

The Concept of *Bildung* in Early German Romanticism

1. Social and Political Context

In 1799 Friedrich Schlegel, the ringleader of the early romantic circle, stated, with uncommon and uncharacteristic clarity, his view of the *summum bonum*, the supreme value in life: “The highest good, and [the source of] everything that is useful, is culture (*Bildung*).”¹ Since the German word *Bildung* is virtually synonymous with education, Schlegel might as well have said that the highest good is education.

That aphorism, and others like it, leave no doubt about the importance of education for the early German romantics. It is no exaggeration to say that *Bildung*, the education of humanity, was *the* central goal, *the* highest aspiration, of the early romantics. All the leading figures of that charmed circle—Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, W. D. Wackenroder, Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis), F. W. J. Schelling, Ludwig Tieck, and F. D. Schleiermacher—saw in education their hope for the redemption of humanity. The aim of their common journal, the *Athenäum*, was to unite all their efforts for the sake of one single overriding goal: *Bildung*.²

The importance, and indeed urgency, of *Bildung* in the early romantic agenda is comprehensible only in its social and political context. The young romantics were writing in the 1790s, the decade of the cataclysmic changes wrought by the Revolution in France. Like so many of their generation, the romantics were initially very enthusiastic about the Revolution. Tieck, Novalis, Schleiermacher, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Friedrich Schlegel celebrated the storming of the Bastille as the dawn of a new age. They toasted the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and they swore that humanity would blossom only in a republic. Their enthusiasm was much more intense and persistent than many of their older contemporaries, such as Schiller,

Herder, and Wieland, who became disillusioned in 1793 after the execution of Louis XVI, when it became clear that France would not become a constitutional monarchy. The romantic fervor glowed unabated throughout the September massacres, the execution of the royal family, the invasion of the Rhineland, and even the Terror.

By the late 1790s, however, the romantic ardor began to dim. The constant instability in France, the readiness of the French to invade and conquer, and the onset of Napoleon's military dictatorship disillusioned them, as so many of their generation. The romantics became especially troubled by the anomie, egoism, and materialism of modern French society, which seemed to undermine all ethical and religious values. Their political views grew more conservative in the final years of the decade. They asserted the need for some form of elite rule, for a more educated class to direct and control the interests and energies of the people. Although they continued to affirm their republican ideals, they believed that the best state was a mixture of aristocracy, monarchy, and democracy.

The political problems in France soon crossed the Rhine, posing a serious crisis for the old Holy Roman Empire. It had become clear that Germany could not follow the path of France: the French attempt to introduce wholesale political reforms, without any prior change in attitudes, beliefs, and customs, had proven itself a failure. But it was also plain that there could be no going back to the past: the Revolution had raised hopes and expectations among the people that could no longer be satisfied by the old alliance of throne and altar. The people wanted to participate in the affairs of the state, to have some control over their own destiny, and they no longer could be pawned off with the reassurance that their prince loved them and ruled in their name. Yet how was it possible to satisfy the widespread demands for social and political change *and* not to slide down the path of perpetual chaos, as in France? That was the question every intelligent observer of the Revolution pondered, and the romantics were no exception.

The romantics' solution to this crisis lay with education. If all the chaos and bloodshed in France had shown anything, they argued, it is that a republic cannot succeed if the people are not ready for it. A republic has high moral ideals, which are worthless in practice if the people do not have either the knowledge or the will to live by them. For a republic to work, it must have responsible, enlightened, and virtuous citizens. If the people are to participate in public affairs, they must know their true interests and those of the state as a whole; and if they are to be responsible citizens, they must have

the virtue and self-control to prefer the common good over their private interests. But such knowledge and such virtue are possible only through education, and indeed by a very deep and thoroughgoing one. Somehow, it was necessary to transform the obedient, passive, and benighted subject of an absolute monarchy into an autonomous, active, and enlightened citizen of a republic.

The romantic argument in behalf of education seems like common sense, and it had been advanced by almost every moderate thinker in the 1790s. Nevertheless, it was still controversial. The argument presupposes a classical doctrine that they inherited from Montesquieu: that “the principle” of a republic is virtue.³ In his famous *Esprit des lois* Montesquieu had written, with the models of ancient Rome and Greece in mind, that the stability of a republic depends on the virtue of its citizens, their willingness to sacrifice their self-interest for the sake of the common good. This doctrine had been countered by no less than Kant himself, who contended in his essay *Zum ewigen Frieden* that a republic would be possible “even for a nation of devils.” Kant’s point was that even if everyone acted solely on their self-interest, they would consent to live according to a republican constitution, because it alone ensured that everyone could pursue their self-interest with a minimum of interference from others. Hence the diabolic Kantian republic required no education at all.

