Chapter 6

Beyond the Critique of Religious Art

The critique of religion launched by the Enlightenment took a long time reaching Germany, but when it finally arrived it did so with pent up explosive force. It is true that, in the eighteenth century, Kant, Lessing, Reimarus, and their followers had preached tolerance for all denominations along with a rationalized version of
religious belief, but these central figures of the Aufklärung never attacked Lutheranism, Calvinism, or even Catholicism with the vituperative energy of a Voltaire, a Holbach, or a Diderot. Part of this lack of anti-religious zeal may be attributed to the fact that, in many parts of Germany, the Reformation had already done some of the work of the Enlightenment by undermining the "superstitions" and institutions of the Roman Church. But it is also relevant that German society was far from experiencing the dynamic political and economic forces that were soon to transform England and France: it was not even unified as a national state and the beginnings of industrial production were still decades off. Under these circumstances, the Enlightenment critique of religious irrationality had little hope of serving as a prelude to the general reconstruction of society. Since it was incapable of introducing a more comprehensive program of change, it offered little by way of compensation to those tempted to risk respectability, career, and freedom on its behalf. The motive that had driven the critique of religion to more ardent forms of expression elsewhere in Europe was missing in this case. In the ensuing years, however, the ground began to shake beneath the political and economic order in Germany as well. To begin with,
Napoleon's armies carried the principles of the French Revolution to the Rhineland, emancipating the Jews and dissolving remaining feudal bonds in the name of the universal rights of man. Moreover the successful struggle against French occupation itself brought the German states to a level of united action and national awareness that marked a break with the past. These political developments were matched by equally unprecedented economic ones. Mechanized factories began to supplant traditional methods of artisanal production, hundreds of miles of railroad tracks were laid, and a national market began to consolidate under the auspices of the Zollverein, the Customs Union. When the critique of religion reappeared in the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century, it entered into this new and dynamic configuration of forces. And in the eyes of the guardians of traditional Germany it posed a dire threat to the ancient regime.

Fredrick Wilhelm IV was quick to recognize the danger of a renewal of the Enlightenment under the changing conditions of the mid-nineteenth century. He ascended to the throne of Prussia in 1840. Optimism arose in liberal circles when the new
monarch acted at first to rectify some of the more glaring abuses of the old order by granting an amnesty to political prisoners and relaxing state censorship. However the subsequent development of a radical press as well as impertinence in the universities led him to abandon his conciliatory policies as he returned to the repressive measures of the past. This reversal was no aberration. Actually, the dominant force in Frederick Wilhelm's personality was not liberalism at all but an intense hatred of the Enlightenment. He was convinced that no state could survive for long if its people were abandoned to "free thinking." After all, the French had begun the eighteenth century by attacking a Church, but they ended it by decapitating a king. They demonstrated by negative example that religious belief is the inseparable companion of political order. Moreover, the intimate relationship between these two forces of stability was already recognized by Prussian law. Head of the Church as well as political sovereign, the monarch united altar and throne in his own person. It was a union Frederick Wilhelm interpreted in the most retrograde terms. By combining Pietism (Lutheran fundamentalism) with a romantic veneration of the Catholic middle ages, he hoped to defend old Europe in the very heartland of the Reformation.
From these varied resources, the country that had disestablished the priesthood in favor of the freedom of individual conscience was supposed to construct a secure principle of authority.

Frederick Wilhelm, along with much of the Prussian aristocracy, had no trouble recognizing the Young Hegelian movement as an obstacle to his prescription for social order. The Young Hegelians practiced a radicalized version of the critique of religion, but, since they were operating under the altered circumstances of the current period, they could not revert directly to the thinking of the eighteenth century. Instead they renewed and intensified the Enlightenment assault on religious irrationality by means of an audacious "left-wing" interpretation of Hegel's philosophical legacy.

