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Claude-Emmanuel Pastoret, put it. Piling irony on irony, the first ken to be ‘pantheonized’ was none other than Voltaire, (in)famously denied a Christian burial when he died in 1778. When his remains were moved to his new resting place in 1791, it was estimated that a crowd of around 200,000 watched.

State patronage of neoclassical art intensified under the comte d’Angiviller, who succeeded Marigny in 1774 (after a brief interlude under Terray). His chief concern was to foster patriotism by commissioning biennially eight portraits and four sculptures of great Frenchmen, to be exhibited in what was planned to be a great national museum at the Louvre. Undoubtedly both the greatest and the most successful painting to be commissioned by d’Angiviller was Jacques-Louis David’s The Oath of the Horatii (Plate 24), conceived in 1781, painted at Rome in 1783–4 and exhibited at the Salon in Paris in 1785, where it was received with rapture and acclaimed as the greatest French painting since Poussin. Because David emerged after 1789 as a fervent supporter of the Revolution, even to the extent of voting for the execution of Louis XVI and becoming a member of the Committee of Public Safety, the picture has often been interpreted as a call to contemporaries to take up arms against the old regime. David himself lent support to such a view by joining Robespierre in 1794 in a ceremonial re-enactment of the oath-taking. Yet this is all retrospective. At the time, David gave no indication that his painting had any topical message. Nor did contemporaries see any: when it was exhibited in Rome for the first time, ‘princes and princesses, cardinals and prelates’ flocked to see it. If the painting really was intended as a republican call to arms, David had made an odd choice of period, for Rome was still a kingdom in the mid-seventeenth century BC and was to remain so for another century-and-a-half. Nor is it clear from either the painting or anything David wrote that he followed Horatius in privileging fatherland over family. Both here and in his other great pre-revolutionary success – The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons (1789) – there is a good case to be made for the moral superiority of the grieving women over the homicidal men. Whatever David’s intentions may have been, The Oath of the Horatii became a potent icon after the Revolution had broken out, for, as Simon Schama has observed, it had all the ingredients for revolutionary rhetoric – patriotism, fraternity, martyrdom.

If the revolutionary credentials of David’s pre-1789 paintings are open to doubt, how much more is that true of the great neoclassical creations of the 1780s in architecture and sculpture! In artistic terms nothing could have been more radical than Claude Nicolas Ledoux’s forty barrières, whose construction began in 1785. Yet their political complexion was as reactionary as could be, for these were customs posts, established around Paris by the detested farmers-general. It might be added that one of David’s greatest portraits was of Antoine Laurent Lavoisier and his wife, painted in 1788. One of the most important scientists of the century, Lavoisier was also a farmer-general and ended up on the guillotine in 1794.

THE RESURGENCE OF THE CULTURE OF FEELING

If a single incident has to be found to mark the culmination of the culture of reason, a strong candidate is an event at Paris on 30 March 1778. For once, that overworked word ‘apetheosis’ is entirely appropriate. For it was on that day that Voltaire went to the Théâtre Français to attend a performance of his final play, Irène. His arrival was greeted with a standing ovation that lasted twenty minutes. When the performance was over, his bust was installed on stage and crowned with a laurel wreath, as the actress playing Irène recited a poem promising Voltaire immortality in the name of the French nation – and then was obliged to give an encore. This was the climax of a triumphal progress across France which had begun the previous month. John Morley observed: ‘no great captain returning from a prolonged campaign of difficulty and hazard crowned by the most glorious victory, ever received a more splendid and far-resounding greeting’. When he arrived at the barrière at the city limits of Paris, he told the customs officer inspecting his belongings: ‘I am the only article of contraband here.’ This remark was very much to the point, for he had been kept out of Paris for thirty years by Louis XV, who regarded his irreverent impiety with horror. Louis XVI allowed Voltaire back, but stayed away from the theatre and forbade the Queen to receive him, thus giving an early indication of his fatal propensity for having the worst of both worlds. Voltaire died exactly two months later, aged eighty-four.
By that time the culture of feeling was enjoying a strong resurgence. Of course, it had never gone away. On the contrary, it had flourished as never before, for emotional forms of Christianity such as Pietism and Methodism were flourishing. All the institutions of the public sphere discussed in the previous section were neutral in terms of content. Periodicals were just as well suited to the propagation of the supernatural as the natural: the Jansenist Nouvelles ecclésiastiques, for example, which began publication in 1728, proved to be one of the greatest and most enduring success stories of the eighteenth century, despite vigorous persecution. The same applied to books, pamphlets, lending libraries and reading clubs. That was shown in France in 1778–9, when a relaxation of censorship brought a flood of reprints of works by dead authors. Of the more than 2,000,000 copies generated, nearly two-thirds were religious. Voluntary associations lent themselves as much to pious as to rationalist purposes, to ‘cass meetings’ for the study of the Bible as well as to assemblies of Freemasons.