The romantics believed that education was indispensable, however, because they questioned one of the central premises of Kant’s argument: that self-interest can be socially cohesive. To build a true community from the separate self-interests of individuals, they argued, is to square the political circle.⁴ A self-interested agent would except himself from the laws when they could not be enforced, so that the only form of social control for a nation of devils would be repressive and authoritarian rule, a true Hobbesian Leviathan. There was no recourse, then, but to turn to education, which provided the only foundation for the state.

2. Education as the Highest Good

Although the social and political context explains why education became such a pressing issue for the romantics, it still does not account for why they regarded it as the highest good, the supreme value in life. To understand why they put education at the very pinnacle of their hierarchy of values, it is

necessary to reconstruct their philosophical position regarding a classical philosophical problem.

The question of the highest good, of the supreme value in life, had been a central philosophical problem since antiquity, and indeed a major source of controversy among all schools of philosophy. This issue had lost none of its relevance and importance in eighteenth-century Germany, where it was a popular theme of religious and philosophical writing. Kant had posed it anew in his *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, and Fichte had made it a central issue of his influential 1794 lectures *Über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*. The romantics simply continued with the tradition; the problem of the highest good appears often in the unpublished writings of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Hölderlin, and Schleiermacher. There can be no doubt that, when he wrote his aphorism, Schlegel was taking a stand on this ancient question.

In the classical sense, first defined by Aristotle and then reformulated by Kant, the “highest good” has two meanings. First, it is a *final* end, a goal that does not derive its value from being the means to any other end. Second, it is a *complete* end, a goal that comprises all final ends, so that nothing can be added to it to give it more value.⁵

Prima facie the romantic view that education is the highest good appears very paradoxical, not to mention implausible. Surely, it seems, education cannot be the supreme value, since it is only the means for something else. After all, someone might well ask, what do we educate people for?

The paradox disappears, however, when we reconsider the German term *Bildung*. This word signifies two processes—learning and personal growth—but they are not understood apart from one another, as if education were only a means to growth. Rather, learning is taken to be constitutive of personal development, as part and parcel of how we become a human being in general and a specific individual in particular. If we regard education as part of a general process of *self-realization*—as the development of all one’s characteristic powers as a human being and as an individual—then it is not difficult to understand why the romantics would regard it as at least a plausible candidate for the title of the highest good.

The romantics regarded self-realization as the highest good in both its classical senses. Self-realization is the *final* end, because it does not derive its value as a means to some higher end, such as the common good or the state. Although the romantics stressed the importance of education for the state, they did not value it simply as a means to that end; on the contrary, they in-

sisted that self-realization is an end in itself, and they argued that the state should promote the self-realization of each of its citizens. Self-realization is also the *complete* end, since an individual who attains it lacks nothing, having achieved everything of value in life. In other words, a person who achieves self-realization attains the end of life itself, the very purpose of existence.

These were broad and bold claims, to be sure, yet they were rarely defended explicitly in the writings of the young romantics.⁶ Nevertheless, we can begin to reconstruct their position when we consider their attitude toward the two competing theories of the highest good in the late eighteenth century. One of these was the hedonism of the English utilitarians and the French *philosophes*, who defined the highest good in terms of pleasure. The other was the moral stoicism of Kant, who regarded virtue as the final good, and happiness in accord with virtue as the complete good.

The romantics rejected hedonism because it did not encourage the development of those capacities characteristic of our humanity or individuality. Pleasure by itself cannot be the highest good since, in immoderation, it even harms us. If it has any value at all, then that is when it is the result of, or integral to, acting on our characteristic human powers.⁷

The romantic critique of hedonism is most explicit and emphatic in Schlegel's and Novalis's indictment of the lifestyle of modern bourgeois society. They use a very redolent term to characterize this way of life: *philistinism*.⁸ The philistine, Novalis says, devotes himself to a life of comfort. He makes his life into a repetitive routine, and conforms to moral and social convention in order to have an easy life. If he values art, it is only for entertainment; and if he is religious, it is only to relieve his distress. In short, the sin of philistinism is that it robs us of our humanity and individuality.

If the romantics found hedonism too morally lax, they regarded Kant's ethics as too morally severe.⁹ They saw two fundamental difficulties to the Kantian ethic. First, Kant had stressed reason at the expense of sensibility, ignoring how our senses are just as much a part of our humanity and just as in need of cultivation and development. It is not simply a purely rational being who acts morally, the romantics held, but the *whole* individual, who does his duty not *contrary to* but *from* his inclinations. Second, by emphasizing acting according to universal laws, Kant had failed to see the importance of individuality. The Kantian ideal of morality demanded that we develop a purely rational personality, which we all shared simply as intelligent beings, and so it endorsed uniformity. While such an ideal might be a sufficient analysis of morality, it could not be regarded as an adequate account of the

highest good, which also demands the realization of individuality, that which makes me just this person rather than anyone else.

