

troyed them, and instead of plastic polytheism art knows now only *one* God, one spirit, one absolute independence which, as the absolute knowing and willing of itself, remains in free unity with itself.”³⁴ No longer does the artist carry around a mirror, to hold up to nature. A better metaphor for the creative process is the lamp, which shines from within.³⁵

NATURE AND NATURE'S LAWS

The two most quoted lines of poetry about a natural scientist were written by Alexander Pope in 1730:

*Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night,
God said "Let Newton be!" and all was light.*

They deftly summed up the Enlightenment's view of Newton's greatest achievement among many. By finally destroying the Greek assumption that the celestial and terrestrial worlds are fundamentally different and by demonstrating that both operate according to the same regular, immutable laws of motion, he had opened the way for the mechanization of heaven and earth. God might still have a place in a post-Newtonian universe, but only as the original creator of a mechanism that

then ran according to its own laws. In Voltaire's opinion: "Newton is the greatest man who has ever lived, the very greatest, the giants of antiquity are beside him children playing marbles."³⁶ It mattered not that Newton was a devout Christian who wrote extensively on theology and spent a good deal of time trying to unravel the secrets of the Book of Revelation. In the eyes of the *philosophes*, he had delivered the knockout blow to revealed religion. He had completed the project begun by another English sage, Francis Bacon. It was now clear that the only true form of knowledge is scientific knowledge, that is to say knowledge established by that combination of empiricism and mathematics that is the scientific method, and whatever could not be verified in this way is not knowledge at all.³⁷ Moreover, science was also opening the way for boundless improvement through the control of nature. As Benjamin Franklin wrote to Joseph Priestley: "The rapid progress true science now makes, occasions my regretting sometimes that I was born so soon. It is impossible to imagine the height to which may be carried, in a thousand years, the power of man over matter."³⁸

But Rousseau was not the only one to find that the light projected by the Enlightenment illuminated more than it warmed and was bright but not very penetrating. Voltaire himself is reported to have commented: "I am like a mountain stream: I run fast and bright but not

very deep.”³⁹ As the eighteenth century wore on, a growing number of intellectuals reacted against the elevation of reason to sole eminence. The fundamental charge that the scientific method could explain everything but understand nothing was advanced in many different ways. A universe in which God had been demoted to the role of primal clock maker seemed to be a chilly place. Johann Heinrich Merck, friend of Goethe and member of the “Storm and Stress” [*Sturm und Drang*] group, wrote:

Now we have got the freedom of believing in public nothing but what can be rationally demonstrated. They have deprived religion of all its sensuous elements, that is, of all its relish. They have carved it up into its parts and reduced it to a skeleton without colour and light ... and now it's put in a jar and nobody wants to taste it.⁴⁰

Hamann was more forthright: “God is a poet, not a mathematician.... What is this much lauded reason with its universalist infallibility, certainty, and over-weening claims, but an *ens rationis* [object of thought], a stuffed dummy ... endowed with divine attributes?”⁴¹ Heinrich von Kleist sneered that all Newton saw in a girl's heart was its cubic capacity and in her breast just a curved line.⁴² August Wilhelm Schlegel thought that the limitations of the Enlightenment were best summed up in

the question of the mathematician: “What can a poem prove?”⁴³ Goethe spoke to God through Mephistopheles in the Prologue to *Faust*, which takes place in Heaven:

*The little earth-god still persists in his old ways,
Ridiculous as ever, as in his first days.
He'd have improved if you'd not given
Him a mere glimmer of the light of heaven;
He calls it Reason, and it only has increased
His power to be beastlier than a beast.*⁴⁴

The Germans were not of course alone in finding rationalism inadequate. The English romantic poets expressed their distaste just as eloquently. In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* of 1800, William Wordsworth wrote: “The Man of science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude: the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion.” William Blake was more concise: Among the epigrams he attached to his engraving of the classical sculpture group *Laocoön* was: “Art is the Tree of Life. Science is the Tree of Death.”⁴⁵

He offered a lengthier denunciation in his narrative poem *Milton*:

*The negation is the Spectre, the reasoning power in man:
 This is a false body, an incrustation over my immortal
 Spirit, a selfhood which must be put off and annihilated away
 To cleanse the face of my spirit by self-examination
 To bathe in the waters of life, to wash off the not human
 I come in self-annihilation and the grandeur of inspiration
 To cast off rational demonstration by faith in the Saviour
 To cast off the rotten rags of memory by inspiration
 To cast off Bacon, Locke, and Newton from Albion's covering,
 To take off his filthy garments and clothe him with imagin-
 ation.*

Perhaps the most considered criticism of mechanistic natural science came from Coleridge in two letters to his friend Thomas Poole. In 1797 he wrote: “I have known some who have been rationally educated.... They were marked by a microscopic acuteness, but when they looked at great things, all became blank and they saw nothing.”⁴⁶ Four years later he developed this view in a justly celebrated passage that deserves to be quoted in full:

The more I understand of Sir Isaac Newton's works, the more boldly I dare utter to my own mind, and therefore to you, that

I believe the souls of five hundred Sir Isaac Newtons would go to the making up of a Shakespeare or a Milton. But if it please the Almighty to grant me health, hope, and a steady mind ..., before my thirtieth year I will thoroughly understand the whole of Newton's works. At present I must content myself with endeavouring to make myself entire master of his easier work, that on Optics. I am exceedingly delighted with the beauty and neatness of his experiments, and with the accuracy of his *immediate* deductions from them; but the opinions founded on these deductions, and indeed his whole theory is, I am persuaded, so exceedingly superficial as without impropriety to be deemed false. Newton was a mere materialist. *Mind*, in his system, is always passive, a lazy Looker-on on an external world.⁴⁷

For Coleridge, Blake, and many more romantics, the archvillain was not, however, Newton but John Locke, for it was his sensationalist psychology that had expelled innate ideas and had thus become “proposition one of the whole philosophy of the Enlightenment.”⁴⁸ At birth, Locke maintained, the human mind was “white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas.” It acquired knowledge simply and solely through experience —“in that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself.” This rejection of original sin meant a move from a theocentric to an anthropocentric view of life, from God to man. It also opened up bound-

less possibilities for social engineering. If man was the product of his environment acting on his sensations, then to change the nature of man one only had to change his environment. Coleridge found this epistemology completely unacceptable: The human mind was not passive —“a lazy Looker-on on an external world”—but active and creative. He prefaced his remarks on Newton in the letter to Poole quoted earlier with the observation “My opinion is this—that deep Thinking is attainable only by a man of deep Feeling, and that all Truth is a species of Revelation.” His friend Wordsworth, on the other hand, chose to reinvent Newton as a proto-romantic “voyaging through strange seas of Thought alone.” Indeed, as Richard Holmes has demonstrated, the natural sciences could be an inspiration to the romantics when approached in a suitably wondering frame of mind.⁴⁹

Coleridge also advanced another popular critique of empirical science when he referred to Locke as a “Little-ist.” By that he meant that the critical methodology favored by rationalist thinkers had dismantled the universe until it lay around them in a meaningless heap of little bits and pieces. As he told Poole: “They contemplate nothing but *parts* and all *parts* are necessarily little—and the Universe to them is but a mass of little things.”⁵⁰ For his part, he explained, he had never lost the habit acquired in childhood through the reading of fairy stories of seek-

ing knowledge through the imagination. In this way, “my mind has been habituated to *the Vast* & I never regarded *my senses* in any way as the criteria of my belief.” He conceded that this ran the risk of promoting superstition but claimed it was greatly preferable to the alternative: “Are not the Experimentalists credulous even to madness in believing any absurdity, rather than believe the grandest truths, if they have not the testimony of their own senses in their favour?”