Nevertheless, to most contemporary observers, it seemed that it was the culture of reason that was on the march, especially among the educated elites. In a biography of Voltaire published in 1789, the marquis de Condorcet reviewed the improvements achieved during the lifetime of his hero (born 1694) as a result of his efforts: health had been improved by more rational burial practices and inoculation; ‘the clergy of the countries subject to the Roman religion have lost their dangerous power, and will lose their scandalous wealth’; freedom of the press had improved; in Scandinavia, Poland, Prussia and the Habsburg Monarchy religious intolerance had vanished and there were even some signs of improvement in France and parts of Italy; serfdom appeared to be on the way out in most parts of Europe; various beneficent law reforms had been instituted; wars were less frequent; sovereigns and their privileged orders were no longer able to dupe their subjects; and generally ‘for the first time reason had started to diffuse over the peoples of Europe a pure and steady light’.

To many European intellectuals, the outbreak of the Revolution in the same year marked the final triumph of reason and the dawning of a new age for all mankind. Georg Forster, a German scholar who had accompanied Captain Cook on his second expedition to the Pacific (1772–5), exclaimed: ‘it is glorious to see what philosophy has ripened in the brain and realized in the state’. Yet this proved to be a false dawn, as Condorcet discovered, dying in prison by his own hand in March 1794 rather than face a ‘trial’ which would have sent him to the guillotine. But the reaction against reason had begun a long time earlier. Of the many candidates, three possible turning points suggest themselves. The first was the epiphany of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on 25 August 1749. In the Confessions he recorded:

The summer of that year [1749] was excessively hot. Vincennes is some six miles from Paris. In no condition to pay for cabs, I walked there at two in the afternoon when I was alone, and I went fast so as to arrive early. The trees along the road, always lopped according to the custom of the country, hardly gave any shade, and often I was so prostrated with heat and weariness that I lay down on the ground, unable to go further. One day I took the Mercure de France and, glancing through it as I walked, I came upon the question propounded by the Dijon Academy for the next year’s prize: Has the progress of the sciences and arts done more to corrupt morals or improve them? The moment I read this I beheld another universe and became another man.

In a letter he wrote to Malesherbes in 1762, Rousseau stressed the suddenness and extremity of his vision: ‘all at once I felt my mind dazzled by a thousand lights, a crowd of splendid ideas presented themselves to me with such force and in such confusion, that I was thrown into a state of indescribable bewilderment. I felt my head seized by a dizziness that resembled intoxication. Seized by palpitations, unable to walk and breathe at the same time, he fell to the ground as if in a trance. When he was able to rise half-an-hour later, he found that the front of his coat was drenched in tears. It was not reason that had shown Rousseau the way to truth, but a sudden conversion experience, comparable to that of Saul on the road to Damascus. The scales dropped from his eyes, as he now realized that the Enlightenment’s value-system needed to be stood on its head – it was civilization not ignorance, prejudice or superstition that had led man astray. In his Discourse on the Arts and Sciences written in answer to the Dijon Academy’s question, he attacked that value-system root-and-branch. To seek to control and exploit nature for the enhancement of man’s material well-being was wrong in principle and deadly in practice. All the various branches of the natural sciences were motivated by vice: astronomy by superstition, mathematics by greed, mechanics by ambition, physics by idle curiosity. He regretted the invention of printing, for it had allowed the impious works of
Hobbes and Spinoza to achieve immortality. He ended by predicting that eventually men would become so revolted by modern culture that they would implore God to give them back their ‘innocence, ignorance and poverty’, ‘for that alone can make us happy and precious in Thy sight’.