In the aftermath of his death in 1831, Hegel's followers divided into left and right wings on the basis of their attitude toward religion. Hegel had portrayed his philosophical system as the conceptual medium in which what he called "Absolute Spirit" came to a fully adequate knowledge of itself. However he was always ambiguous concerning the relationship of this
philosophical Absolute to the God of traditional religious belief. On the one hand, he was fascinated by the Christian account of the Incarnation, the mystery of a God who is born as a man, suffers and dies on the cross, and is resurrected to eternal life. He saw it as the glorious symbol of a reality that is "spiritual" (in the unique sense Hegel gave to the term) in that it progresses by overcoming opposition on higher levels of development, and so enriches itself by enduring the "seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labor of the negative." On the other hand, he regarded the story of the Incarnation, along with all other religious stories, as the product of pictorial thinking (Vorstellung). Such thinking communicates profound truths to be sure, but in an imaginative, sensuous form. Imagery, however, is tainted by contingency, since the object of imaginary representation always appears as one thing among others, located at some definite and limited place and time. For this reason, pictorial thinking cannot help but depict the infinite depth and power of the Absolute in distorted fashion, in other words, as a finite thing. Since it is not completely appropriate to its subject matter, pictorial thinking is destined to be superceded by the purely conceptual thought of philosophy. The Concept, in Hegel's sober phrase,
may be "charmless and image-poor," but, for that very reason, it is the only medium fully adequate for expressing the necessary, eternal, and infinite character of Absolute Spirit.

For Hegel, the supercession (Aufhebung) of religion by philosophy has the technical meaning of a negation which at the same time preserves the object negated by lifting it to a higher level of expression. But this eminently dialectical position proved difficult to sustain. For in what sense can religion survive its translation into the language of pure concepts? Is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob really a philosopher's God? Here is where the split among Hegel's followers occurred. The right wing had captured the master's own chair at the University of Berlin with the appointment of Georg Andreas Gabler. Gabler and his supporters emphasized the element of preservation in Aufhebung by interpreting the philosopher's Absolute Spirit as the God of biblical revelation. The left wing was centered in the so-called Doctors' Club, which met mostly outside of the university in the beer halls and cafes of Berlin. Its members emphasized the element of negation in Aufhebung by practicing philosophy as a relentless critique of religious faith. For them, the true home of Absolute
Spirit is not God but human self-consciousness, and it is the task of the philosopher to reveal that truth.

The Tubingen theologian, David Friedrich Strauss, was the first to classify Hegel's followers into left and right wings on the model of the political significance of the seating arrangements in the legislative assembly of revolutionary France. He was also the earliest representative of the Hegelian left, and as such established the beacon that guided the entire movement. In his path-breaking treatise of 1835, *The Life of Jesus*, Strauss subjected the gospels to a new mode of historical criticism designed to release their rational content from the mythical form in which it was conveyed. He began by denying that most of the stories reported in the New Testament had occurred as real events. In particular, miracles - including such central ones as the virgin birth and the resurrection - could not have actually taken place since they contradict the laws of nature. They were imaginative symbols rather than historical occurrences, myths in which the Christian community gave its most profound messianic longings an objective expression. Because they were rooted in the authentic emotional experiences of an historical people, they
were not in any sense arbitrary creations. Yet while suited to the primitive mentality of earlier times, they were inappropriate for an enlightened age. The truth of the gospels could survive in the nineteenth century only in demythologized form. For Strauss this meant that Christology had to be detached from the figure of Jesus. The incarnation is the core teaching of the New Testament. But the entire human race enacts the union of the divine and human natures. The individual, Jesus, has no monopoly here. In light of this recognition, the contemporary meaning of the Christian religion is a profound and universal humanism. According to Strauss, "by nurturing within himself the idea of humanity, the individual participates in the divine-human life of the race." 3 Christ is present, not in a single person, but in the human species as a whole.

Bruno Bauer, then lecturer in theology at the University of Berlin, was among the conservative Hegelian critics of Strauss's book. 4 He argued that, far from being a myth, the Jesus of the gospels was a philosophical necessity in that he brought Greek and Roman wisdom as well as Judaic revelation to a higher level of expression. Yet to the surprise of his friends and professional associates, it took Bauer only a few years to abandon this line of attack as he came to surpass his erstwhile opponent in the radicalism of his approach to religion. Strauss had not rejected Christianity, but merely tried to reinterpret it in accordance with his humanistic orientation. Bauer was carried to the left of this relatively moderate position by his own inquiry into the historical sources of the New Testament. In several works he argued that the evangelists were neither receptacles of the revealed word of God, as the theological conservatives claimed, nor the equally passive mouthpieces of a collective myth, as Staus would have it. Rather, they were creative individuals, artists
who expressed their deepest thoughts and feelings in imaginative, poetic form. Like the entire world of late antiquity, the original Christian community was racked by debates concerning the nature of God, the meaning of evil, the fate of the soul, and so on. The authors of the gospels expressed their opinions on these matters through their depictions of the life and teachings of Christ. In the process they established the figure of the Son of God, the Messiah who brings redemption from sin by healing the division between human and divine existence.