The ideal of *Bildung* was meant to rectify these shortcomings of Kantian ethics. A romantic education had two fundamental goals, each compensating for one of these flaws. One would unite and develop *all* the powers of a human being, forging all his or her disparate capacities into a *whole*. The other would develop not only our characteristic human powers—those shared by everyone as a human being—but also our individuality—those unique aptitudes and dispositions peculiar to each individual. These goals were, of course, closely linked: to develop all one's powers as a whole was inevitably and naturally to realize one's individuality, for individuality emerges in that unique synthesis, that special unity, of all one's human powers.

3. Aesthetic Education

To describe the romantic ideal of education in terms of human perfection, excellence, or self-realization, as I have done so far, is insufficient. This gives only its genus, not its *differentia specifica*. Perfection was not an ideal characteristic of romanticism alone, but it can be found in many strands of eighteenth-century German thought. The pietists (P. J. Spener, Johann Arndt), the classicists (C. M. Wieland, Goethe, Herder), and the Leibnizian–Wolffian school (Moses Mendelssohn, Alexander Baumgarten, Christian Wolff) all had their ideals of perfection. It is necessary to be more precise because, in basic respects, the romantics were critical of the ideals of their predecessors and contemporaries.

We come closer to a more accurate account of the romantic ideal if we describe it as *aesthetic* education. The term was first given currency by Schiller in his famous 1795 *Über die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, a work of seminal importance for the romantics. Much of the aestheticism of the romantic movement—its belief in the central role of art in cultural renewal—can trace its origin back to this work. The romantics followed Schiller in seeing art as the chief instrument for the education of mankind, and in viewing the artist as the very paragon of humanity.

Why did Schiller and the romantics give such importance to art? Why did they see it as the key to *Bildung*? We can reconstruct their reasoning only if, once again, we place it in their social and political context, specifically the social and political crisis of the 1790s.

Well before the 1790s, the leading thinkers of the *Sturm und Drang*—J. G. Hamann, J. G. Herder, Justus Möser, and eventually Schiller himself—had criticized the traditional *Aufklärung* for failing to provide a proper education for the people. The *Aufklärer* of the Leibnizian–Wolffian school had defined enlightenment in terms of imparting knowledge, of spreading clear and distinct concepts, among the public, as if education were only a matter of cultivating the intellect. But such a program of education—so it seemed to Herder and Möser as early as the 1770s—suffered from two serious shortcomings. First, it did not encourage thinking for oneself, or spontaneity of thought, because it presupposed that someone else had already done all the thinking for one; the public were made into passive and unquestioning recipients of knowledge already acquired and concepts already clarified. Second, and even more problematically, it assumed that if people did understand the principles taught to them that they would be willing and able *to act* according to them; but such fatuous intellectualism ignored the classical problem of *akrasia*: that even if we know the good, we might not act according to it.

For all these thinkers, the Revolution provided striking confirmation of this diagnosis. The *philosophes* in France had been preaching the principles of reason to the people for decades, and they had proclaimed constitution after constitution. But all to no avail. The people were not ready for such high principles and lofty ideals. Rather than acting according to the principles of reason, they gave free reign to their own interests and passions. The result was plain for all to see: France was tumbling, sinking further into the abyss of chaos, strife, and bloodshed.

The lesson to be learned from the failure of the Enlightenment and the chaos of the Revolution, Schiller argued, is that it is not sufficient to educate the understanding alone. It is also necessary to cultivate feelings and desires, to develop a person's sensibility so that he or she are *inclined* to act according to the principles of reason. In other words, it was also essential *to inspire* the people, to touch their hearts and to arouse their imaginations, to get them to live by higher ideals.

Of course, in the past there had been a remedy for this problem. Religion, with its powerful myths and seductive mysteries, had provided a popular incentive to morality because it could appeal directly to the heart and the imagination of the people. There was nothing like the image of a suffering Christ, a resurrected Lazarus, or an angry Jehovah to edify the virtuous and to chasten the sinful. But, by the late 1790s, this traditional source of moral

authority was on the wane, and indeed on the verge of collapse. Here the *Aufklärung* had been only too successful. Its ruthless and relentless criticism of the Bible, of the traditional proofs for the existence of God, and of the authority of the clergy had left little standing of the old religion, which was now condemned as prejudice, superstition, and myth. Clearly, there was an enormous vacuum to be filled. The obvious failure of Robespierre's contrived and artificial cult of reason had made this all the more apparent.

