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The Romantic Revolution

Written by Tim Blanning

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

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THE ROMANTIC REVOLUTION

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Weidenfeld & Nicolson
LONDON

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THE CRISIS OF THE AGE OF REASON

ROUSSEAU ON THE ROAD TO VINCENNES

On 28 June 1751 the first volume of the *Encyclopedia, or a systematic dictionary of the sciences, arts, and crafts* (better known in its abbreviated French form as the *Encyclopédie*), edited by Jean Le Rond D'Alembert and Denis Diderot, was published in Paris. Originally intended to be nothing more than a translation of Ephraim Chambers' *Cyclopædia* of 1728, the project soon expanded to ten volumes and kept on growing. By the time it reached completion with a two-volume index in 1780 it covered thirty-five volumes containing more than 20,000,000 words. This was much more than a reference work: it was underpinned by a mission to modernise. Once all knowledge had been assembled and its fundamental principles identified, the way would be clear for further progress. It was a process that necessarily involved casting a critical eye at existing institutions, customs and values. As Diderot put it in his article on Encyclopedia: 'all things must be examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone's feelings … We must ride roughshod over all these ancient puerilities, overturn the barriers that reason never erected, and give back to the arts and the sciences the liberty that is so precious to

them'.[1] Although the sharp eye of the censor compelled discretion, chief among those 'ancient puerilities' that Diderot had his eye on was the Catholic Church.

The impact of the *Encyclopédie* was immediate and lasting. An instant best-seller right across Europe, its sales had exceeded 25,000 complete sets by 1789, more than half of them outside France.[2] Anyone who contributed to it automatically became a celebrity: 'in the past', wrote Voltaire, 'men of letters were not admitted into polite society, they have now become a necessary part of it'.[3] Fierce opposition from the conservative press and intermittent persecution by the authorities, culminating in an outright ban by both King and Pope in 1759, helped to promote a sense of solidarity among both contributors and sympathisers, so that '*encyclopédiste*' entered the language to denote a progressive intellectual. But by the time they were forced underground, Diderot and D'Alembert had succeeded in their mission of creating an institutional centre for their project of Enlightenment.[4] Also in 1759 D'Alembert claimed in his treatise *Elements of Philosophy* : 'a most remarkable change has taken place in our ideas, a change which by its rapidity, seems to promise us a greater one yet … Our century has called itself supremely *the century of philosophy*'.[5]

This triumphalism derived in part from the knowledge that the *Encyclopédie* was only one of many major works of enlightened philosophy to have been published around the middle of the century, including Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* in 1748, the first volume of Buffon's *Natural History* in 1749, Condillac's *Treatise on Systems*, also in 1749, and Voltaire's *The Age of Louis XIV* in 1751. Yet at the very moment that the tide seemed to be running irresistibly in their favour,

a mighty splash announced the appearance of an intrepid opponent determined to swim against the current. This was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in July 1749 had a conversion experience while on his way to see his friend Diderot in prison at Vincennes, just outside Paris. Unable to afford a carriage, Rousseau went on foot, whiling away the time by reading the *Mercure de France*. His eye was struck by an advertisement for a prize essay competition staged by the Academy of Dijon. The topic was: 'Has the progress of the sciences and arts done more to corrupt morals or improve them?' In his autobiography *Confessions*, published posthumously in 1782, Rousseau recalled: 'The moment I read this I beheld another universe and became another man'.[6] In another account he went into more detail about the extreme nature of his reaction: 'I felt my mind dazzled by a thousand lights … I felt my head seized by a dizziness that resembled intoxication'. Slumping to the ground, he spent the next hour in a kind of trance, sobbing so passionately that when he came to his senses he found his coat drenched with tears.[7]