The second event occurred one night in June 1764 when Horace Walpole, fourth son of Sir Robert, had a nightmare. In a letter to his friend William Cole, he explained what had happened:

I walked one morning ... from a dream, of which all I could recover was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story) and that on the uppermost bannister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening I sat down and began to write, without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate.

The stream of consciousness continued for two months until his novel – *The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic Story* – was complete. When he published it the following year, Walpole pretended that it had been found ‘in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England’, having originally been printed in Naples in 1529. In the preface he also speculated that it had been written by a priest of the old school ‘to confirm the populace in their ancient errors and superstitions’ at a time when they were under threat from the light of reason shed by the Renaissance. Perhaps because it was such an immediate success, Walpole claimed ownership in his preface to the second edition, which came out later the same year, describing the exercise as ‘an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting, but the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life.’ Walpole certainly gave his own resources of fancy full rein, including such extravagances as a portrait that stepped out of its frame, a statue that bled, a sword so massive that it needed fifty men to wield it, giant severed body parts, a sundry cast of magicians, goblins, friars and other agents of the supernatural, and so on. Both the original dream and the writing of the novel took place in the ideal environment, for in the course of the previous fifteen years or so, Walpole had turned his house at Strawberry Hill near Twickenham into a Gothic extravaganza, if not the very first example of the ‘Gothic revival’ then certainly the most influential.

The third possible turning point was Goethe’s journey to Strassburg in March 1770, at the age of twenty-one, to study law at the university there. So it was on German-speaking but French-ruled soil that Goethe experienced his cultural conversion. The agent was the cathedral, the first great Gothic building he had seen. Like most educated Europeans, he had been taught to think of medieval architecture as the epitome of barbarism. Representative of German opinion was the definition offered by Johann Georg Sulzer in his very popular encyclopedia of the arts, first published in 1771: ‘The epithet “Gothic” is frequently applied to the fine arts to designate a barbarous taste, although the meaning of the expression is seldom defined exactly. It seems to be used principally to indicate clumsiness and lack of beauty and good proportions, and originated in the clumsy imitations of ancient architecture perpetrated by the Goths who settled in Italy.’

According to his autobiography, published in 1811, Goethe’s first reaction to Strassburg Cathedral was to see its spire only as the ideal vantage-point from which to view the surrounding countryside. Gradually, however, it began to arouse an aesthetic response which was as powerful as it was difficult to articulate. In thinking through the problem posed by the discrepancy between his anti-Gothic prejudices and the building’s irresistible appeal, Goethe revolutionized his aesthetic code. All the classical canons were refuted by this irregular, asymmetric, idiosyncratic pile, which was not even finished, for one of the two projected spires had never been built, and which resembled an organism that had grown rather than a structure that had been built. What he had been taught to find offensive, he found just the reverse – it was nothing less than ‘a new revelation’.