Art became so important to Schiller and the romantics because they saw it as the only means to resolve this crisis. They argued that while philosophy cannot stimulate action nor religion convince reason, art has the power to inspire us to act according to reason. Because it so strongly appeals to the imagination, and because it so deeply effects our feelings, art can move people to live by the high moral ideals of a republic.

Ultimately, then, the romantics sought to replace the traditional role of religion with art as the incentive and stimulus for morality. Hence they developed ideas for a modern mythology, a new Bible, and a restored church. Now the artist would take over the ancient function of the priest.

This case for the power of art to educate humanity was first put forward by Schiller, but it soon became a *leitmotiv* of the romantic movement. It is a central theme of Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, of Friedrich Schlegel's *Ideen*, of Wackenroder's *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders*, and of Tieck's *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen*. Nowhere does it emerge with more simplicity and clarity, however, than in a later work of high romanticism, Heinrich von Kleist's short story *Heilige Cäcilie oder die Macht der Musik*. According to the story, which takes place during the early Reformation in Holland, four brothers, who are fanatical Protestants, organize a mob to attack a convent; its despairing and defenseless nuns appeal to Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music, who inspires them to sing. Such is the beauty of their *Gloria* that the plunderers fall on their knees, confess their sins, convert, and then finally go mad, spending the rest of their days in a sanatorium, singing every evening the *Gloria*. Of course, this was a myth all of its own; but there can be no doubt that it expressed the highest hopes, and most fervent wishes, of the romantic soul.

4. The Role of Art

It might seem as if the romantics only traded one form of naiveté for another—namely, the Enlightenment confidence in reason for their own faith

in art. Both beliefs seem quixotic because they ascribe exaggerated power to the realm of culture. It is very idealistic, to say the least, to assume that we can become better people simply by listening to music, reading novels, and attending plays. If art does have that effect, one is tempted to say, that is probably because people are already predisposed to it, and so already educated for it. But then the whole case for art is caught in a vicious circle: art educates humanity only if people are already educated.

The charge of naiveté is one of the most common objections to Schiller's argument, and the reputation of the romantics for hopeless idealism is largely based on it. But this criticism rests on a very superficial understanding of the role of art in romantic education. When the romantics wrote of aesthetic education they were not simply referring to the effect works of art have on moral character. They had something more in mind. But what?

Exactly how the romantics understood aesthetic education becomes clear from a close reading of Schiller's *Briefe*. It is striking that, in the tenth letter, Schiller virtually concedes the whole charge of naiveté.¹⁰ He admits that art will educate only the virtuous, and he notes that the periods when art flourished were also those when morals declined. But, after accepting these points, Schiller then turns his argument in a new direction. The question for him is not whether art has an effect on moral character, but whether beauty is an essential component of human perfection itself. Schiller's argument is that if we perfect ourselves—if we form our various powers into a whole—then we will become like works of art. To perfect ourselves is to unify the form of our reason with the content of our sensibility; but the unity of form and content is what is characteristic of beauty itself. Hence aesthetic education does not consist in having our characters formed by works of art but in making our characters into works of art.

Schiller's most detailed account of how a person can become a work of art appears in his treatise *Anmut und Würde*.¹¹ Here he puts forward his ideal of "the beautiful soul" (*die schöne Seele*), the person whose character is a work of art because all his or her actions exhibit grace. For Schiller, a graceful action is one that shows no sign of constraint—whether that of a physical need or a moral imperative—and that reveals the spontaneity and harmony of a person's whole character. Such an action does not stem from sensibility alone, as if it were the result of natural need, and still less from reason alone, as if it were the product of a moral command; rather it flows from the whole character, from reason and sensibility acting in unison. The beautiful soul does not act from duty contrary to inclination, or from inclination contrary to

duty, but from inclination according to duty. Such a spontaneous inclination is not, however, the product of the desires and feelings that are given by nature, but the result of our moral education, the discipline and training of virtue. In a graceful action, then, our desires and feelings are neither repressed according to reason, nor indulged according to sensibility, but refined and ennobled, or, to use a modern term, “sublimated.”

Schiller’s ideal of the beautiful soul gives a completely new perspective on how art motivates moral action. It is not that contemplating works of art inspires us to do good deeds, but that there is an aesthetic pleasure inherent in human excellence, which serves as an incentive to attain and maintain it. The stimulant to moral perfection does not derive from any work of art but simply from the pleasure involved in the exercise of characteristic human activities. Like most moralists, Schiller maintains that virtue brings its own reward, a unique kind of pleasure; he simply adds that this pleasure is essentially aesthetic, because achieving human perfection is like creating a work of art.