The reason for this effusion was Rousseau's sudden insight that the Dijon Academy's question was not rhetorical. Collecting his wits, he set about articulating his epiphany in *A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences*, which won the prize and was published the following year. With all the zeal of the convert, he proclaimed that, contrary to expectation, the civilising process was not leading to liberation but to enslavement, as it has flung 'garlands of flowers over the chains which weigh us down', so that 'our minds have been corrupted in proportion as the arts and sciences have improved'. All the various branches of the natural sciences, he observed, have their origins in a vice: astronomy in

superstition, mathematics in greed, mechanics in ambition, physics in idle curiosity. Even printing had proved to be a false friend, for it had allowed the dissemination of impious tracts, such as those of Hobbes and Spinoza. Rousseau ended his diatribe with the prediction that eventually men would become so alienated from the modern world that they would beg God to give them back their 'ignorance, innocence, and poverty, the only goods that can make for our happiness and that are precious in your sight'.[8]

This was to turn the agenda of the Enlightenment on its head with a vengeance. Throwing caution to the winds, Rousseau went out of his way to distance himself from his former friends, accusing them of subverting the traditional values of patriotism and religion in pursuit of 'the destruction and degradation of everything sacred among men'. It took a long time for the *philosophes* to realise just how extreme was Rousseau's apostasy. They chose to see his *Discourse* as 'a paradox rather than a conviction'.[9] Complacently believing that history was on their side, they moved from bewilderment to irritation to hostility, even hatred in the case of Diderot or Voltaire. Yet although they might dismiss him as a 'lunatic', as Voltaire did, they could not help but notice that Rousseau's anti-modernism had struck a responsive chord in many readers. What made him more dangerous was his total lack of any connection with the establishment. On the contrary, he had proved his credentials as a sea-green incorruptible by ostentatiously turning his back on the offer of a royal pension in 1752.[10] His rejection of the Enlightenment had made him *more* radical.

ROUSSEAU'S LOVERS: FROM A MIMETIC TO AN EXPRESSIVE AESTHETIC

Even the least perceptive of the *philosophes* had to wake up to the threat when in 1761 Rousseau published an epistolary novel. The title of the very first edition was *Letters from two lovers living in a small town at the foot of the Alps* but it soon became known as *Julie, or The New Héloïse*. Voltaire's reaction that he would rather kill himself than read such 'a stupid, bourgeois, impudent and boring' book all the way through was not shared by the European reading public.[11] By the end of the century it had gone through more than seventy editions, becoming the biggest best-seller of the century in the process. When the printing presses proved unable to keep up with demand, enterprising Parisian booksellers resorted to renting out copies by the day or even hour.[12] Rousseau was already famous: *La Nouvelle Héloïse* turned him into a cult. The fan mail which poured in – and which he carefully preserved – was remarkable as much for its intensity as for its bulk. Typical was an effusion from the cavalry captain Jean-Louis Le Cointe, which began with the apologetic exclamation: 'Yet another letter from someone unknown to you!' Yet, he went on, so full was his heart that he had to overcome his reluctance to disturb the most amiable philosopher of all time. Not only had Rousseau's book made a case for morality more effectively than any sermon, he wrote, it had also shown men how they could achieve earthly happiness.[13]

By pretending to be only the editor of a collection of letters he had stumbled on, Rousseau sought to give the novel the kind of immediacy achieved today by the better television soap operas. His success with only the written word at his disposal

says a great deal for his literary skills, for he was required to assume the guise of several different characters – Julie, the long-suffering and ultimately doomed heroine; her lover, the sensitive Saint-Preux; Lord Edward Bomston, an English nobleman as warm-hearted as he is rich; Wolmar, the noble atheist; and so on. Many of Rousseau's correspondents took him at his word, insisting that the events depicted had really happened and demanding to know what had happened after the end of the book. Not at all untypical was the marquise de Polignac's anguished letter describing her reaction to Julie's death: 'I dare not tell you the effect it made on me. My heart was crushed. Julie dying was no longer an unknown person. I believed I was her sister, her Claire. My seizure became so strong that if I had not put the book away I would have been as ill as those who attended that virtuous woman in her last moments'.[14]

This was not the first time that the tear-ducts of eighteenth-century readers had opened their flood-gates. The sentimental novels of Samuel Richardson, for example, had achieved a similar response in the 1740s. What raised Rousseau's emotional appeal above the ruck was its autobiographical dimension. As he himself observed:

> What won me the women's favour was their belief that I had written my own story and that I was myself the hero of my novel. The belief was so firmly established that Mme de Polignac wrote to Mme de Verdelin, begging her to persuade me to let her see Julie's portrait. Everybody was convinced that it was impossible to express feelings so vividly unless one had felt them, or so to depict the raptures of love except with one's own heart as model. In that they were right, and it is true that I wrote the novel in a state of burning ecstasy.[15]

This passage is from Rousseau's *Confessions*, which begins with a programmatic declaration of the primacy of the individual. The opening words are: 'I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself. Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different'.[16]

This signalled nothing less than a revolution, one which placed the creator, not the created, at the centre of aesthetic activity. The mimetic view it overturned dated back at least to Plato, who expounded it in Book Ten of *The Republic* through Socrates in conversation with Glaucon, using an everyday object such as a couch as illustration: 'We have these three sorts of couch. There's the one which exists in the natural order of things. This one, I imagine we'd say, was the work of a god . . . Then there's the one made by the carpenter . . . And then there's the one made by the painter . . . Painter, carpenter, god. Three agents responsible for three kinds of couch'. So the painter, poet or any other kind of artist, is twice removed from the ideal couch, that is to say from the truth. Plato also provided a simile to aid understanding of what the artist did, likening him to a man who carried a mirror around with him and was thus able to imitate the external world and all that lived in it.[17]

Subsequent theorists may not have shared Plato's disdain for the arts and those who practised them, but they adhered to the central concept of imitation. Representative of the mainstream of the age of the Enlightenment was Abbé Dubos, hailed by Voltaire in *The Age of Louis XIV* as 'a man of great

judgment'.[18] In *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, first published in 1719 but still being reprinted in the 1750s, he wrote: 'just as a painting imitates the features and colours of nature, so does the musician imitate the sounds, accents, sighs and inflexions of the human voice, together with all the sounds with which nature expresses its feelings and passions'.[19] Imitation did not mean mere copying, of course. Nor did it mean the mechanical reproduction of a specific object. Rather it involved seeking the best elements of nature at its finest ('*la belle nature*') and reproducing them in a painting, sculpture, poem, piece of music or whatever. By selecting and combining natural elements containing beauty, the artist could produce an idealised image more beautiful than nature itself could ever supply. This quest could be assisted by a study of classical Greece and Rome, for it was there that the best examples of idealised beauty could be found, thanks to the superiority of their climate and culture. Hence Winckelmann's famous injunction in his seminal treatise *On the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* of 1755: 'there is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled; I mean by imitating the ancients'.[20]

For neo-classicists such as Winckelmann, the manifest superiority of buildings such as the Parthenon, or statues such as the Apollo Belvedere, revealed the existence of rules governing artistic creation. Moreover, they were rules that could be taught – rules that *should* be taught. In drama there were unities of time and place to be observed, in the visual arts there were the classical proportions to be observed. As Sir Joshua Reynolds put it in 1769: 'I would chiefly recommend, that an implicit obedience to the *Rules of Art*, as established by the practice of the great MASTERS, should be exacted from the *young*

Students. That those models, which have passed through the approbation of ages, should be considered by them as perfect and infallible guides; as subjects for their imitation, not their criticism'.[21] This trenchant advice was delivered in his first discourse to the recently created Royal Academy in London. It was only one of many new creations in the eighteenth century, the century *par excellence* of the art academy. In 1720 there were just nineteen in Europe, of which only four were really operative; by 1790 there were more than a hundred.[22] By this time, it was the academy rather than the master's studio that had become the main centre of instruction for aspiring painters.