It was a revelation he shared with the world in an essay entitled ‘Concerning German Architecture’, dedicated to Erwin von Steinbach, Strassburg Cathedral’s main architect. Here he used his new enthusiasm for the Gothic to preach a new aesthetic credo. Any idea that beauty could be found by joining schools, adopting principles or following rules was emphatically rejected: they were so many chains enslaving insight and energy. The ghastly good taste, harmony and purity demanded by classical aesthetics did violence to nature’s untamed spontaneity. 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. The crucial adjective is 'characteristic' (karakteristische), by which he meant art which grows naturally and spontaneously from the culture within which it is produced, not something that has been imitated. In the case of Strassburg Cathedral, it was not only characteristic art, it was also art that was characteristically German. It had been produced on German soil 'in authentically German times' (in echter deutscher Zeit) and only gained in stature by virtue of being treated with contempt by the Italians or the French. The great tower was all the more wonderful for looking like something that had grown: 'a lofty, wide-spreading tree of God, declaring with a thousand branches, a million twigs, and with leaves as numerous as the sands of the sea, the glory of the Lord, its Master'.

It was also in Strassburg that Goethe met Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), who edited the collection Of German Identity and Art (Von deutscher Art und Kunst), in which the essay on Strassburg Cathedral appeared. Together they formed the distinguished core of a movement that came to be known as 'Sturm und Drang', usually translated as 'Storm and Stress', which took its name from the eponymous play by Friedrich Maximilian von Klinger (1752–1831). This was very much an angry-young-man movement against what was perceived as the stultifying rationalism and classicism of the older generation. Instead the Stürmer und Dränger stressed the primacy of the 'inner light' they derived directly or indirectly from Pietism. Their heroes were lonely outsiders, still kicking vigorously against the pricks even as they were sent down to perdition by the forces of convention. Subjectivity, originality and passion were their ideals. As Herder's mentor, the Prussian Pietist Johann Georg Hamann put it: 'passion alone gives hands, feet and wings to abstractions and hypotheses; gives spirit, life and voice to images and symbols'.

Within little more than a decade, Sturm und Drang had burnt itself out, but not before Goethe had published two highly influential masterpieces: the play Götz von Berlichingen in 1773 and the novel The Sufferings of Young Werther in 1774. Frederick the Great dismissed the former as 'an abominable imitation of those bad English plays', but it had a colossal impact, because it was a great libertarian manifesto, both in what it said and the way that it said it. Stylistically it was a revolution, not so much abandoning the unities of time, place and action – the defining features of the dominant French model – as turning them on their head. The action sprawls over several months, there are dozens of scene changes, and there are at least two main plots. Also calculated to grate on the classical ear was the language, for Goethe drew on two early sixteenth-century sources, Luther's translation of the Bible and the historical Götz's autobiography, as well as the Upper German dialect spoken in his home town of Frankfurt am Main. The result was a wonderfully expressive idiom but one which was also colloquial, ungrammatical and generally rough-hewn. Substantively, the main message anticipated Kant: any kind of authority that was not self-generated but was imposed from outside was to be rejected. In the most important single line of the play, the anti-hero Adelbert von Weisligen says: 'One thing is for certain: happy and great alone is the man who needs neither to command nor to obey to amount to something!' Werther was even more of a sensation, the first international best-seller written by a German. The plot is quickly recounted: Werther, a young man of middle class but respectable station, meets and falls in love with a girl who returns his feelings but has already committed herself to another. Unable to come to terms with his frustrated passion, Werther shoots himself. The challenge it thrust in the face of cultural convention was so fierce that indifference was impossible. On the right, clerical conservatives found its glamorization of suicide repugnant; on the left, enlightened progressives found its disparagement of reason equally offensive. But the book's admirers drowned the criticism with paens of emotional praise worthy of Werther himself. The journalist Christian Daniel Schubart (1739–91) told his readers: Here I sit, my heart melting, my breast pounding, my eyes weeping tears of ecstatic pain, and do I need to tell you, dear reader, that I have been reading The Sufferings of Young Werther by my beloved Goethe? Or should I rather say that I have been devouring it? Within a year there were eleven editions in print, most of them pirated; by 1790 there were thirty. Translated into French and English almost at once, by the end of the century it was available in almost every European language.

