

The background of the book cover is a reproduction of a painting. It depicts several figures in a blue, ethereal sky. At the top, a single white star is visible. In the center, a figure with a pale face and dark hair is being embraced from behind by two other figures. Below them, another group of figures is visible, some appearing to be in a state of distress or being held. The overall style is reminiscent of 19th-century Romanticism or Symbolism.

Metamimesis

Imitation in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*
and Early German Romanticism

Mattias Pirholt

Metamimesis

Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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and Early German Romanticism

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CAMDEN HOUSE

Rochester, New York

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*To my daughters, Dora and Siri,
and to the loving memory of my father, Gunnar Pirholt (1942–2008),
my mother-in-law, Ulla Johansson (1930–2007),
and my father-in-law, Paul Johansson (1931–2012).*

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A note on the text: The abbreviations used throughout this book are listed in the following section. All emphases in quotations are in the original, unless otherwise noted, and appear as italics, even when the original uses *Sperrdruck* or increased spacing between the letters.

Mattias Pirholt
The Åland Islands, May 2012

Abbreviations

- FBA Clemens Brentano. *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe, Frankfurter Brentano-Ausgabe. Edited by Jürgen Behrens et al. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1975–.
- KA Friedrich Schlegel. *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*. Edited by Ernst Behler et al. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1958–.
- KSB August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Kritische Schriften und Briefe*. Edited by Edgar Lohner. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1962–74.
- MA Johann Wolfgang Goethe. *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens*. Münchner Ausgabe. Edited by Karl Richter. Munich: Hanser, 1985–98.
- NA Friedrich Schiller. *Sämtliche Werke*. Nationalausgabe, begründet von Julius Petersen, fortgesetzt von Lieselotte Blumenthal and Benno von Wiese. Weimar: Böhlau, 1943–.
- S Novalis. *Schriften: Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe. Edited by Paul Kluckhohn et al. 2nd ed. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960–.
- V August Wilhelm Schlegel. *Kritische Ausgabe der Vorlesungen*. Edited by Ernst Behler. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1989–.
- W Clemens Brentano. *Werke*. Studienausgabe. Edited by Wolfgang Frühwald et al. 2nd ed. Munich: Hanser, 1978.

Introduction

Auf der andern Seite kann aber auch die Nachahmung des Wirklichen an Vollkommenheit unendlich zunehmen: denn die Fülle jedes Einzelnen ist unerschöpflich, und kein Abbild kann jemals ganz in sein Urbild übergehen. (*KA* I, 289)

Über das neuere *Princip der Nachahmung der Natur. / Realisierung des Scheins* (*S* III, 244)

FROM THE VERY BEGINNING mimesis and its various translations — *imitatio naturae*, *imitation of nature*, *Nachahmung der Natur* — have proved themselves to be ideological concepts. Plato's famous rejection of imitation in the *Republic* — that imitation of objects removes us one step further away from the world of ideas — has not only aesthetic and philosophical implications but political ones as well. Imitation is more precisely a form of activity that diverts the attention of the citizen from his or her real duty.¹ In Aristotle mimesis becomes an anthropological theory. Imitation, Aristotle argues, is a fundamental faculty of mankind and an *instinct* implanted in man from birth.² Accordingly, it seems reasonable to assume that his definition of drama as an imitation of human action, rather than of human characters,³ could be taken as an aesthetic theory that focuses on human relations more than anything else.

In present-day interpretations the ideological nature of mimesis continues to be an important issue. Erich Auerbach's famous exposition in *Mimesis* (1946) construes the evolution of represented realities in literature as essentially one that reflects the history of social and political conditions.⁴ In the works of Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Julia Kristeva, René Girard, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-Luc Nancy, on the other hand, mimesis is viewed as being more problematic. It points just as much to the irrational, tabooed (Adorno), antisymbolic (Kristeva), and even mystical (Benjamin) connection with what has been repressed in the dialectic of the Enlightenment,⁵ as to the will to suppress and dominate the other (Girard) and the racist nazi myth of identity (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy).⁶ Mimesis remains an analytically attractive concept that enables the interpreter to uncover hidden, repressed, or unconscious social structures materialized in imitative practices (art and poetry, for instance) — an idea that lies at the bottom of both Plato's refutation and Aristotle's affirmation of the idea of imitation.

