’s article “Nietzsche and National Socialism” in the opening sentences states that:

“And yet our modern concept of the *Volk* has its source in Romanticism, even as it transcends romanticism by leaps and bounds. The National Socialist concept of the *Volk* is formulated not only from a historical and intuitive perspective, it has equally firm footing in science and biology.”³⁴

Härtle both connects National Socialism to Romanticism and makes a distinct break. The main portion of his analysis and critique of Nietzsche is that he does not explicitly include race as a factor in the Volk. Härtle sees previous conceptions of Volk as being historically rooted, but lacking the racial component that he feels is central to Germanness, which Nazism includes in their construction of the Volk. Again, this is a clear break that is being made: pre-Nazi Romanticism does not include racial categories in the Volk, but we (the Nazis) are including it. This is not just inheriting an idea, this is evidence that modifications were being made from a Nazi lens.

Heinz Kindermann, editor and contributor for the favourite literary journal of the Nazi party, *Von Deutschen Art und Dichtung*, argues for what he calls ‘new literary values’. He states that:

“Our biological perspective has taught us to first examine internal structures and only then consider the external; to first turn our attention to the health effects, to the physical and psychological benefits, and only then to focus scrutiny on the perfection of the form...ideal standard can the succeed...when the external and the internal aspects of literature are unanimous...because they both issue from one and the same outpouring soul, the same racial *völkischen* and characteristic perspective...especially the internal aspect of literature – its psychological-intellectual content, *völkisch* orientation, its world view, and its view of mankind – be healthy.”³⁵

Kindermann is making an explicit case for a particular reading of literature, especially Romanticism, considering that he quickly cites Schiller and Goethe to back up his claims. The Nazis are reading literature, not on the literatures’ terms, but instead in a way that is looking for an internal/external harmony that is meant to match up with their construction and understanding of biology and race. This is an active form of interacting with text that is at odds with the passiveness that would make the continuation argument work. The Nazis are actively reading their worldview into literature, instead of purely deriving it from literature. It is with this

³³ Rabinbach, Anson, and Sander L. Gilman ed., *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) 298.

³⁴ Rabinbach and Gilman ed., 302.

³⁵ Rabinbach and Gilman ed., 473.

understanding that a claim for the appropriation argument can be made because it is being discussed within a literary valuing argument.

The purpose of this paper is not to claim that there are no problematic ideas from Romanticism that would have appealed to the Nazis, but rather that the Nazis were not continuing Romanticism or ‘fulfilling Romantic dreams’, but that they were appropriating parts of Romanticism that worked with the world view and constructed new parts for the ideas that did not work. Through studying the historiographical debates of inheritance vs. appropriation, I deconstructed the key elements of each argument and analyzed, based on historical context and primary source analysis, which of the arguments had the stronger case, and then through my own analysis, provided support for the appropriation argument. Further research into the history of literary studies would be the next logical step, since this paper was largely concerned with the historiographical debates and in discerning the key elements. It is easy to understand why the continuation argument is part of the historical discourse, and I do not wish a lessening of historical research into the larger historical contexts in which nationalism, and by extension National Socialism, developed; however, further research into how and why the Nazis appropriated previous ideas might yield some answers on how they consolidated and kept power, and it might further dismantle the argument that Nazism is something that is anti-modern, and not created by modernity.

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