According to Bauer's treatment in *The Synoptic Gospels*, Matthew, Mark, and Luke (he dismissed John entirely as a literary fabrication) occupied a specific stage in the development of self-conscious subjectivity. They lived at the time of the Roman Empire, an era when people had freed themselves from the substantive political and cultural institutions of the ancient city states. Such freedom was an expression of the absolute character of human self-consciousness, its ability to rise above all finite, determinate conditions. Still, a sense of emptiness was the result of the loss of familiar ways of life. According to Bauer, the evangelists responded to this sense of emptiness by giving the power of universal self-consciousness a positive, objective form. They placed that power outside of themselves in the estranged though comforting figure of the Messiah. The gospels were therefore both an historically necessary and an alienated expression of free subjectivity. It was not long before Bauer drew the most radical implications from his analysis of the New Testament. Following dismissal from his teaching post in 1842, he published a defense of his writings titled *The Good*
Cause of Freedom. In that book, he did not hesitate to proclaim himself an atheist. Christianity may once have been a necessary stage in the development of the spirit, but it is now an obstacle to further progress. It is the source of a kind of delirium in which humankind debases itself in the presence of its own creations, in which it "flings [itself] down in adoration before [its] own work."5 In the name of human happiness and autonomy, the philosophical critic must liberate self-consciousness from the idols that hold it in thrall through the uncompromising destruction of religion.

Though Feuerbach made the concept of alienation famous, it was actually Bauer who introduced it into the Young Hegelian lexicon. As we can see from the preceding quotation about the adoration of one's own work, his use of the concept extended the biblical critique of idolatry to all objects of the religious imagination, including those of the Christian faith. Moses condemned the Israelites for abandoning the true God in order to worship the work of their hands in the form of the golden calf. Bauer condemned the Christians for abandoning human self-consciousness, the only real Absolute, in order to worship God, who is nothing more than its alienated product. In Bauer's view, the problem with alienation is not merely that it is a species of epistemological error, a misrecognition of one's creation as something foreign to oneself. Just as importantly, it is a form of moral and psychological pathology, a sickness of subjectivity. The religious worshipper is entranced, fascinated, enthralled by the object of worship. He adores his God, prostrates himself before it as an inferior being in the presence
of a superior one. As a result he relinquishes his genuine autonomy in favor of the illusory power of his Lord. In this view, Bauer showed himself to be a true heir of the Enlightenment. Its thinkers had excoriated religious "fanaticism" as a form of mental derangement in which the deranged person acts under the influence of irrational forces experienced as visions, ecstasies, prophesies. But Bauer went further than these thinkers by emphasizing that the power that seizes the ordinary worshipper as well as the genuine fanatic is actually a disguised expression of human self-consciousness. Religion is a state of abjection in the presence of a shadow cast by oneself. The central and most difficult task of the modern era is to complete the Mosaic critique of idolatry and the Enlightenment critique of fanaticism by liberating humanity from its domination by religious phantasms, thereby ending the reign of God and inaugurating the reign of Man. Only a new and militant atheism can overcome religious alienation and so, in Bauer's quintessentially left-Hegelian phrase, "restore humanity to itself."

Bauer attributed such atheism to Hegel in a polemical *tour de force* published in 1841 under the title, *The Trumpet of the Last Judgement on Hegel,*
the Atheist and Anti-Christ: An Ultimatum. In the anonymous pamphlet, he adopted the rhetorical strategy of posing as a Pietist defender of religion who, on the basis of extensive citations from Hegel's works, warns believers that the Young Hegelians are nothing more than the true disciples of their master. By means of this artifice, he intended to confound the interpretation of Hegel by the Hegelian right. Bauer proceeded by establishing a distinction between the exoteric Hegel and the esoteric one. In many surface formulations, the great philosopher appears to embrace the teachings of Christianity, but this is simply a matter of prudent restraint. While his conservative followers have treated such superficial appearances seriously, the Young Hegelians have penetrated beneath them to the true meaning of their master's doctrine. As many more revealing passages demonstrate, Hegel views religion as an imaginary objectification of human self-consciousness: "This is the terrible, dreadful, religiously mortifying kernel of the system. Who partakes of this system is dead to God, for he holds God dead." 6 In Pietist disguise, Bauer went on to identify Hegel's philosophy as a threat to the German political order, bound up as it is with ecclesiastical institutions. As the Enlightenment demonstrated, the theoretical
destruction of the Church is merely a prelude to the practical destruction of the state. By proclaiming the freedom of self-consciousness and the primacy of reason, Hegel associates himself with that supreme product of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, regarding it, in fact, as the greatest event in history. Out of a deep hatred of tradition, he works to bring the established order to ruin.