Between these ancient and the contemporary discourses, we find an almost unfathomable amount of discussion and interpretation of the problem of mimetic representation. Figures implying mimesis — imitation, similarity, repetition, and analogy, among others — reappear throughout the history of aesthetics with uncanny regularity, continuously reforming themselves and adapting themselves to new circumstances, new ideas, and new ideologies. Despite the repeated attacks on the idea of mimetic representation, it has proved to be indispensable to how we think about art. “The concept of mimesis,” Stephen Halliwell argues in *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (2002), “lies at the core of the entire history of Western attempts to make sense of representational art and its values.”⁷ For better or for worse, the concept constantly insists on our attention, urging us to address the questions that necessarily arise as soon as we consider our ideas of how we — in art and in general — represent what we see around us and what we sense within us.

But why do aesthetic concepts like mimesis, imitation, and representation provoke all these varied ideological and political responses — the word Halliwell uses is *values* of representational art? Mimesis and representation, W. J. T. Mitchell has underscored, are first and foremost concepts that refer to ways that literature and art interact and intersect with life. Their insistence on our attention and on constant reinterpretation underscores their universal significance, and the reason for this is that they constitute “precisely the point where these questions [of ideology and politics] are most likely to enter the literary work. If literature,” Mitchell continues, “is a ‘representation of life,’ then representation is exactly the place where ‘life,’ in all its social and subjective complexity, gets into the literary work.”⁸ What is more, investigations into the history and aesthetics of mimesis require a dialectical approach, as neither life nor its representations may be grasped independently. Life is not only the input of the work but also the output. To put it differently, the various forms of representation — realistic, fantastic, scientific, philosophical, rhetorical, etc. — let the conditions of life into the work and, at the same time, determine how we construe life outside the work. Mimesis, then, constitutes the dialectical point of intersection between the literary work and life.

If mimesis constitutes a persistent ideological and dialectical intersection of life and literature in the history of aesthetics, the idea that art at one time or another revolts against the aesthetics of imitation is no less ideological. This revolt has defined aesthetics and literary history since at least the early twentieth century. It suggests, I would say, a teleological history of the autonomization of art and the separation of the field of aesthetics from other forms of discourses. From this point of view art is essentially — though not historically — an autopoietic system, preoccupied with its own forms and themes. In an almost Hegelian sense, the *Geist* of art has to realize itself as autonomous in history before art can become identical

with itself and become art proper. The self-identity of the aesthetic, the telos of the progression of art, is finally obtained in the modernist conception of aesthetics, which promotes the artist as an independent, self-sufficient creator.

When literary history searches for the sources of the modernist insistence on the autopoietic nature of poetry, it repeatedly places the turning point in the late eighteenth century. This period is often referred to as one of crisis and change — politically, philosophically, scientifically, and aesthetically. These are the times of the French Revolution, the end of the feudal world order and “l’âge Classique,” the rise of modern capitalism and consumerism, the beginning of the industrial age, the triumph of the bourgeoisie, the restructuring of the public sphere, and the transcendental turn in philosophy. Aesthetically, the metamorphosis is just as profound. Particularly the early romantic movement (*Frühromantik* or Jena romanticism), an incredibly intensive and productive phase in literary history dating from the mid-1790s, played a critical role in the transformation of aesthetic expression. The emergence of a specifically romantic aesthetics in the works of August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Ludwig Tieck, and Clemens Brentano, to mention a few, seems to be a turning point in history of art — a change of paradigm or even a revolution.⁹ The romantics rebelled against the rule-governed, repertoire-based rhetorical poetics of classicism; they turned against the idea that there are given forms and motifs, established once and for all; they refused to subordinate poetry to other uses of language (rhetoric, logic).

What this book would like to question, however, is the idea that the romantic revolution also meant the complete refutation of the aesthetics of mimesis. Were the romantics actually able to liberate themselves completely from a two-thousand-year-old tradition that began with Plato and Aristotle and was resurrected in the fifteenth century by Leon Battista Alberti — a tradition that saw imitation as the fundamental and universal principle of aesthetic practice? Or did they, whether consciously or unconsciously, appropriate, reinterpret, and reshape the idea of mimesis, adopting it to new aesthetic, political, social, and moral circumstances? The romantics’ theoretical discourse of the concept of mimesis, as I will show in the first chapter, adopted and reinterpreted ideas that were typical of the classicist debate. Thus, the analogy between the productivity of nature and that of the artist (*poiesis*), and the conception of art as the formation of alternative and ideal worlds, are ideas that bridge the gap between classicism and the Enlightenment, on the one hand, and romanticism, on the other.