Against the “the cold and lifeless Spitzbergen of arm-chair reason” (Novalis),⁵¹ the romantics opposed feeling. Again and again they stressed the need to escape from the arid factual world of appearances and enter the interior realm of the self. Caspar David Friedrich warned: “Beware of the superficial knowledge of cold facts, beware of sinful ratiocination, for it kills the heart and when heart and mind have died in a man, there art cannot dwell.”⁵² Blake’s version of the same thought was: “Mental Things alone are Real, what is call’d Corporeal Nobody knows of its Dwelling place; it is Fallacy and its Existence an Impos-ture.”⁵³ Goethe’s eponymous hero in his bestselling novel *The Sufferings of Young Werther* responded to the “narrow bounds which confine man’s powers of action and investigation” by exclaiming: “I return into myself, and find a world!”⁵⁴ What he found there was a tropical zone far more tempestuous than the icy cliffs of Spitzbergen.

Albert, his decent but dull rival for the affections of Lotte, observes primly: “A person who is carried away by his passions loses all power of deliberation and is as good as drunk or mad.” Werther replies:

Oh, you rationalists! Passion! Drunkenness! Madness! You stand there so calm, so unsympathetic, you moral men! chide the drinker, abhor the irrational, walk past like priests, and like the Pharisee thank God that he has not made you like one of these. I have been drunk more than once, my passions were never far from madness, and I repent of neither: for in my own measure I have learned to understand how it is that all extraordinary beings, who have accomplished something great, something seemingly impossible, have always and necessarily been defamed as drunk and mad.⁵⁵

Shelley made the same point more soberly when he wrote: “Poetry, as has been said, differs in this respect from logic, that it is not subject to the control of the active powers of the mind, and that its birth and recurrence have no necessary connexion with the consciousness or will.”⁵⁶

Underlying these attacks on reason, logic, atomism, materialism, and the rest was a view of nature sharply opposed to that ascribed to Newton. Nothing roused the romantics to greater indignation than the notion that na-

ture was inert matter, to be understood by dissection, experiment, and analysis. On the contrary, they proclaimed, all nature constituted a single living organism, a “Universal Nature or World Soul.” This last concept was central to the philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854), succinctly summarized by the chiasm “Nature is visible Spirit; Spirit is invisible Nature.” His own study of physics, medicine, and mathematics convinced him that matter consists of an equilibrium of active forces standing in polar opposition to one another, manifesting the “holy ever-creative, original energy of the World, which generates and busily evolves things out of itself.”⁵⁷ The centrality assigned to aesthetic activity in his “transcendental idealism” made him immensely influential—and popular—with romantic artists, although not all of them imbibed that influence at first hand, preferring the more accessible versions provided by his many admirers. One such was Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810), whose knowledge of Schelling was probably mediated by the Norwegian scientist and poet Henrik Steffens, who wrote about the “inner life” of the earth.⁵⁸ Runge was a painter of great intensity and originality who could also express himself eloquently in writing, as in the following letter to his brother Daniel of 1802:

When above me the sky swarms with countless stars, the wind blusters through the wide space, the wave breaks roaring in the wide night, over the forest the atmosphere reddens, and the sun lights up the world; the valley steams and I throw myself on the grass sparkling with dewdrops. Every leaf and every blade of grass swarms with life, the earth is alive and stirs beneath me, everything rings in one chord, then the soul rejoices and flies in the immeasurable space around me. There is no up and down any more, no time, no beginning and no end. I hear and feel the living breath of God, who holds and carries the world, in whom everything lives and works; here is the highest that we feel—God.⁵⁹

In their different ways, both Turner and Caspar David Friedrich also “dematerialised nature” (Robert Rosenblum) to reveal its internal powers and mysteries.⁶⁰ So nature was no longer Newton’s laboratory, but “Christ’s Bible,” as Friedrich put it.⁶¹ Like so many other romantics, Friedrich was a Christian pantheist. Commenting on his painting *Swans in the Reeds*, he wrote: “The divine is everywhere, even in a grain of sand; and here I have portrayed it in the reed.”⁶² Wordsworth returned to this theme again and again, as in the following lines from *The Excursion*:

A Herdsman on the lonely mountain-tops,

*Such intercourse was his, and in this sort
Was his existence oftentimes possessed.
Oh then how beautiful, how bright, appeared
The written promise! Early had he learned
To reverence the volume that displays
The mystery, the life which cannot die;
But in the mountains did he feel his faith.
All things, responsive to the writing, there
Breathed immortality, revolving life,
And greatness still revolving; infinite:
There littleness was not; the least of things
Seemed infinite; and there his spirit shaped
Her prospects, nor did he believe,—he saw,
What wonder if his being thus became
Sublime and comprehensive!⁶³*

THE CULT OF GENIUS

An important direct influence on Runge was Ludwig Tieck’s novel *Franz Sternbald’s Wanderings* and its hero’s cri de cœur: “Not these trees, not these mountains do I wish to copy, but my soul, my mood, which governs me just at this moment.”⁶⁴ The inner self was everything:

If the light did not shine brightly from within, nothing worthwhile could be achieved. As another great painter of nature, Caspar David Friedrich, put it: “The artist should not only paint what he sees before him, but also what he sees within him. If, however, he sees nothing within him, then he should also omit to paint that which he sees before him. Otherwise his pictures will resemble those folding screens behind which one expects to find only the sick or even the dead.”⁶⁵ And he practiced what he preached: In 1816 he recorded: “For some time I have been idle and felt myself incapable of doing anything. Nothing would flow from inside; the spring had run dry, I was empty; nothing spoke to me from the outside, I was apathetic, and so I concluded that the best thing to do was to do nothing. What is the point of working if it doesn’t lead to anything?”⁶⁶ A dedicated hiker through the Saxon Riesengebirge, Friedrich spent a great deal of time out in the open air, but when he returned to the studio he excluded the outside world as much as possible. Contemporary pictures of him at work in his studio on the banks of the Elbe at Dresden show the lower half of the window shuttered and only the most essential tools present.⁶⁷ His fellow painter Wilhelm von Kugelgen described it as follows: “Friedrich’s studio was so absolutely bare.... It held nothing but the easel, a chair and a table, above which hung the room’s only ornament, a T-square, although no

one could understand how it came to be so honoured. Even the justifiable paintbox, phials of oil and paint rags were banished to the next room, for Friedrich was of the opinion that all external objects disturb the pictured world within.”⁶⁸ Wordsworth made just the same point in “The Inner Vision”:

*If Thought and Love desert us, from that day
Let us break off all commerce with the Muse:
With Thought and Love companions of our way—
Whate’er the senses take or may refuse,—
The Mind’s internal heaven shall shed her dews
Of inspiration on the humblest lay.*

But now that attention had switched to the interior world of individual artists, much sharper differentiation between them was inevitable. However good a painter might be at following the academic rules, if he did not possess the divine spark, what he put on canvas would be boring—not to say worthless. It was no accident that it was during this period that the artist as genius began to set the pace as the role model, not just for fellow artists but for all society. Of course there had been geniuses recognized in the past. Both contemporaries and posterity

had venerated Dante, Michelangelo, or Shakespeare, but this was different—now there was a *cult* of genius.⁶⁹

One of the earliest and most influential articulations of this shift was Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* of 1759. Modern writers had a choice to make, he observed: "They may soar in the regions of *liberty*, or move in the soft fetters of easy *imitation*." Young stressed what was to become axiomatic for all romantic creativity—originality: "Originals are the fairest Flowers: Imitations are of quicker growth, but fainter bloom."⁷⁰ He also offered a definition of genius that is hard to beat: "What, for the most part, mean we by Genius, but the Power of accomplishing great things without the means generally reputed necessary to that end? A Genius differs from a good Understanding, as a Magician from a good Architect; That raises his structure by means invisible; This by the skilful use of common tools. Hence Genius has ever been supposed to partake of something Divine."⁷¹ Young was especially fond of contrasting "learning," which was admirable after its own fashion, and genius: "Learning we thank, Genius we revere; That gives us pleasure; This gives us rapture; That informs, This inspires; and is itself inspired; for Genius is from Heaven, Learning from man: This sets us above the low, and illiterate; That above the learned and polite. Learning is borrowed knowledge; Genius is knowledge innate, and

quite our own."⁷² And of course a genius has no use for rules, which "like Crutches, are a needful Aid to the Lame, tho' an Impediment to the Strong. A Homer casts them away."⁷³