At the time Bauer published *The Trumpet*, he had a close intellectual association with Marx, so close in fact that some of their friends assumed, probably incorrectly, that they had collaborated on the pamphlet. They had met in Berlin in 1838 at meetings of the successor to the Doctors' Club, *Die Freien* (The Free). Quite prominent in that circle of Young Hegelians, Bauer was partially responsible for winning Marx to the movement. He inspired him with his militant approach to the critique of religion, a position the two men intended to develop further in a journal they were going to title *Archive of Atheism*. The project came to nothing when backers failed to materialize, but that disappointment did not prevent Bauer from enlisting Marx in another collaborative effort. He
proposed a sequel to *The Trumpet*, a book that would develop a radical interpretation of art by disguising itself as a religious attack on Hegel's aesthetics. Marx agreed to contribute a chapter.

The book appeared anonymously in 1842 under the title *Hegel's Teachings on Religion and Art Judged from the Standpoint of Faith*. Bauer, however, was its sole author. Marx spent the winter of 1841 to 1842 working on his chapter, which was to have been called *Hegel's Hatred of Religious and Christian Art and His Dissolution of All Positive State Laws*, but he never managed to complete the piece. Instead he reframed his project the following spring, intending to publish the specifically aesthetic material in the form of two journal articles, which also never appeared. What remains in Marx's literary estate are only the reading notes he made in preparation for his treatment, consisting in excerpts from several books, including Charles de Brosses' *On the Cult of Divine Fetishes*, C. A. Boettiger's, *Ideas on Mythology in Art*, and J. J. Grund's *The Painting of the Greeks*. Whatever detailed independent contribution Marx intended to make to the project, his chapter was supposed to support the fundamental thesis of Bauer's book, namely that Hegel was a revolutionary "Jacobin"
who secretly hated Christianity, while venerating instead the human-centered "religion of art" of the world of ancient Greece.\(^7\)

Margaret Rose has demonstrated that Marx would have framed his contribution to Bauer's project in opposition to the patronage given by the Prussian royal court to the work of the so-called Nazarenes. A group of German painters living on the grounds of a monastery in Italy, the Nazarenes rejected the neo-classicism that was a dominant trend in post-Revolutionary French art, as well as in academies throughout much of continental Europe, in favor of a return to the piety of the middle ages. The Nazarene's attitude toward the Renaissance was ambivalent. They were profoundly hostile to its paganism, its emphatic revival of the heritage of Greece and Rome, though they did find something to admire in the early period of the Renaissance, especially in the work of Raphael, whom they regarded as its most spiritually devout representative. The aesthetic project of the Nazarenes demanded a revival of the religious impulse in art which they hoped would stem the secularizing trends that had begun with the Reformation and deepened considerably in the aftermath of the Enlightenment and the French
Revolution. When Friedrich Wilhelm IV was informed about the Nazarenes by German diplomats in Italy, that "Romantic on the Throne" found in the expatriate movement the ideal cultural pendant to his plan to return Prussia to its religious and political past. Prussian court patronage of the Nazarenes was opposed by liberals and radicals alike, such opposition finding its most eloquent expression in Heinrich Heine's art-critical journalism. In his contribution to Bauer's book, Marx intended to enlist a radicalized, even revolutionary, Hegel on the side of Heine and like-minded critics against a self-consciously reactionary movement in the visual arts.

Johann Friedrich Overbeck, *The Triumph of Religion in Art* Staedelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt on Main 1831-1840

The distinction between the humanistic art of ancient Greece and religious, Christian art was certainly not the invention of either Bauer or Marx. With their rejection of neo-classicism and the pagan element in Renaissance art, the Nazarenes
understood their own work explicitly in terms of that opposition. It is easy to see that this was the case from a key programmatic painting of the movement, Johann Friederich Overbeck's, *The Triumph of Religion in Art*. An obvious homage to Raphael, the canvas depicts the Madonna and Christ Child resting on a cloud at the upper center of the pictorial space, surrounded by figures of the mature Christ, as well as those of other biblical characters resting on adjacent clouds. The lower half of the picture shows small groups of artists, monks, priests, bishops, and others, all dressed in Renaissance garb, engaging in separate conversations, a familiar convention of Raphael's paintings. In the lower right corner of the canvas, a boy reads from an open book supported by the broken capital of a Corinthian column, while he is instructed and observed by others in his group, including a monk who watches intently. In the lower left corner, another boy receives artistic instruction while sketching an image of the cloak worn by the armored crowned figure to his left, a symbol perhaps of the sanctified state power of the middle ages. The young artist makes his sketch on the base of a broken pedestal that rests on the body of its own classical statue, a body from which the head has been cleanly severed. In Overbeck's
backward-looking conception, the classical heritage that supported the achievements of Renaissance art lies in ignominious ruins, conquered and surmounted by the transcendentally elevated Christian icon of the Madonna and Child.