Furthermore, as revealed by the interconnection between imitation and production, or indeed by the fundamental dialectics of life and poetry, mimesis does not only denote a theoretical relation between art and the world. More than anything it is a practical concept, indicating the dialectical

practices involved as the world is turned into art and vice versa. Mimesis as a set of formal practices enables, as we saw, the dialectical intersection of life and poetry, but it also institutes the difference between the two. The idea of similarity, which lies at the bottom of the concept of imitation, nullifies the idea of identity, instilling through the imitative practices of the artist an irrevocable difference between object and representation. In the late eighteenth century these mimetic practices were under transformation, certainly, but they still reveal a complex dialectic of reality and ideality. During the period in question, the idea of aesthetic autonomy was gradually advancing, but at the same time, the work of art was dialectically brought back to the world in the form of utopia. The autonomous simulation, which we find in the works of, say, Karl Philipp Moritz, Novalis, and Brentano, interacts with the world as a utopian transformation of it. The mimetic practices of the artist — the use of figures of mimesis such as imitation, repetition, recognition, and remembrance — turn out to overturn the relationship between nature and art, making nature into imitations of art.

What stands out — at least since Walter Benjamin's groundbreaking dissertation, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1920) — as a distinctively romantic contribution to the heterogeneous structure of productive modes in the late eighteenth century is a fundamentally (self-)reflective gesture that permeates all forms of expressions. Romantic thinking and romantic criticism, Benjamin shows, are epitomized by a fundamental reflective displacement. Criticizing the ego philosophy of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the romantics (Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis in particular) decentered the subject, situating it in a reflective constellation in which the work of art functioned as the primary "medium of reflection." The form of the (romantic) work, Benjamin concludes, is the objective expression of the work's inherent reflectivity.¹⁰ Although Benjamin's scope is the theoretical and conceptual discourse of the romantics, he indirectly points to the practice of reflection in the romantic work as well. Schlegel's philosophical investigations into the self-reflective form of the work also indicate the self-reflective practice of the romantics, including his and his comrades' poetic practices, which are under consideration in this book.

The structure of the romantic work, then, consists of a combination of mimetic and self-reflective practices. To put it another way, the romantic work reproduces mimesis metapoetically as a representation of representation. It reflects the representational conditions of the work itself, rendering it what I would like to call a *metamimetic* space. The term *metamimesis* suggests that mimetic representation takes place in the metapoetical space of the work. This space is in turn represented by what one could call *figures of imitation* — that is, by figures that in different ways denote the aesthetic practice in which life and poetry intersect within the novel. Images con-

noting similarity, resemblance, remembrance, repetition, and analogy, for instance, all unlock the metamimetic space of the novel, as they represent the novel's own mimetic self-understanding. These figures of imitation, then, become points of reflection where the conditions and limitations of representation in general, and of mimesis in particular, are investigated. Romantic mimesis, then, is a transcendental concept that aims at investigating the transcendental laws of mimetic representation and that is compatible with what has been labeled the transcendental turn in late eighteenth century poetry and philosophy. But whereas scholars like Paul Böckmann and Manfred Engel construe this turn as a renunciation of the tradition of mimesis,¹¹ this book will investigate how mimesis is transcendentalized in the romantic work. Reflections of mimesis give us the key to the understanding of romantic thinking and romantic aesthetics.

In the romantic work, the ideology of mimesis — that is, the intersection of life and poetry provided by mimesis — becomes a question of reflection: the romantic work does not so much present an ideological content as it reflects on the conditions of ideology. As a result, romantic ideology has proved itself to be highly problematic and intrinsically contradictory. The politics of the romantics have been regarded as both revolutionary and reactionary, both democratic and aristocratic. Yet none of these is — or else all of them are — in fact applicable to the political reflections in the romantic work. Rather, the work provides us with the conditions of these terms. It experiments and tests the nature and limits of ideologies rather than settling for any one of them. Thus, the romantic idealizing of the Middle Ages points directly and paradoxically to ideas of democracy, just as much as the idea of a radical revolution leads to a reactionary denunciation of modernity. Romantic ideology, in other words, is nothing less than a *contradictio in adjecto*.