From the insights of individuals such as Rousseau, Walpole and Goethe, a new world-view was created. What eventually became known as the 'romantic revolution' opposed emotion to reason, faith to scepticism,
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intuition to logic, subjectivity to objectivity, historicism to natural law, and poetry to prose. In the view of the romantics, the Enlightenment and its scientific method had analysed and analysed until the world lay around them in a dismantled, atomized and meaningless heap. It was a common accusation that the Enlightenment ‘could explain everything, but understand nothing’. Johann Heinrich Merck, a member of the Sturm und Drang group, complained of the Enlightenment:

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.

Reason had looked like a liberator but had turned out to be a particularly demanding tyrant. Hamann asked angrily: ‘What is this much lauded reason with its universality, infallibility, certainty, and over-weenning claims, but an ens rationis, a stuffed dummy, endowed with divine attributes?’ In Rousseau’s view, the philosophes committed the fault of his lover, Madame de Warens, of whom he wrote in the Confessions: ‘instead of listening to her heart, which gave her good counsel, she listened to her reason, which gave her bad’. It was in this spirit that Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) sneered that Newton would see in a girl’s breast only a crooked line, and in her heart nothing more interesting than its cubic capacity, while William Blake (1757–1827) proclaimed that ‘Art is the Tree of Life. Science is the Tree of Death’. In the place of the arid abstractions of rationalism, the romantics called for a remystification of the world. Against the natural aesthetic laws of classicism, they opposed the spontaneity and originality of the inner light of genius. As the greatest of the romantic painters, Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), put it: ‘The painter should not just paint what he sees in front of him, but also what he sees inside himself. But if he should see nothing inside himself, then he should stop painting what he sees in front of him. Otherwise his pictures would become mere screens behind which one expects to find only the sick or even the dead.’ This precept was given visual expression by his friend Georg Friedrich Kersting (1785–1847), who depicted Friedrich in a bare studio isolated from the outside world (Plate 26).

THE CULTURE OF FEELING AND THE CULTURE OF REASON

To gain access to what really mattered, the romantics believed, reason and its main instrument – the word – were not so much inadequate as misleading, instilling a false sense of precision and clarity. If nature was not an inert mass, governed by the blind, mechanical Newtonian laws, but a vibrant organism pulsating with life, then it could be understood only by allowing the other human faculties to resume their rightful place. It was an indication of their rejection of the Enlightenment’s rationalism that they turned its central metaphor – light – on its head. ‘The cold light of day’ was rejected as superficial, and in its place was enthroned ‘the wonder-world night’. Is the owl perched on the artist’s shoulder in Goya’s The Sleep of Reason Begets Monsters a monster to be feared, or is it perhaps the Owl of Minerva, the symbol of wisdom, who ‘lies only at dusk’ (Hegel)? From Novalis and his Hymns to the Night to Richard Wagner and Tristan und Isolde, the night was celebrated as ‘the mother of all that is true and beautiful’.

THE SACRALIZATION OF ART AND THE STATUS OF THE ARTIST

In the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, culture shed its representational or recreational function to become a sacralized activity to be worshipped in its own right. One clue is provided by comparing and contrasting two funerals dating from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. No one knows exactly when Mozart was buried, nor even the day. He died in Vienna at 1 a.m. on 5 December 1791, according to his widow, Constanze. At 3 p.m. on the following day or on the day after that (accounts conflict), the body was taken to St Stephen’s Cathedral, where it was blessed in front of the Crucifix Chapel, and was then transported on a hearse through the Stubentor, along the Landstrasse to the new cemetery of St Marx. The actual interment may have taken place on the same day – the 6th or 7th depending on which authority one follows, or more likely on the next, i.e. the 7th or 8th, given the lateness of the hour. If some of the crasser myths surrounding Mozart’s obsequies have been exploded, the fact remains that it was a very muted send-off. No one was present at the graveside, apart from
the sexton and the priest, and no gravestone was erected to mark the spot.