Schiller’s argument in behalf of aesthetic education ultimately depends on a theory of beauty as perfection. Such a theory could easily be generalized and extended to whatever is capable of perfection, whether it is an object in nature, an individual person, or the state and society itself. This was a temptation that neither Schiller nor the romantics could resist. They broadened their case for the primacy of the aesthetic in human life by also applying it to the state and society. They argued that the perfect society or state is also a work of art. In the final letter of the *Briefe*, for example, Schiller wrote of his utopia as an *aesthetic* state (*ästhetischen Staat*), which, like a work of art, unites the different members of society into a harmonious whole.¹² In his *Glauben und Liebe* Novalis imagined a *poetic* state in which the monarch is the poet of poets, the director of a vast public stage in which all citizens are actors.¹³ And in his early manuscript *Versuch einer Theorie des geselligen Betragens* Schleiermacher imagined an ideal society in which individuals form a beautiful whole through the free interaction of personalities and the mutual exchange of ideas.¹⁴ Schiller, Novalis, and Schleiermacher all assume that the perfect society or state is like a work of art because there is an organic unity between the individual and the social whole, which is governed neither by physical nor moral constraints but only free interaction.

The early romantic ideal of utopia was therefore the creation of a social or political work of art. This aesthetic whole would be a *Bildungsanstalt*, a society in which people would educate one another through the free exchange

of their personalities and ideas. The romantic *salons*, in Berlin and Jena, were fledgling attempts to put this ideal into practice. If life were only one grand *salon*, one long learning experience in which everyone participated, the romantics believed, then society would indeed become a work of art, and this life “the most beautiful of all possible worlds.”

5. Education and Freedom

We come closer to the *differentia specifica* of romantic education when we describe it as aesthetic. Yet we are still far from our goal. The problem is that even the ideal of aesthetic education—though central to the romantics—was not unique to, or characteristic of, them. There were many thinkers in eighteenth-century Germany who described human perfection in aesthetic terms and stressed the need to cultivate human sensibility as well as reason. This line of thought can be found in the Leibnizian–Wolffian school, and especially in the writings of its most outstanding aesthete, Alexander Baumgarten.¹⁵ By the early eighteenth century the connection of virtue with beauty had already become a venerable tradition: it was a favorite theme of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, who had an enormous influence in Germany. Schiller’s theme of the beautiful soul also had a proud ancestry, which could trace its origins back to pietism and that “German Voltaire,” C. M. Wieland.¹⁶

This raises the question: What, if anything, is characteristic of a *romantic* aesthetic education? How, if at all, did it differ from the forms of aesthetic education so prevalent in the eighteenth century?

Although there are clear points of continuity between the Leibnizian–Wolffian tradition and the romantics, there is also a drastic and dramatic break between them. That break is made by Kant’s critical philosophy, which had sundered the link between virtue and beauty so carefully forged and crafted by the Leibnizian–Wolffian school. In the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* Kant had argued that the basis and incentive for moral action must derive from pure reason alone, independent of all considerations of pleasure, aesthetic or otherwise. And in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* he stressed that the pleasure of beauty is completely disinterested, having its characteristic qualities independent of all moral and physical ends. When we experience an object as beautiful, Kant contended, we take pleasure in the sheer contemplation of its form, but we do not consider whether it conforms to moral or physical purposes.¹⁷ In both these works Kant attacked the worth of the

concept of perfection—the keystone of the ethical and aesthetic thought of the Leibnizian-Wolffian school—as a criterion of morality or beauty.

The sheer prestige of the critical philosophy in the 1790s in Germany would seem to be sufficient to bury, once and for all, the seductive equation of virtue and beauty, morality and aesthetics, which had entranced so many thinkers in the eighteenth century. But the very opposite is the case. Paradoxically, Kant's critique led to Schiller's reformulation and transformation of this equation, which gave it a new lease on life. In his unpublished but seminal 1793 *Kallias oder über die Schönheit*, Schiller resynthesizes on a new basis the realms of art and morality, of beauty and virtue, which had been so disastrously divided by Kant.¹⁸ He endorses some of the negative conclusions of the Kantian critique: that art must be autonomous, serving neither moral nor physical ends, and that the concept of perfection, understood in the classical sense as unity in multiplicity, is insufficient to explain beauty. Nevertheless, Schiller argues against Kant that beauty is more than simply a subjective quality, such as the pleasure of contemplation, and he insists instead that it is an objective feature of an object itself. Whether or not an object is beautiful, Schiller contends, depends on whether it is *self-determining*, that is, whether it is free from external constraint and acts according to its inherent nature alone. Since self-determination is equivalent to freedom, and since a beautiful object presents, exhibits, or reveals this quality to the senses, beauty is nothing more nor less than *freedom in appearance*.