The novel seems particularly receptive to the mimetic-reflective restructuring of practice and its ideological conditions. The genre's rise in eighteenth-century Europe is intimately connected with the rise of the bourgeoisie and hence a bourgeois interpretation of reality. A new kind of mimeticism, a new way of interconnecting life and poetry, was born, and it focused not on hereditary forms and objects of representation but on the psychology and problems of the individual within a new society. The "new" genre of the novel enabled new ways of experimenting with the intersection between the actual and the possible.

For the early romantics, the novel became nothing less than a generic ideal or a "progressive Universalpoesie," as Schlegel says (*KA* II, 182), consisting of an amalgamation of all other genres and hence transcending the inherited classical system of genres. Their conception of the ideal nature of the novel, I will show in the first chapter, did not lead them to refrain from the mimetic intersection of life and poetry. On the contrary, the progressive universalism of the genre in question enabled them to

reinterpret the relation between poetic representation and life. Rather than passively reproducing life, the novel became the production of life. No aspect of human existence should be excluded from the productive representation. Life in its totality and fullness is what should be experienced in the work, and in the end, the work and the world were conflated into one self-mimetic simulation of reality.

Once again, the reflectivity of the mimetic practice calls for attention, as the romantic novel represents not so much life as such as the transcendental conditions of life. A romantic work could ask itself: How can art represent life? The answer could sound something like: only in so far as life becomes art. Friedrich Schlegel, for instance, talks about how romantic poetry (the novel) transforms life and society into art (*KA* II, 182), whereas Novalis pictures a process in which reality is completely romanticized (*S* II, 545). As a result, the romantic novels almost compulsorily tell stories of artists and writers and their road to self-understanding and to a comprehension of the interrelation between the individual and society. The metamimesis of the romantic novel — that is, the novel's reflections on mimesis embodied in these stories of artists — provides a double thematics that are indeed ideological: the intersection of life and poetry in the romantic work points to the formation (*Bildung*) of the individual as well as to ideas of social order. As we will see, figures of imitation are primarily materialized in depictions of social relation and in stories of the individual's place in society. Reflecting on representation means that one reflects on the social order as well.

No other work of the period defined the double theme of self-understanding and interaction with society as Johann Wolfgang Goethe's paradigmatic novel, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795–96). Although itself not a romantic work, it constitutes the indisputable point of departure for any discussion of the romantic novel. In a famous statement, Friedrich Schlegel included Goethe's novel with the French Revolution and Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* as the most important indicators of the time (*KA* II, 198). What specifically fascinates him, according to a passage in his extensive essay "Über Goethes Meister" (1798), is the transformation of representation in the novel: "Der Dichter und Künstler hingegen wird die Darstellung von neuem darstellen, das schon Gebildete noch einmal bilden wollen; er wird das Werk ergänzen, verjüngern, neu gestalten" (*KA* II, 140). Schlegel interprets *Wilhelm Meister* as a new form of self-reflective representation: the representation of representation. However, the representational self-reflectivity is not a question of a self-sufficient aesthetic game, Schlegel's essay shows us, but pertains to such ideological issues as the formation of individuality (*Bildung*) and the submission of free will to social restrictions, usefulness, and economic conditions. In other words, the novel's new way of self-representation presents new ways of interconnecting life and art.

What Schlegel's ingenious essay draws attention to — this is the theme of my second chapter — is the importance of self-reflection in Goethe's novel and the ideology associated with this act. In *Wilhelm Meister*, reflection, as it materializes in the depictions of theater and the visual arts, is an attempt to overcome the differentiation of representation by reinstating a symbolic unity. This differentiation comes about in a scene early in the novel where the young Wilhelm is confronted with the way the mimetic acting of the stage actor takes place in a social sphere, where the main qualities are difference, lack, and shortage. The desire for symbolic images is supposed to put an end to the experience of difference, which is inherent in imitation. However, the symbolic unity itself turns out to be split between truth and falsity, and it reveals a process of commoditization of the world that affects the aesthetic expression. It transforms art into uncontrollable fetishes, and the novel's desire for identity and unity remains unsatisfied.