How different was the treatment of Beethoven thirty-six years later. When he died in Vienna at around 5.45 p.m. on Monday, 26 March 1827, his friends had already selected an appropriate plot in the Währing cemetery. Once life was pronounced extinct, they set about arranging an autopsy, preserving Beethoven's physical likeness for posterity through a drawing and a death-mask by Joseph Danhauser, and safeguarding his possessions. They also kept a vigil alongside the 'polished oak coffin which rested on ball-shaped gilded supports' and which was surrounded by eight candles, as the throngs of those wishing to pay their last respects filed past. Three days later the funeral took place, beginning at three in the afternoon, formal invitations having been issued. As the coffin was carried down into the courtyard of the House of the Black-Robed Spaniard, nine priests from the Schottenstift intoned a blessing and a choir drawn from the Italian Opera sang a chorale by Anselm Weber. So dense had the crowd become that the procession had great difficulty in starting off, as one can see from Franz Stober's celebrated painting, itself a significant phenomenon. When eventually it did get going, a second choir sang the Misere to trombone accompaniment. Along the road, so many people 'from all classes and estates', as a newspaper report put it, had gathered that the procession to the church of the Holy Trinity in the Alsergasse took one-and-a-half hours to cover the 500 yards (450 m). After the funeral service, the cortège, still numbered in thousands, formed up again for the journey to the Währing cemetery. At the gates, the classical actor Heinrich Anschütz delivered an oration written by the Habsburg Empire's most celebrated dramatist, Franz Grillparzer. This became justly celebrated in its own right, and is indeed as commendable for its eloquence as for its brevity. Particularly striking was the complete absence of any reference to God. The deity to whom Grillparzer - and Beethoven - paid their 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!' No supernatural being was necessary, only a secular religion of aesthetics mediated by a supreme artist. As Schubert's friend Gabriel Seidl put it in a poem dedicated to Beethoven's memory:

He dominates and reconciles what is strange and incompatible.
He feels through his mind; he thinks through his heart.
He teaches us new jubilation, new laments, new prayer and new jests.
... He lives! For his life is his music; no god will ever uproot that from the world's breast.

Part of the explanation for the very different obsequial treatments accorded to Mozart and Beethoven lies in the establishment of art in general, and music in particular, as an independent, autonomous source of value and authority in human society. It was in Germany during the middle decades of the eighteenth century that aesthetics emerged as a distinct discipline. Lessing's Laocoön, or The Bounds of Painting and Poetry of 1766 synthesized several different strands to form a tie that was to bind together succeeding generations of German intellectuals. Not for nothing was Lessing the son of a Protestant pastor, like so many other of his fellow writers. As Nicholas Boyle has aptly observed in his biography of Goethe, German aesthetic theory was 'the ex-theology of an ex-clerisy'.

Neoclassicists such as Lessing, who reacted with such repugnance to the hedonistic excesses of the rococo, took a great deal from the French theorists of Louis XIV's academies, but one characteristic they did not adopt was the subservience of the arts to non-artistic purposes such as the glorification of the Sun King. This was given magisterial expression by Johann Georg Sulzer in his Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste (General Theory of the Fine Arts) of 1771, where he stated firmly that the use of the arts for representational purposes such as 'display and luxury' was 'a complete misunderstanding of their divine power ... and their high value'. Even more influential was Winckelmann. To his achievements already recorded in this chapter must be added his creation of an aesthetic religion by the marriage of the language of Pietist introspection with sensualist paganism. Winckelmann'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 (Leopold Ertleinger).

If the refined formulations of philosophers might have had a limited appeal (although one should never underestimate the intellectualism of the German Bildungsbürgertum), the same could not be said of the
poets, dramatists and novelists who shifted the literary balance of power on the continent to the east of the Rhine. It was Goethe, who commanded all those genres, and many more besides, who came to be regarded by posterity as the pre-eminent figure, but in his own lifetime and for long thereafter, it was his friend Friedrich Schiller who was the more highly regarded, not least by musicians. Beethoven thought Goethe was too much of the courtier when he met him for the first time in 1812, but he venerated Schiller from an early age, and clearly knew his work intimately, quoting passages from Schiller’s plays in his correspondence.