In thus defining beauty, Schiller intends to give a new foundation to Kant's concept of aesthetic autonomy, its independence from moral and physical ends. But, ironically, such a definition also provides a new connection between art and morality. For the self-determination of the aesthetic object—its independence from all forms of constraint, whether moral or physical—means that it can serve as a symbol of freedom, which, according to the critical philosophy itself, is the fundamental concept of morality. Hence Schiller, quite self-consciously and deliberately, rejoins the realms of art and morality, though now the connecting link between these domains is provided by the concept of freedom rather than that of perfection.

This does not mean that Schiller completely rejects the old concept of perfection, which he continues to use and to describe in the traditional terms as a unity in multiplicity; but it is important to see that this concept now has a new underpinning: the concept of freedom itself. Perfection is now defined in terms of self-determination, acting according to the necessity of one's nature independent of all constraint.

The romantic concept of aesthetic education has its roots in Schiller's redefinition of the moral role of art. What is central to and characteristic of the romantic concept is the Schillerian thesis that the end of aesthetic education is freedom. Like Schiller, the romantics maintain that to become an aesthetic whole, to make one's life a work of art, it is necessary to realize one's nature as a spontaneous and free subject. Since beauty consists in freedom in appearance, we attain beauty only when our moral character expresses freedom itself.

That *Bildung* consists in the development of freedom is a point much stressed by both Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. Schlegel simply defined *Bildung* as "the development of independence" (*Entwicklung der Selbständigkeit*), famously arguing that what is characteristic of *Bildung* in the modern world, in contrast to the ancient, is precisely its striving for freedom.¹⁹ The purpose of our lives, he maintained, is to realize our nature as self-determining beings, where self-determination consists in constantly attempting to determine what one is, and then realizing that one is nothing but the activity of constantly attempting to determine what one is.²⁰ Novalis was no less emphatic and explicit than Schlegel: "All education (*Bildung*) leads to nothing else than what one can call freedom, although this should not designate a mere concept but the creative ground of all existence."²¹

It is this emphasis on freedom, then, that separates the romantic account of aesthetic education from its historical antecedents in the Leibnizian-Wolffian school. But is this not what we should expect? The rallying cry of anyone who came of age in the 1790s was freedom. The problem with the old *Aufklärer* of the Leibnizian-Wolffian school, the romantics complained, is that they had abandoned their freedom by compromising with the social and political status quo. A romantic education would be one fitting for the 1790s: the liberation of the spirit from all forms of social and political oppression.

6. The Awakening of the Senses

The chief aim of aesthetic education, whether in the romantic or Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition, was the cultivation of sensibility. Normally contrasted with reason, sensibility was defined in a very broad sense to include the powers of desire, feeling, and perception. The underlying premise behind the program of aesthetic education was that sensibility could be developed, disciplined, and refined no less than reason itself. Long before the 1790s, the

Sturmer und Dränger had complained that the *Aufklärung* had failed to educate this faculty. Since their main task was to combat superstition, prejudice, and enthusiasm, the *Aufklärer* had naturally devoted most of their attention to the development of reason. But, the *Sturmer und Dränger* objected, this was to neglect one-half of our humanity.

The romantics shared this criticism of the *Aufklärung*, and in this regard their concern with sensibility was continuous with the tradition of the *Sturm und Drang*. Like Schiller and the *Sturmer und Dränger*, the romantics wanted to cultivate sensibility as an *aesthetic* faculty. Their aim was to educate the senses, specifically their power to perceive the beauty of the world. This faculty could be made more sensitive, refined, and acute, they believed, so that a person's life could be greatly enriched and ennobled.

It is important to see, however, that there was something else unique to, and characteristic of, the romantic program of aesthetic education, and that in an important respect they went beyond even Schiller and the *Sturm und Drang*. What is distinctive of their program is not *that*, but *how*, they wanted to educate sensibility. Their aim was, in a word, *to romanticize* the senses. But what does this redolent word mean?

The best clue comes from Novalis. To romanticize the world, he explains in an unpublished fragment, is to make us aware of the magic, mystery, and wonder of the world; it is to educate the senses to see the ordinary as extraordinary, the familiar as strange, the mundane as sacred, the finite as infinite.²² The romantics wanted to break outside the confines of our ordinary and mundane perception of the world, where we automatically categorize everything according to common concepts, and where we see things only as objects of use. Their goal was to develop our power of *contemplation* so that we can see things anew, as they are in themselves and for their own sakes, apart from their utility and common meaning.