The academy was not the sort of environment in which – say – Jean-Jacques Rousseau with his 'mortal aversion to any sort of compulsion'[23] would feel at home. The pedantry could certainly be oppressive. At Vienna, the drawing of foliage was not taught from life but from paper leaves cut and glued together by the professors, for example in 'the spiky oak manner' or 'the rounded lime tree manner'.[24] This was the kind of approach memorably parodied by Wagner in *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* when the aspiring singer Walther von Stolzing is told he will need to learn the 'writing-paper', 'black-ink', 'hawthorn blossom', 'straw blade' melodies, the 'rose', 'short-lived love' and 'forgotten' tones, and so on and so forth. Well might Friedrich Schiller ask in a letter of 1783: 'do you expect enthusiasm where the spirit of the academies rules?'[25] From the rich stock of dismissive remarks about academies, the following two commend themselves by their pithiness: 'rules are vestal virgins; unless they are violated, there can be no issue' (Johann Georg Hamann) and 'the Aristotelian unities are like crutches for cripples' (Christian Daniel Schubart).[26] The latter remark was a rejoinder to Reynolds'

claim in the first discourse that 'rules are only fetters to men of genius'. The most striking rejection of academic authority was delivered by the German artist Asmus Jakob Carstens when he replied to a demand from the Prussian minister of education Karl Friedrich von Heinitz that he return from Rome to resume his teaching duties at the Berlin Academy:

> I belong not to the Berlin Academy but to Humanity which has a right to demand of me the highest possible development of my faculties. I shall continue with all my strength to justify myself to the world through my works. Thus I renounce all those benefits, preferring poverty, an uncertain future, and perhaps an infirm and helpless old age, with my body already showing signs of illness, in order to fulfil my duty to humanity and my vocation to art. My capabilities were entrusted to me by God. I must be a faithful steward so that when He says: 'Give a reckoning of thy stewardship', I shall not have to say: 'Lord, the talent with which you entrusted me I have buried in Berlin'.[27]

Carstens died three years later, still in Rome. Stylistically, his art was neo-classical; indeed he has been described as 'the most representative German painter of mature classicism'.[28] Yet he was also aggressively individualistic and vehemently opposed to the academic ethos. Orphaned at fifteen, he passed up the chance to be apprenticed to the famous Johann Heinrich Tischbein, court painter at Kassel, because he could not stomach also being a servant, whose duties would have included standing outside at the rear of the carriage while his master sat inside. So he found himself apprenticed to a cooper instead.[29] In another letter to von Heinitz, Carstens wrote: 'when nature brings forth a genius (and that happens very

seldom) and when that genius forces his way past a thousand obstacles into the light of day, then he ought to be supported. Posterity will honour a monarch as much for supporting a genius as for winning a battle or conquering a province'.[30] This kind of comment warns against assuming a contrast between neo-classicism and romanticism based on respective attitudes to academies. For every academician like Reynolds, comfortably nestled in the bosom of the establishment, there was a wild loner like Carstens or Fuseli (of whom more later).[31] Many Enlightenment thinkers who subscribed to mimetic aesthetics doubted the utility of academies. Diderot thought they stifled creativity, while Voltaire commented: 'no work that can be called academic can be called a work of genius, no matter what the genre'.[32]

What proved to be revolutionary was not the rejection of academies, or even rules, but of the whole classical aesthetic based on the imitation of *la belle nature*. As Rousseau demonstrated in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *The Confessions*, the truly radical departure was to move from a mimetic aesthetic centred on the work to an *expressive* aesthetic which put the creator at the centre: 'The true object of my confessions is to reveal my inner thoughts exactly in all the situations of my life. It is the history of my soul that I have promised to recount, and to write it faithfully I have need of no other memories; it is enough if I enter again into my inner self, as I have done till now'.[33] This was the essence of the romantic revolution: from now on artistic creativity was to be *from the inside out*. In Hegel's pithy formulation, romanticism was 'absolute inwardness'. Explaining this insight, Hegel observed that romanticism had 'dissolved all particular gods into a pure and infinite self-identity. In this Pantheon all the gods are dethroned, the

flame of subjectivity has destroyed 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 mechanisation 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 knock-out 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
> imagination.

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 arch-villain 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 boundless 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 favoured 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 seeking 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 armchair 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 Imposture'.[53] Goethe's eponymous hero in his best-selling 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 nature 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 summarised 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 each other, 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 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]