In his native England, Young's treatise made little impact at first, but it was quickly taken up in Germany, where it appeared in two different translations within two years of publication.⁷⁴ No one responded with greater—or more influential—enthusiasm than Johann Georg Hamann, the self-styled "Magus of the North."⁷⁵ Hamann had good firsthand knowledge of the English intellectual world, having lived in London during 1757–58. It was there that he experienced an intense religious conversion that inspired him to develop a highly individual worldview. The entire classical inheritance he abandoned. In *Socratic Memorabilia*, published in 1759, he asked what permitted Homer to be ignorant of the rules or Shakespeare to disregard them. His one-word answer was: "Genius." Moreover, the prerequisites of genius were originality, passion, and enthusiasm: "Passion alone gives hands, feet and wings to abstractions and hypotheses; gives spirit, life and voice to images and symbols."⁷⁶

Hamann's "polemical pyrotechnics," as Nicholas Boyle has dubbed them,⁷⁷ were too incoherent and opaque to inspire a movement. It was through his pupil Johann Gottfried Herder and Herder's friend Goethe, that his

insights entered the mainstream. In his autobiography, Goethe recorded Hamann's huge influence on everyone who found the prevailing *Zeitgeist* uncongenial and also paid tribute to his "wonderful greatness and profundity" [*Großheit und Innigkeit*].⁷⁸ Goethe's own epiphany occurred at Strasbourg in 1770, brought on by the overwhelming impact of its Gothic cathedral. He articulated his response in "Concerning German Architecture," an essay dedicated to Erwin von Steinbach, the cathedral's chief architect, and published in a collection edited by Herder in 1773. Goethe emphatically rejected any idea that beauty could be found by joining schools, adopting principles, or following rules: They were so many chains enslaving insight and energy. In the essay's key passage, Goethe defined his alternative: "The only true art is characteristic art. If its influence arises from deep, harmonious, independent feeling, from feeling peculiar to itself, oblivious, yes, ignorant of everything foreign, then it is whole and living, whether it be born from crude savagery or cultured sentiment."⁷⁹ Untamed, spontaneous authenticity was everything: "For a genius, principles are even more harmful than examples."⁸⁰

In developing his new aesthetic, Goethe was also strongly influenced by Rousseau. In the year following the latter's death in 1778, he made a pilgrimage to the island of Saint Pierre on the lake of Bièvre in Switzerland,

where Rousseau had taken refuge after his expulsion from Geneva. There Goethe wrote his name on the wall of the room the fugitive had occupied. He also took the opportunity to visit some of the places where episodes from *La Nouvelle Héloïse* had been set—and was duly overcome by tearful emotion. Shortly after the posthumous publication of *The Confessions* in 1782, Goethe was given a copy by his mother, as part of a lavish new edition of Rousseau's collected works, and enthused: "Even the few pages at which I have looked are like shining stars; imagine several volumes like that! What a heavenly gift to mankind a noble human being is!"⁸¹ In Rousseau's *Dictionary of Music*, first published in 1768, Goethe would have found the following emotional effusion under the entry "Genius":

Seek not, young artist, what meaning is expressed by genius. If you are inspired with it, you must feel it in yourself. Are you destitute of it, you will never be acquainted with it. The genius of a musician submits the whole universe to his art. He paints every piece by sounds; he gives a language even to silence itself; he renders ideas by sentiments; sentiments by accents; and the passions which he expresses are drawn from the bottom of the heart. Voluptuousness, by his assistance, receives fresh charms; the grief to which he gives utterance, excites cries; he continually is burning, and he never consumes.⁸²