The romantics sought to romanticize not only our external senses—our powers of perception of the external world—but also our internal ones—our sensitivity to the world within. They attempted to direct our attention to our inner depths, to the hidden recesses of the self, no less than to the world without, the realms of society and nature. For the romantics, self-realization was essentially self-discovery, an exploration of one's inner depths. As Novalis puts the point: "We dream of a journey through the universe. But is the universe then not in us? We do not know the depths of our spirit. Inward goes the secret path. Eternity with its worlds, the past and future, is in us or nowhere."²³

It was this conviction that later inspired Novalis to write *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*—the major *Bildungsroman* of the romantic school—as an antipode to Goethe’s earlier work in the same genre, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. While Wilhelm’s apprenticeship consists in his adventures in the wider world, his encounters with extraordinary characters and difficult situations, Heinrich’s education comes from unraveling the secret of his own dreams. There are two ways to educate the soul, Heinrich explains: one of them “the path of experience,” which is very indirect and leads to only worldly wisdom or prudence, while the other is “the path of inner contemplation,” which is very direct and results in spiritual self-realization.

There was a grand ambition behind this program for the reawakening of the senses, whether internal or external. The romantics aim was to *reunify* man with himself, nature, and others, so that he would once again feel at home in his world. According to the romantic philosophy of history, early man had been at one with himself, with others, and with nature; this unity was purely natural, and did not depend on any efforts of his own. Inevitably and tragically, however, this primal harmony had been torn apart by the development of civilization. Man had become alienated from others as a result of the increasing competition of civil society; he had become divided within himself with the rise of the division of labor; and he had become estranged from nature after the sciences had demystified it, making it into an object to be dominated and controlled for human benefit. The task of modern man was to *recreate* on a self-conscious and rational level that unity with ourselves, others, and nature that had once been *given* to early man on a naive and intuitive level.

Such indeed was the vocation of the romantic poet, who would attempt to revive our lost unity with ourselves, with nature, and with others. The key to recreating that unity consisted in the *remystification* of the world, in romanticizing the senses, because only when we were reawakened to the beauty, mystery, and magic of the world would we reidentify ourselves with it.

Not surprisingly, this demand for a reawakening of the senses led to the reappraisal of mysticism among the romantics. This sympathy for mysticism appears in many works of the early romantic school, in Novalis’s *Die Lehrling zu Sais*, Schleiermacher’s *Reden über die Religion*, Friedrich Schlegel’s *Ideen*, and Schelling’s *System des transcendentalen Idealismus*. All these works argue that we have a spiritual sense, a power of contemplation or intellectual intuition, which transcends our discursive reason and brings us into direct con-

tact with ourselves, others, and nature itself. They all praise the power of the artist to express these intuitions, and to revive our slumbering powers of contemplation.

Naturally, this new mysticism went hand-in-hand with a revival of religion in the romantic circle, which became especially apparent after the publication of Schleiermacher's *Reden* in 1799. Rather than regarding religion as a primitive form of metaphysics or morality, as the *Aufklärung* had done, the romantics saw it as a specific form of contemplation or perception of the universe. The essence of religion, Schleiermacher argues in his *Reden*, is the intuition of the universe. This religious reawakening has often been criticized as a relapse into the ideology of the *ancien régime*, but it is important to see it in the context of the romantics' general concern with *Bildung*. They valued religion chiefly as an instrument of aesthetic education, as a means of re-awakening the senses.

7. The Power of Love

The romantic program for the education of sensibility involved not only the cultivation of the senses, but also, more importantly, the development of "the faculty of desire." Its aim was to educate not only our powers to perceive, but also those to feel and desire. For the romantics, to educate feeling and desire meant essentially one thing: to awaken, nurture, and refine the power of love.

What especially inspired the early romantics—what, more than anything else, gave them their sense of purpose and identity—was their rediscovery of the lost power of love. It was their view that this vital source of our humanity had been forgotten, repressed, or ignored for far too long, and that it was now time to remember, reclaim, and revive it. Owing to the rationalism of the *Aufklärung* and to the legalism of the Kantian–Fichtean ethics, love had lost its once pivotal role in ethics and aesthetics, the pride of place it once held in the Christian tradition. The romantics saw it as their mission to restore the sovereignty of love to the realms of morals, politics, and art.

The central concept of romantic ethics is love. The romantics gave it all the stature once accorded to reason in the *Aufklärung* and Kantian–Fichtean ethics. It is now love, rather than reason, that provides the source and sanction of the moral law. Love, Schlegel tells us,²⁴ is to the law as the spirit is to the letter: it creates what reason merely codifies. The power of love indeed transcends all moral rules: while love inspires, the law represses; while love

forgives, the law punishes. Love is also a much more powerful “determining ground of the will” (as Kant would call it), a much more effective stimulant to moral action, than reason. The bonds that tie the individual to the community and state are not the universal norms of reason but the affection and devotion of love.

Love had a no less pivotal place in romantic aesthetics. It is the spirit of love, Schlegel writes, that must be “invisibly visible” everywhere in romantic art.²⁵ The artist could romanticize our senses only through the inspiring power of love. We can remystify the world—we can rediscover its lost beauty, mystery, and magic—only if we see all things in the spirit of love. It is through love that we see ourselves in nature and others, and so again identify with the world and become at home with it once more.