In the monumental, 1200-page *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel also works with an important distinction between classical and Christian art, but he draws the distinction, not as a simple dichotomy, in the manner of both Bauer and the Nazarenes, but rather as two-thirds of a far more complex and subtly articulated triad. That triad consists in what Hegel regards as three great epochs in the history of art, which he calls the Symbolic, the Classical, and the Romantic. Symbolic Art is largely the creation of the ancient nations of the East, especially Persia, India, and Egypt; Classical Art, the product of ancient Greece and Rome; and Romantic Art develops over the entire history of the Christian West, though, in addition to religious art, it includes such secular trends as medieval court poetry, as well as the portrait and landscape painting of the Dutch Golden Age. In general terms, the triad is a progressive, dialectical one in that each stage emerges from the one that proceeds it by resolving the contradictions involved in its predecessor.
However this simple dialectical schema is tempered by the fact that, in Hegel's view, art is merely the initial expression of Absolute Spirit, destined to give way to the more advanced expressions of religion and philosophy, so that the most highly developed form of art, namely the Christian, Romantic one, also represents the self-negating dissolution of art. In a famous phrase, Hegel insists that "Art is, and must remain for us, on the side of its highest content, a thing of the past." The fulfillment of art as an expression of the Idea in the realm of sensuous appearance belongs, not to the ultimate stage of the Idea as Spirit, but to its penultimate one. Classical art, especially the ancient Greek sculptural representation of the Gods, is the medium in which meaning and form achieve a full, organic fusion in the human body portrayed as a vessel of the Spirit. But the price of that beautiful fusion of inward meaning and external form is a limitation of aesthetic content. It is only the finite Spirit of the Greek God as one divine principle among others that can be expressed in the definite and delimited shape of the human body. Spirit as the infinite return to itself from its alienated expression in the natural world cannot be captured in this fashion. The role of Romantic art is to allow this infinitely inward spirituality to emerge
but, in the process of so doing, it must transcend the limitations of artist expression itself. For Hegel, then, the most advanced form of art is also the stage of art's self-destruction.

Hegel's own aesthetic preferences were decidedly modern. For example, he affirmed the secular romanticism of Schiller and Goethe. When it came to painting, he was highly critical of the desire of artists to provide themselves with a content that Spirit had already surpassed by embracing the medievalism of the Roman Catholic Church. Whether or not he was referring to the early Nazarenes in this critical stance, Hegel would have found little value in their backward-looking work. But, at least in the mature period in which he composed the *Aesthetic Lectures*, he also would have rejected Bauer's radical neo-classicism, and for a similar reason that he rejected romantic medievalism: once Spirit has exhausted the depths of one of its cultural configurations, there can be no turning back.

From what we can surmise on the basis of the notes he made in the winter of 1841-1842, Marx was focusing on neither the Classical nor the Romantic stages in Hegel's aesthetic triad, but rather on its
initial Symbolic stage. In Hegel's treatment of Symbolic art in his *Lectures*, he begins by contrasting the symbol with the sign. In both cases, we have some object of perception or imaginative contemplation that indicates or refers to a meaning, but, in the case of the sign, such reference is purely conventional in character. The English word "cat" for example has no more in common with the animal it designates than does the French word "chat," or the Spanish word "gatto." The three different words function as signs for the same animal because the linguistic communities in which they occur have decided that it should be so. A symbol, on the other hand, actually exhibits the meaning to which it refers. As with the sign, there is still a distinction between meaning and shape, the inward and the outward, content and form, but, in the case of the symbol, the two distinct sides overlap. Hegel's example is the lion which is able to serve as a symbol of strength because it possesses the property of being strong. Part of what it symbolizes belongs to its inner constitution. Symbols, however, are necessarily imperfect representatives of the meanings they indicate because, while there is some overlap between content and form, there is also a disparity between the two. The lion may be strong, but its strength is
merely one of its properties, while, conversely, there are many kinds of strength, not all of which are exhibited by the lion. Because of this disproportion, this lack of fit between inward meaning and outward shape, symbolic expression is inherently unstable. Since no symbol exhaustively embodies its meaning, and each embodies many extraneous properties, symbolization is never complete. At best, it must move from symbol to symbol, in a restless quest for a perfect adequacy it will never be able to achieve.