In Goethe's novel the self-reflective, self-gazing representation is portrayed as a sign of unbridgeable difference and as the reason behind the unquenchable desire for unity and transcendence. In Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde* (1799), as we will see in the third chapter, these differences are the driving force of the story. The novel reflects on the problem of metamimesis by representing imitation as transcendence and transgression of both medial and social boundaries. The free play of aesthetic repetition permeates the novel on almost every level and reveals an extremely horizontal, nontranscendental conception of the world and society that counterbalances the allegorical indication of the absolute. Thus, mimetic representations as well as metamimetic reflections are located in the same world as the one they reflectively depict. The radical worldliness of the novel is embodied in the novel's poetics of indolence, which in turn suggests an equally radical politics of nonprogression. This ideology denounces the transcendentalist ideas of society that assign to man's practices the goal of progress. Schlegel's poetics, correspondingly, is based on repetition, reproduction, and regression within one and the same world, and is thus radically egalitarian.

Whereas in Schlegel's novel the metamimetic reflections point to a radical worldliness, in Novalis's posthumously published *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, which is discussed in the fourth chapter, we find ourselves in a world of fictive simulation and aesthetic appearance. Using figures of mimesis, Heinrich's story is a simulation of life, aiming at transcendently investigating the conditions of life. Heinrich's life story is one of imitation and repetition of other people's experiences, revealing that appearance (*Schein*) constitutes the very core of truth. The entire novel becomes a self-reflective metamimetic space, forming a self-contained simulation of reality, which at the same time shows that reality is essentially fiction and simulation — Novalis's idea of the *ordo inversus*. As a result, fiction and

imagery are the only ways to establish (an image of) utopia, as only fiction provides a truthful image of the fictive nature of reality and the true nature of fiction.

In Brentano's *Godwi oder Das steinerne Bild der Mutter* (1801–2), finally, the tendencies of the romantic novel and romantic ideology are exhausted to the maximum, making this work the perfect manifestation of the romantic theory of the novel and at the same time a fundamental critique of the novel's representational conditions. Using almost all elements of Schlegel's theory of the novel to the fullest (the amalgamation of genres and of art forms, self-reflection, autobiographical elements, erotic motifs, etc.) Brentano's text points to the idea of beauty and unity but also to lack and petrification — both poles constitute the core of representation. Figures of imitation, particularly in the form of the self-reflective Ovidian characters, Narcissus and Echo, refer to the desire to communicate with the other and the fundamental isolation of the reflective subject. The way out of this contradiction is an idea of love that embraces both similarity and difference. Imitation in Brentano's work is politically radical, suggesting a new, nonbourgeois society, establishing a new aesthetics and a new relationship among individuals.

Together the four novels reveal a productive and problematic involvement in the aesthetic-ideological complex of mimesis and representation. The reflective-mimetic (metamimetic) gesture, which can be retraced in the novels' self-reflective use of figures of imitation, is a political gesture that points beyond traditional political dichotomies — between individual and society, progression and reaction, radicality and conservatism, poetry and reality — toward a transcendental politics, uncovering the conditions of ideology and the need for critique. As the following chapters will show, romantic ideology is first and foremost critical (both philosophically and politically) and aims at representing the possibility of the political and thus of new social practices. Romantic ideology is essentially a utopian ideology, but not in terms of its fascination for the Middle Ages or of its idea of the coming of a golden age. Instead, it articulates a critical utopia, a transcendental utopia.

Notes

¹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 395c.

² Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. and trans. Stephen Halliwell, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Loeb, 1995), 1448b.

³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450a.

⁴ See, in particular the chapter on Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert in Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, 4th ed. (Bern: Francke, 1967), ch. 18.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 178; Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique: L'avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle, Lautreamont et Mallarmé* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), 57–61; Walter Benjamin, “Über das mimetische Vermögen” (1933), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II/1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 210–13.

⁶ René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), 11–57; Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Mythe nazi* (La Tour d'Aigues: Edition de l'Aube, 1991).

⁷ Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2002), vii.

⁸ W. J. T. Mitchell, “Representation,” *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990), 15.

⁹ Ernst Behler, *Frühromantik* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992), 15.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1920), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I/1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 73.

¹¹ Paul Böckmann, “Der Roman der Transzendentalpoesie in der Romantik,” *Geschichte, Deutung, Kritik: Literaturwissenschaftliche Beiträge dargebracht zum 65. Geburtstag Werner Kohlschmidts*, ed. Maria Bindschedler and Paul Zinsli (Bern: Francke, 1969), 174; Manfred Engel, *Der Roman der Goethezeit*, vol. 1, *Anfänge in Klassik und Frühromantik: Transzendente Geschichten* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993), 5–6.