The romantic program of *Bildung*, of aesthetic education, stressed the cultivation of love, the development of the capacity of every individual to give and receive affection. This was essential to self-realization, to the development of our humanity and individuality, the romantics believed, because love is the very core of our humanity, the very center of our individuality. “Only through love, and the consciousness of love,” Friedrich Schlegel wrote, “does a human being become a human being.”²⁶ Love was indeed the key to reconciling and unifying the two warring sides of our nature, the intellectual and physical, the rational and the emotional. It was not simply a physical urge, but a much deeper spiritual desire: the longing to return to that golden age when we were at one with ourselves, others, and nature.

Although the romantic rediscovery of love was based on an reappraisal of its spiritual significance, it is important to see that they never neglected or debased its physical roots. The education of desire meant arousing and cultivating not only our spirituality, but also our sensuality. That we must learn to accept and enjoy our sexuality, that we must see sexuality as part of love, and that we must love someone sexually to be fulfilled human beings were the central themes of Friedrich Schlegel’s novel *Lucinde*, which shocked the public of his day. There Schlegel protests against repressive social norms that view sexuality as legitimate only in marriage, and that regard marriage as a matter of domestic convenience. He could see nothing wrong with divorce and a *ménage à quatre* if it led to the development of one’s individuality and humanity, and he could see nothing right with a marriage and chastity if it resulted in repression and indignity.

An essential theme of Schlegel’s campaign for sexual liberation is his at-

tack on sexual stereotypes. He criticizes the prevalent sexual norms that limit men to an active and aggressive role and women to a passive and submissive one. To better enjoy our sexuality, he advises couples to switch these roles. There is no reason within human nature itself why men cannot develop the passive, tender, and sentimental sides, and women develop their active, dominant, and rational sides. Masculinity and femininity are properties of each person, regardless of their sex.

8. A Final Paradox

The romantic philosophy of education ends with a paradox. We have seen that there was nothing more important to the romantics than *Bildung*, the education of humanity. This was the central theme and goal of their ethics, aesthetics, and politics. But, from a more practical perspective, there seems to be nothing less important to the romantics than education. When it comes to concrete suggestions about how to educate humanity—about what specific institutional arrangements are to be made—the romantics fell silent. There is very little in the writings of the romantics about the social and political structure to be created to ensure the education of humanity.²⁷

Such silence, however, was more the result of principle than negligence. The reason for their taciturnity was their deep conviction that the self-realization of the individual must derive from his freedom, which must not be impaired by social and political arrangements. It is for this reason that Friedrich Schlegel would write: “Humanity cannot be inoculated, and virtue cannot be taught or learned, other than through friendship and love with capable and genuine people, and other than through contact with ourselves, with the divine within us.”²⁸

The paradox of German romanticism is its utter commitment and devotion to the education of humanity, and yet its recognition that it cannot and ought not do anything to achieve it. We are left, then, with a striking gap between theory and practice, which it was the very purpose of romanticism to overcome.

Friedrich Schlegel: The Mysterious Romantic

1. The Mystery

Scholars have often recognized Friedrich Schlegel's leading role in the development of early German romanticism (*Frühromantik*). He has generally been given credit for formulating the concept of "romantic poetry" (*romantische Poesie*), which became so characteristic of this movement. To be sure, Schlegel did not invent the concept, which had a long history in German aesthetics before him; but he did make it the defining aesthetic ideal of the romantic circle.¹ Thanks to him, *romantische Poesie* became the shibboleth of the early romantic movement.

But if Schlegel's role in the rise of *Frühromantik* is clear and uncontroversial, the opposite must be said about his own philosophical development. There has always been a deep mystery surrounding the origins of Schlegel's romantic aesthetic. Namely, it seems almost impossible to understand why Schlegel became a romantic in the first place. Schlegel's manifesto for romantic poetry in his famous 1798 *Athenäumsfragment* no. 116 seems to be a complete *volte face*, a radical reversal of his own neoclassical aesthetic, which he had defended passionately only a few years earlier in his neoclassical writings. In his 1795 *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*, the so-called *Studiumaufsatz*, Schlegel had already formulated, if only in crude outline, his later concept of romantic poetry.² Yet if in 1799 Schlegel embraced romantic poetry, in 1795 he repudiated it.

Whence this reversal in attitude toward romantic poetry? Why did Schlegel come to celebrate what he had once despised? Schlegel himself offers no explanation. And his extremely complex intellectual development presents a bewildering plethora of tantalizing clues and false leads. Yet there is a reward for trying to find one's way through the Schlegelian labyrinth.