In Hegel's view, Asian art possesses this symbolic structure since it is marked by the disproportion between a conception of the absolute that is excessively abstract, and symbols that are drawn immediately from the natural world and therefore are excessively concrete in the sense that they are irremediably particular, contingent, and multiple. Indian art, for example, tries to create symbols of Brahman, the absolute substance in relation to which all that appears is a veil of Maya, a shimmering play of illusions. But because Brahman is only substance, and not subject as well, because it does not actualize itself in the ordinary world of objects and events, nothing drawn from that world
is capable of expressing its supremely aloof character. According to Hegel, the Indian artist tries to rectify the deficiency of his symbolic material by expanding it to colossal dimensions, or by distorting it grotesquely. The gigantic body of Vishnu floating on the primal waters, the hundred arms of Shiva, and the multiple heads of the creator God, Brahma, are so many futile attempts to force the sensuous symbol to burst its finite bonds, so that it may express an absolute that, by its very nature, shuns such delimited expression. Each failure at symbolic representation becomes a motive to search for an even more outlandish symbolic form, and the result of that incessant quest is a profusion of fantastic creations, a profusion that, in the last analysis, is as empty of spiritual content as it is luxuriant and exotic. To some degree, the problems of Indian art are resolved by the higher-level of symbolism of the Egyptians who at least bring the difference between inward meaning and outward shape to conscious awareness. The pyramid is an especially good example of such awareness and even, as Hegel says, serves as a "symbol of the symbol" in its essential structure, since it involves a distinction between the overt shape of the architectural form, and the mysterious meaning hidden inside of it. The fact that the
pyramid is a tomb that preserves the body of the dead in order to facilitate the continued existence of the soul in the netherworld is also relevant here, since the distinction between body and soul is drawn for the first time by the Egyptians, in an initial glimpse of what will later unfold as the genuine life of the spirit. But Egyptian symbolism merely raises the question of spiritual existence without being able to answer it with any concreteness, and so Egyptian symbolism remains a riddle, like the one posed by the half-feline, half-human Sphinx in Oedipus Rex: "What is it that walks on three legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?" to which the answer is "Man," in other words, self-conscious subjectivity.

Indian art and Egyptian art are two forms of what Hegel calls "unconscious symbolism," even though the awareness of symbolic structure begins to dawn in the Egyptian world. However each of these forms of art is preceded by an even more rudimentary stage of unconscious symbolism, represented in Hegel's Lectures by the Zoroastrian religion of light. In ancient Persia, Zoroastrians
worshipped light as a manifestation of the divine being Ormazd, who was opposed by his nemesis, Ahriman, the principle of darkness. Hegel is careful to note that light is not something separate from Omazd, his vessel, representative, or analogue in the world of finite things. Rather, light is Ormazd; in light and all that is akin to light - such as fire, the sun, the stars, and so forth - the good and luminous God is really present, just as, for Catholics, Christ is actually present in the Eucharist. But such real presence implies that, for the Zoroastrian worshipper, there is a fusion, an immediate identity, between meaning and shape in the experience of light. From a point of view internal to the religion, light is not a symbol of the Divine, because in a symbol the inward aspect of meaning and the outward aspect of shape must be distinguished. It is we, from the more advanced perspective of philosophical reflection, who recognize that light is a symbol of the Absolute, not the Zoroastrian himself. The Zoroastrian's failure to distinguish between invisible meaning and visible shape is connected with the fact that the ancient Persian worship of fire never took the form of art. Art is a process of human making in which the artist shapes external reality in accordance with a mental image or conception, and so must be aware of the
distinction between the two sides. But since awareness of that distinction is the same thing as consciousness of the structure of the symbol, unconscious symbolism cannot be expressed as art. An unconscious symbol can only be an object that is not shaped by a process of human making, a pre-existent natural entity, an example of which, of course, is Zoroastrian light.