1: Romanticism, Mimesis, and the Novel

Der Gegenstand der Kunst, wie wir gesehen haben, ist nothwendig Natur. Die Idee der Natur haben wir in uns, aber historisch genommen, wie wir sie in der Erfahrung kennen lernen, bleibt sie für uns unübersehbar und unergründlich. (VI, 261)

THE IMMENSE AMOUNT OF SCHOLARSHIP attempting to define the nature or essence of romanticism has suggested that one's interpretation of mimesis constitutes a dividing line between, on the one hand, (neo)classicism and the Enlightenment and, on the other, romanticism. After the resurrection of the interest in the romantic movement in the early twentieth century, brought about first by Ricarda Huch and Josef Nadler and then by H. A. Korff, Josef Körner, Julius Petersen, and Fritz Strich, the consensus has been that the young romantics put a definite end to the hegemony of classicism by replacing mimesis, or the imitation of nature, with new aesthetic ideals. Instead of being subjected to the rules and techniques of reproducing nature through verisimilitude, the artist was now a free, productive creator, equivalent or at least comparable to God or nature itself — as in Lord Shaftesbury's attractive idea of the artist as a second maker. What led to the romantic revolution is often seen as a process that went on for several decades, beginning in the early eighteenth century, but the work of the Jena romantics was crucial. Its consistent and deliberate renunciation (*Abkehr*) of the aesthetics of imitation is construed as a key factor in the romantic revolution.¹

It is striking that this way of telling the story, despite the numerous attempts to rewrite the course of events, has prevailed. Contemporary criticism tends to emphasize the continuity in the development of the late eighteenth century, from the Enlightenment, via Sturm und Drang and Weimar classicism, to early romanticism.² Nevertheless, this interpretation of the key concept, mimesis, remains more or less the same, with only few exceptions. Even scholars who emphasize the profound connections between romanticism and the preceding movements agree with the general idea that romantic aesthetics signifies a break with the aesthetics of mimesis. It seems crucial to romantic scholarship to underscore a fundamental rupture in history in order to ensure a comprehensible narrative of progress. Mimesis as a sign of both obsolete aesthetics and an obsolete world order ("Page Classique") must, so it seems, meet its end with the rise of the bourgeoisie.³

To be sure, sustaining the idea of imitation as an all-encompassing aesthetic principle became in the course of time increasingly difficult as the possibilities of aesthetic expression diversified. During the eighteenth century, the end of classicist hegemony opened up the field for new ways of thinking about the nature of art. However, as we will see in this chapter, the concept of mimesis remained extremely powerful throughout the century, adapting itself to new historical contexts and aesthetic ideals. For more than two thousand years, since Plato and Aristotle at least, it had proved to be capable of continually reforming itself, addressing new problems and supplying new solutions; the eighteenth century was no exception. During this period the debate on the possibilities and limits of imitation became critical, revealing a high degree of ingenuity among critics, philosophers, and poets in criticizing the concept and at the same time reshaping it in accordance with their own agendas.

Furthermore, as the discussion on the aesthetics of imitation intensified, we see the rise of a new genre: the novel, whose possibilities, restrictions, and authority are criticized and defended with as much ferocity as the concept of imitation. As we will see in the second section of this chapter, the debates on the novel and on imitation were in fact interrelated, as both focused on the connections between life and poetry and on the license of the artist to transcend these connections. For the romantics the novel became a way of dealing with the clash between reality and ideals, which were brought together by the mimetic nature of this particular genre.

This chapter, then, will give the theoretical background necessary to the readings of Goethe, Schlegel, Novalis, and Brentano in the following chapters. It will show how the concept of imitation continued to attract the attention of critics and writers during the last years of the eighteenth century. It will suggest that the aesthetics of mimesis played an important role for the romantics both in their reinterpretation of art as self-reflective and in their obsession with the novel. These two lines of thought — the reflective and the novelistic — coincide in the metamimetic novelistic practice that is the subject of the following chapters.

The Romantic Reinterpretation of Mimesis

If there is one thing that the concept of mimesis does not denote — and never has denoted — it is the immediate, self-explaining, and photographic depiction of reality. If we look closer at how the term has been used in ancient philosophy, in eighteenth-century poetics, or in twentieth-century criticism, we soon realize that imitation (*mimesis*, *imitatio*, *l'imitation*, *Nachahmung*) has almost nothing to do with copying or reproducing a given reality. Even the most determined eighteenth-century advocates of