Indeed, Rousseau's influence on German intellectuals was immense, far greater than on their equivalents in France, where it was only after 1789 that he achieved recognition for his political works. Johann Heinrich Campe had "My Saint!" inscribed on a bust of Rousseau; Herder's fiancée, Caroline Flachsland, learned French expressly to read the works of "a saint and a prophet"; Herder invoked, "Come Rousseau, and be my guide!"; Friedrich Maximilian Klinger believed that Rousseau had brought "a new revelation" to the world; and so on and so forth. No less a figure than Kant wrote that it was Rousseau who had put him right again [*hat mich wieder zurecht gemacht*].⁸³

THE ELEVATION OF THE ARTIST AND THE SACRALIZATION OF ART

This elevation of genius, which became a permanent feature of the modern cultural landscape, had important consequences for the status of the creative artist. By 1800 "genius" had ceased to be one characteristic among many that an individual might possess and had progressed to encompass the whole person: *Avoir du génie* means just to possess exceptional talent; *être un génie* is to be superhuman.⁸⁴ His—and the gender-specific possessive pronoun can be used here without apology—emergence was greatly assisted by the secularization of European

society and the simultaneous sacralization of its culture. If the eighteenth century was "the age of faith" as well as "the age of reason," it also witnessed a downgrading of organized religion and its priests. For a growing number of educated Europeans, both traditional doctrines and traditional institutions were no longer sufficient. They looked to art in all its various forms to fill the transcendental gap that was opening up.

It was, however, a special kind of art: art that was serious, profound (at least in intention), and above all self-contained. It was around this time that "art" acquired its modern meaning. For Dr. Johnson, "art" still chiefly meant skill, as in "the art of boiling sugar," and even in his subordinate definition of "a science, as the liberal arts," the main emphasis was on "the power of doing something not taught by nature and instinct; as, to *walk* is natural, to *dance* is an art."⁸⁵ A generation later, art had advanced to become the supreme form of human activity. It could no longer be subordinate to some external patron such as a prince or a church or designed simply to entertain. So the exponents of a sacralized art rejected not just the triumphalism of Versailles and the ecclesiastical art of the baroque, but also the hedonism of the rococo. Particularly influential was Winckelmann, who in effect created an aesthetic religion by marrying the language of Pietist introspection to sensualist paganism. Winckel-

mann's account of the Apollo Belvedere is more than an appreciation of a statue, it is a religious exercise, because for him the statue does not represent God, it *is* a God.⁸⁶ Yet for all his emotionalism, Winckelmann was operating very much within a neoclassical framework; indeed, his celebrated call for “noble simplicity and calm grandeur” represents the best summary of its program. It was only when the last external restraints were cast aside that the creative artist could break out of the mimetic cocoon and achieve full independence as a high priest of an aesthetic religion.

For this new kind of purpose, a new kind of space was needed. Sacralized art could no longer be satisfied with sharing churches or palaces with prelates or princes but demanded its own temples. An early example was the opera house on Unter den Linden in Berlin, commissioned by Frederick II of Prussia as soon as he came to the throne in 1740. Taking the form of an autonomous classical temple, it was the first freestanding opera house in Europe.⁸⁷ The inscription above the portico proclaimed, “*Fridericus Rex Apollini et Musis*”—“Dedicated by King Frederick to Apollo and the Muses.” It was no coincidence that Frederick reviled Christianity as a tissue of pernicious fictions and turned instead to the arts to satisfy his need for transcendental experience: “Since my childhood I have loved the arts, literature and the sciences,

and if I can contribute to their propagation, I dedicate myself with all the zeal at my disposal, because there can be no true happiness in this world without them.”⁸⁸ His aestheticism was shared by another great German role model, Goethe, who wrote after visiting the art gallery of the elector of Saxony at Dresden: “This sanctuary ... imparted a unique feeling of solemnity which much resembled the sensation with which one enters a church, as the adornments of so many temples, the objects of so much adoration, seemed to be displayed here only for art's sacred ends.”⁸⁹