In spite of the fact that Zoroastrianism is the most primitive form of unconscious symbolism that Hegel discusses in depth, it is not the most primitive form that he mentions. Indeed for him, light is a rather elevated, beautiful, and sophisticated image of the Absolute, especially in its ability to pervade all of space while at the same time illuminating things in their unique particularity, a reflection in the natural world of what Hegel calls in his *Logic*, "the concrete universal." There is a sort of poetry involved in the religion of light that is missing from other kinds of reverence for natural objects. One such form of reverence is the worship of fetishes. In the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel simply indicates that fetishism is a form of unconscious symbolism without probing its specific nature. But he mentions fetishism in the context of an interesting discussion
of wonder. It is often said that wonder lies at the origin of art, religion, and even philosophy, but Hegel insists that it also lies at the root of humanity's earliest attempts at symbolization. Wonder detaches us from our original, unthinking immersion in the realm of objects by suspending our practical relation to that world, especially our attitude of desire in which we have so little interest in what external things are in themselves that we immediately set about to consume them. The person who wonders sees in external things a significance independent of their ability to satisfy immediate needs, separates subject and object, and yet discerns in the object a meaning that accords with the deeper, spiritual nature of subjectivity itself. Thus fetishism, in addition to other forms of nature worship, is the first breakthrough to that specifically human orientation that will eventually culminate in the highest expressions of absolute spirit, namely, art, religion, and philosophy: "In this unification, there is immediately present the fact that the single natural objects - and above all the elemental ones, like the sea, rivers, mountains, stars - are not accepted just as they are in their separation, but, lifted into the realm of our ideas, acquire for our ideas the form of universal and absolute existence."8 It is likely that Hegel's general
conception of fetishism as a form of nature worship involving no element of artistic shaping is derived from Charles de Brosses treatise, *On the Cult of Divine Fetishes*. But what a difference in their assessments of the significance of the phenomenon! For de Brosses, as we saw in Chapter 3 above, worship of the fetish is an expression of childishness, primitive stupidity, and ignorance of the nature of cause and effect, while for Hegel the fetish is the medium through which consciousness of the spirit first arises.

In order to support Bauer's interpretation of Hegel as a "Jacobin" critic of religious art, Marx needed to break with Hegel's relatively elevated view of the fetish, and this is precisely what he did in the winter notebooks of 1841-1842. Although Marx made excerpts from several books about religion and art, the central text in the notebooks is clearly de Brosses' work on fetishes, especially since that treatise influenced several of the others, including Karl August Boettiger's *Ideas Concerning the Mythology of Art*, and Johann Jakob Grund's *Greek Painting*. It is true that *On the Cult of Divine Fetishes* had hardly anything at all to say about art because it regarded the fetish by and large as a found object. De Brosses' fetish is some pre-
existent feature of the natural world invested by the native with a false personhood that could be implored, cajoled, placated, or even abused in an attempt to allay the fears that originate in a life exposed to the vagaries of nature without any clear understanding of true causal connections. For de Brosses, the character of the fetish as a found object is rooted in the pressing and unmediated character of the fear it was meant to alleviate, which allowed no time or mental space for the effort of artistic shaping. Apart from a couple of references to very crude objects produced by hand, de Brosses' examples of fetishes consist in such things as fish bones, gourds, dirt, corn, trees, snakes, the sea, cats, crocodiles, and small stones, all of which are mentioned in Marx's excerpts. Boettiger's and Grund's treatises, however, make use of de Brosses' pioneering treatment of fetishism precisely in the context of aesthetic and art-historical discussions, which is what makes the concept of the fetish suitable for use by Marx in his participation in Bauer's project.

Boettiger and Grund each retain de Brosses' basic conception of the fetish as a found object or at best the product of crude handiwork, but they
incorporate it into an account of the progressive development of art, not as its initial stage, but rather as its extra-aesthetic historical presupposition. Fetishism remains outside of the realm of art because it lacks the element of aesthetic form, and yet the earliest examples of aesthetic formation take the fetish as the raw material of artistic shaping. So, for example, in Boetigger's philological and archeological treatise on the mythology of art, he claims that fetishists reached a point, especially in the development of the Egyptian and Asian "nature religions," where they engraved and painted their god- and animal-signs (die Fetischisten graben und malen ihre Goetter- und Thierzeichen). Such aesthetically fixed fetish-signs as the snake, the raven, the owl, and so on then made their way in the maritime trade from Egypt and Asia to Greece where they were absorbed into the most primitive forms of Greek religion. These included the ancient oracles, such as the one at Delphi, to which the snake was sacred. Of course, once this foreign fetish material was absorbed into the Greek cults, it became available for further elaboration. Pan and the Satyrs, the primeval generation of the Titans, the owl of Minerva, and so on, preserve an age-old substratum of fetish material which is profoundly altered, though not obliterated, when subsequent
generations of Greek artists imbue it with more highly developed and sophisticated aesthetic form.

