Review Essay

“To Die and Know it”—Approaches in Literature

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The common denominator of the books which are the subject of this review is that their authors discuss a writer or a group of writers who long to find a meaning in life; some of them also try to explain the meaning of suffering—hence the title of this review from Robert Lowell. These topics call for a religious approach of some kind, which, however, is unique in each case and at least slightly at odds with the powers that be: the church, the ruling classes, the predominant social values. As unique and unusual is each writer’s way of expressing his or her concept of how to give life a meaning. This chronologically organized appreciation tries to follow their lines of thought.

In The Longing for Myth George S. Williamson introduces us to the “new mythologies” that developed in nineteenth-century Germany out of the belief that the time-honored “ancient mythologies” had to be superseded in order to undermine the influence of the predominant Protestant educated classes. The culturally and often politically ambitious young hotspurs behind this change were the Jena Romantics Friedrich Schelling and Friedrich Schlegel; the “nationally”-minded literati August Wilhelm Schlegel, Joseph Görres, Jacob Grimm, and Heinrich Heine; and the classical philologist Friedrich Creuzer, the theologian David Friedrich Strauss, the composer Richard Wagner, the “folk psychologist” Heymann Steinthal and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. This list already makes it obvious that Williamson has examined documents from a wide range of scholarly disciplines as well as relying heavily on biographical information about the writers mentioned, which he then retells in detail. Because of the last point, his work can equally well be read as an introduction to their lives. Also, throughout the book Williamson takes great pains to throw some light on the links between new intellectual attitudes and old social, political, and religious contexts in which they emerged. For my liking, he sometimes overdoes this, and quite a few passages consist of not much more than just eminent names being dropped. For clarity’s and brevity’s sake, I would