Now installed in their own buildings—the first freestanding museum in Europe was the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, constructed between 1769 and 1779 to contain the collections and library of Landgrave Frederick II—paintings could be worshipped in their own right. More or less simultaneously, music found its own autonomous space in the public concerts that mushroomed during the second half of the eighteenth century. As they moved from tavern to dedicated concert hall, they required a more reverential attitude from the audience. This was well put by Fanny Burney's heroine Evelina in the novel of that name published in 1778:

About eight o'clock we went to the Pantheon. I was extremely struck with the beauty of the building, which greatly surpassed

whatever I could have expected or imagined. Yet, it has more the appearance of a chapel, than of a place of diversion; and, though I was quite charmed with the magnificence of the room, I felt that I could not be as gay and thoughtless there as at Ranelagh [a pleasure garden], for there is something in it which rather inspires awe and solemnity, than mirth and pleasure.⁹⁰

This image of the concert hall as church and the concert as divine service became a recurring feature of romanticism. In “The remarkable musical life of the composer Joseph Berglinger,” published as part of the enormously influential *Heartfelt Effusions of an Art-Loving Monk* of 1796, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck recorded: “When Joseph went to an important concert, he avoided looking at the glamorous audience and sat by himself in a corner, listening with devotion as if he were in a church—silent and motionless, his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him.”⁹¹

The secularization of society, intensified by the French Revolution, urbanization, and industrialization, encouraged the sacralization of art in all its forms. In 1832 the French periodical *L'Artiste* asserted: “In our nineteenth century, a century that no longer believes anything, music has become a kind of religion, a last belief to which society is clinging with all its might, exhausted as it is by dogmas and words.”⁹² Although an exaggeration, even

if applied only to Paris, it was not an aberration. Of the many supporting observations from contemporaries, the following by Hermione Quinet about the period before 1848 is representative: “I often forget that the Conservatoire is not a church, that the hundred musicians in the *Société des Concerts* live scattered throughout the twenty arrondissements of Paris and not in a seminary, that they are not a college of priests gathered before us to perform a holy service each Sunday.”⁹³

Especially revealing were the events following Beethoven’s death on March 26, 1827. The funeral oration, written by the leading poet of the day, Franz Grillparzer, and delivered at the gates of the Währing cemetery in Vienna by the leading classical actor of the day, Heinrich Anschütz, did not mention the Christian God once. The deity to whom Grillparzer—and Beethoven—paid homage was Art: “The thorns of life had wounded him deeply, and as the castaway clings to the shore, so did he seek refuge in thine arms, O thou glorious sister and peer of the Good and the True, thou balm of wounded hearts, heaven-born Art!”⁹⁴ Beethoven’s role as secular redeemer was well put in a poem dedicated to his memory by Schubert’s friend Gabriel Seidl: “He teaches us new jubilation, new laments, new prayer and new jests.” Anticipating Richard Wagner’s celebrated injunction to emotionalize

the intellect, Seidl added: “He feels through his mind; he thinks through his heart.”⁹⁵

In the popular imagination, Beethoven was the romantic hero par excellence: the lonely, tortured, afflicted, uncompromising, utterly original genius, a man who “treated God as an equal,” as his friend Bettina von Arnim recorded.⁹⁶ In his autobiography, Richard Wagner recorded that when he was fourteen he had been bowled over when first hearing a Beethoven symphony (the Seventh) at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig, with “the added impact of Beethoven’s physiognomy, as shown by lithographs of the time, as well as the knowledge of his deafness and his solitary and withdrawn life. There soon arose in me an image of the highest supernal originality, beyond comparison with anything.”⁹⁷ Franz Liszt claimed that for *all* musicians “Beethoven’s work is like the pillar of cloud and fire which guided the Israelites through the desert—a pillar of cloud to guide us by day, a pillar of fire to guide us by night ‘so that we may progress both day and night.’”⁹⁸