Winckelmann’s celebrated call for ‘noble simplicity and calm grandeur’ permeated Schiller’s mature dramas and his aesthetic writings of the 1790s. In his two masterpieces of 1795–6 – On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters and Naive and Sentimental Poetry – Schiller addressed the malaise of modern man, analysing him into his rational and sensuous components. The upheavals unleashed by the French Revolution had revealed the impotence of a purely rational ‘theoretical culture’. What was needed was the ‘practical culture’ offered by aesthetic education, which would allow the expansion of the powers of the imagination. Enlightenment by means of concepts could not influence the character of mankind, for most humans are moved to take action by their feelings. So the seeds of rational perception will wither where they fall unless the soil has been prepared by the emotions and imagination: ‘The way to the head must be opened through the heart.’ And that was the task of aesthetic education, to pave the way for the transition from ‘rule by mere forces to rule by laws’. Aesthetic experience was the one area in which the rational and the sensual could interact harmoniously: only in culture was man simultaneously active and free, able to influence the world around him while remaining self-contained. At a time when all Europe was in danger of being overwhelmed by revolutionary change, it was only through culture that humankind could achieve liberty without licence: ‘If man is ever to solve the problem of politics in practice, he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to freedom’ was Schiller’s conclusion. Or, in Beethoven’s more succinct formulation: ‘Only art and scholarship give us intimations and hopes of a higher life.’

It was in the eighteenth century that ‘art’ acquired its modern meaning. For Dr Johnson, ‘art’ still meant skill, as in ‘the art of boiling sugar’, although by this time it was becoming established that ‘the fine arts’, ‘elegant arts’ or ‘arts of taste’ could be distinguished from ‘necessary’, ‘mechanical’ or ‘useful’ arts. It was from the Germans that the English took the belief that literature, the visual arts and music possessed some common quality that raised them above technology. In On the Plastic Imitation of the Beautiful of 1787, Karl Philipp Moritz (who also wrote a perceptive account of his travels through England) argued that just because they served no practical purpose, artistic creations enjoyed a self-sufficient, quasi-religious character. That axiom of course carried with it important implications for the way in which artists should be treated. Now promoted to be high-priests, they had the right to enjoy a creative freedom unencumbered by the representational or recreational needs of the patron. In the words of Goethe’s friend and portraitist Johann Heinrich Meyer, ‘art must feel free and independent; it must rule, as it were, if it is to thrive; if it is ruled and mastered, it is bound to decline and vanish’.

This drive for independence was fuelled in part by a growing restlessness with the often quirky demands of patrons. Did not even the equable Haydn feel exploited as he ground out yet another baryton trio for Prince Nicholas Esterházy? In 1790 he wrote about the previous decade: ‘I did not know if I was a Kapell-master or a Kapell-servant . . . It is really sad always to be a slave . . . I am a poor creature!’ Less than a year later he was whisked off to London by the impresario Salomon, and there he found both fame and fortune. He wrote home to Maria Anna von Genzinger on 8 January 1791:

My arrival caused a great sensation throughout the whole city, and I went the round of all the newspapers for 3 successive days. Everyone wants to know me. I had to dine out 6 times up to now, and if I wanted, I could dine out every day.