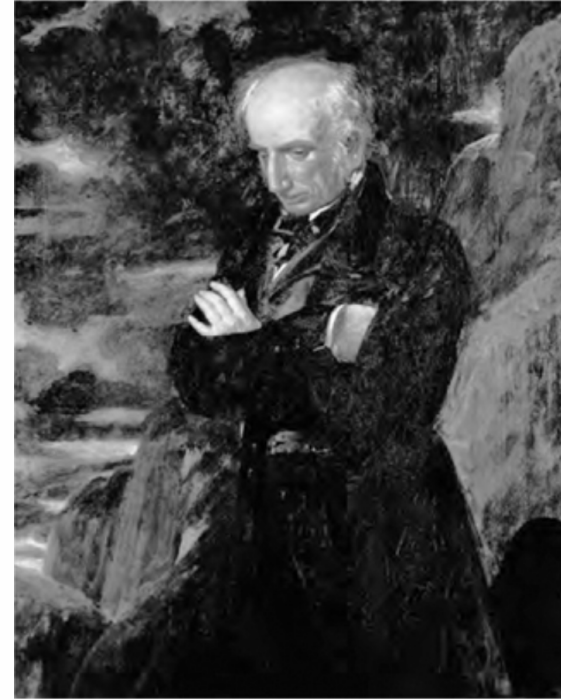
Liszt provided material evidence of his enthusiasm when he intervened to save the faltering project to erect a statue of Beethoven at his birthplace, Bonn, in 1845. Although the organization was chaotic, to put it very mildly, the event supplied the best possible evidence of Beethoven’s posthumous standing. Tens of thousands of

enthusiasts poured into the small Rhenish city for the celebrations, including Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Spohr, Charles Hallé, Jenny Lind, and an army of journalists and critics. That this was much more than a musical event was dramatized by the appearance of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and the king and queen of Prussia, not to mention the launching of a steamboat named *Ludwig van Beethoven* on the opening day. In his speech at the ceremonial banquet, Liszt described the journeys made to Bonn from all over Europe by the participants as constituting one great pilgrimage.⁹⁹

Apart from his supreme skills as a pianist, Liszt was also a prolific writer, contributing frequently to the musical periodicals on a wide range of topics. In a remarkable series of articles titled “On the Situation of Artists and Their Social Condition,” published in installments in the *Gazette musicale de Paris* in 1835, he delivered a passionate critique of modern civilization. Its degeneration, he argued, was due to the separation of religion, politics, art, and the natural sciences into separate activities. Only when they could be reunited under the aegis of the arts, especially music, could man’s alienation be resolved. It was high time that creative artists realized that they had a “great religious and social MISSION” (*sic*).¹⁰⁰ To the poet Ludwig Eckardt, he wrote: “Art is for us none other than the mystic ladder from earth to Heaven—from the

finite to the Infinite—from mankind to God: an everlasting inspiration and impulse towards redemption through love!”¹⁰¹

As art was sacralized and placed on a pedestal, so were its creators elevated to become high priests of this aesthetic religion. As early as 1802, Joseph Haydn had referred to himself as “a not wholly unworthy priest of this sacred art.”¹⁰² By the middle of the nineteenth century, the use of quasi-religious language to describe the musician’s calling was common, as for example when an English periodical referred to Mendelssohn and Spohr as “high priests of art who wield the sceptre by right of intellectual power” or when Prince Schwarzenberg, one of the greatest aristocrats of the Habsburg Empire, praised Liszt as “a true prince of music, a genuine *grand seigneur* ... a priest of art.”¹⁰³ This kind of tribute was not confined to musicians, although they were especially venerated. In 1842 Elizabeth Barrett Browning was moved by Benjamin Haydon’s portrait *Wordsworth on Helvellyn* to write:



The poet as priest: Benjamin Haydon, *Wordsworth on Helvellyn* (1842)
National Portrait Gallery, London (Bridgeman Art Library)

*Wordsworth upon Helvellyn! Let the cloud
Ebb audibly along the mountain-wind,
Then break against the rock, and show behind
The lowland valleys floating up to crowd
The sense with beauty. He, with forehead bowed
And humble-lidded eyes, as one inclined*

*Before the sovran thought of his own mind;
And very meek with inspirations proud,
Takes here his rightful place as poet-priest
By the high-altar, singing prayer and prayer
To the higher Heavens.*[104](#)