Yet Haydn did return to Eisenstadt and remained in the service of the Esterházy’s until the day he died. He was sharp enough to appreciate that the anonymous public could be just as hard a taskmaster as any prince. The trick was to take the money and the adulation without having to compromise creative freedom. Not easy to do at the best of times, this balancing-act became progressively more difficult as the public rapidly broadened in numbers without deepening in appreciation. A Haydn symphony was one thing, Beethoven’s Ninth was quite another. What the public wanted was easy-listening, that is to say plenty of
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variety, good tunes, regular rhythms, not too long, and all preferably in the key of C-major so that it could be easily played at home on the piano that was increasingly becoming a feature of middle-class parlours. Long and loud were the complaints from musicians that the public did not appreciate them, preferring the jaunty tunes and rumpy-tumpy orchestration of Italian ice-cream opera. Beethoven's own comment on the prevailing fashion for Italian opera, conveyed two years later in a conversation with Hummel, was characteristically pithy: 'It is said vox populi, vox dei – I never believed it.'

The way out of this dilemma, to avoid jumping from the frying-pan of aristocratic tyranny into the fire of public philistinism, was to liberate art from both the scum and the dregs of society and to place it on an altar in unsullied safety (just to mix the metaphor once more). So artists of all genres embraced with enthusiasm the sacralization preached by the aestheticians. From the rich range of examples available, the following two recommend themselves by their eloquence and relative brevity. First, Novalis (the Saxon noble Friedrich von Hardenberg):

Whoever feels unhappy in this world, whoever fails to find what he seeks – then let him enter the world of books, art and nature, this eternal domain which is both ancient and modern simultaneously, and let him live there in this sacred church of a better world. There he will surely find a lover and a friend, a fatherland and a God.

And secondly, Goethe:

True poetry identifies itself as such by knowing how to liberate us from the earthly burdens that oppress us, by being a secular gospel, by creating inner cheerfulness and outward contentment. Like a hot-air balloon, it raises us into the higher regions and gives us a bird's-eye view of the confused labyrinths of the world.

Of all the creative artists, it was the musicians who found this easier, for their medium speaks directly to the psyche without any mediating word or image. This was put particularly well by Leonard Willoughby: 'The romanticists hoped to reach ultimate reality through music because, through the quasi-identity of its form and content, it seemed to derive from the eternal primordial chaos without having passed first through the ordering faculty of the human mind. It was precisely this Dionysian element in music which the romanticists loved and stressed.' It did not mean that they were obliged to retreat to some remote ivory tower, removed from the grubby tastes of the general public. What it did mean was a self-protective detachment from the worst excesses of the market-place.

This was a process accelerated by the musicians' ability to express with special force the ever-growing importance of the nation in both elite and popular discourse. The late Ernest Gellner was fond of quoting a character in James Hadley Chase's novel No Orchids for Miss Blandish: 'Every girl ought to have a husband – preferably her own', and then adding: 'every high culture now wants a state, and preferably its own', which can be augmented to read 'and every nation wants music – preferably its own'. It was this which lay behind the contemporary veneration of Handel in England, who was all the more English for being naturalized. Especially through his oratorios he literally gave a voice to the potent triad that supported English national identity: Protestantism, prosperity and power. When he died in 1759 at the age of seventy-four he was given a grand funeral in Westminster Abbey and a prominent permanent memorial. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death, a great Handel Commemoration was organized to celebrate his status as a national icon, attended by the King and Queen, prelates, peers, gentry and 'last, not least in all Matters of Entertainment and Expence, by the Majesty of the People', as a newspaper report put it. The Anglican clergyman William Coxe observed that the Commemoration was 'the most splendid tribute ever paid to posthumous fame' and 'an honour to the profession, the nation and to the Sovereign'. It was no accident that this apotheosis of the musician should have taken place in London, the city with the largest public sphere in Europe. Handel's demonstration of the ability of music to articulate national identity was imitated by the French revolutionaries with the 'Marseillaise' and other songs in a popular idiom, and subsequently by virtually every European country. This elevation of music and musicians marked a sharp change in the traditional hierarchy of artistic genres, for in the past it had been the architects and painters who had been most esteemed by patron and public alike. As the nineteenth century was to show, the inexorable march of music to cultural hegemony had begun.

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