Grund makes a similar point in his meditations on Greek painting, though he emphasizes that an internal contradiction persists in Greek art between balanced, harmonious and beautiful form, and its persisting fetishistic substratum. The invention of form by Greek painters begins with their transformation of Egyptian hieroglyphics, which inscribe geometrically stylized images of animal gods or animal-human hybrids. The Greek breakthrough to aesthetic form in painting occurs, not just with the substitution of fully humanized gods for animal ones, as Hegel emphasized, but even more importantly, with the supple use of the painterly line to reproduce the shades and shadows of natural objects, their presentation in infinitely varied though initially monochromatic gradations. For Grund, "Aesthetic presence is beautiful appearance: it is light," and so a second conquest of beauty occurs when the Greek painter applies color to the monochromatic image, conveying, not the substantiality of objects, but something like their erotic charm. The dual deployment of line and color in the developed painting of ancient Greece enables the painter to work with the tensions created
between the fixed character of the line and the ephemeral presentation of color, between the occlusive and self-enclosed shape and the enticingly erotic play of light, between eternity and time, being and life. By mediating these tensions, reconciling them in a balanced but still vibrant whole, the Greek painter completes the aesthetic transformation of the fetishistic hieroglyph. However, for Grund, the significance of this transformation is not merely a matter of technique. Technical mastery occurs in the service of the abolition of human fear. "Art hates everything that is ugly and fantastic and seeks to banish it," writes Grund. The ugly and the fantastic are the ways in which nature appears to us as an object of fear. Grund thus follows de Brosses in locating the origin of fetishism in fear, but he diverges from the earlier thinker by claiming that the mastery of this destructive emotion occurs, not first of all through Enlightenment science, but rather through aesthetic activity. We free ourselves from the terrors of nature by rendering it beautiful. That is the human significance of aesthetic form. By shaping nature in accordance with the standards
of beauty, balance, and harmony, we assume a free and distanced relationship to it. We liberate ourselves from a nature which we have personified in accordance with our fears by transforming it into a realm of beautiful appearance. But, for Grund, the conquest of fear is not accomplished once and for all. There is always a danger of what Freud called the "return of the repressed." Art faces the ever-present possibility of degenerating into fetishism once again, of indulging and even amplifying fear, rather than sublimating it in beautiful appearance. Grund gives as an example of such regression the grandiose scale as well as the extravagant and "barbaric" elaboration of detail in Christian architecture, the return of the fetish in high medieval form.

Grund does not address the question concerning the cause of aesthetic regression, but Marx certainly would have approached it in the context of the democratic politics he shared in 1841-42 with Bauer and many of the other young Hegelians. Even for the master, Hegel himself, Greek art was an expression of the stage Spirit had reached in the self-governing "ethical life" (Sittlichkeit) of the ancient polis. Unlike those subjected to "Asiatic despotism," the Greeks were not slaves in more or
less veiled form; they were the free creators of their own customary norms, their own modes of collective life. In his youth, Hegel did not hesitate to associate the achievements of the French Revolution with the ethical self-determination of the citizens of the Greek city states. To this extent the Young Hegelians replicated in their political musings the republican orientation of the Young Hegel. Bauer's claim that Hegel was a radical Jacobin rings true, though not far past the end of the philosopher's student days. Still, Greek democracy, the revolutionary French republic, the liberation from political despotism, and the triumph over fetishistic fear in the beautiful work of art are the four coordinates in relation to which Marx would undoubtedly have developed his contribution to Bauer's book. Given those coordinates, the return of the repressed in the Christian art sponsored by Frederick Wilhelm IV would have signified a regression to the superstitious fear that is the necessary cultural complement of despotic political rule. There is only one problem with this result. While it is perfectly coherent theoretically, it has nothing to do with Hegel's philosophy of art.

The concept of regression, or the return of the repressed, has no place in Hegel's dialectical...
schema. Hegelian supercession (Aufhebung) preserves negated content as something elevated and transformed, but it does not recognize a tendency on the part of that content to return to its original condition. Thus, although the fetish for Hegel, just as for Boetigger and Grund, is an extra-aesthetic historical presupposition of art, it has a fundamentally different significance for him than it does for the later aestheticians. As we have seen, according to Hegel, as the most primitive form of unconscious symbolism, the fetish already represents an initial breakthrough to the sphere of the Spirit, a first elevation of natural reality to "the realm of our ideas" in "the form of universal and absolute existence." Thus the supplanting of the fetish by the conscious symbolism of art, or by even higher forms of aesthetic expression, is the fulfillment of the fetish, the unfolding perfection of its fundamental orientation, and not merely its negation. For Boettiger and Grund, on the other hand, and indeed for any concept of the fetish compatible with Bauer's programmatic intentions, the standpoint of fetishism as an expression of ignorance and fear is in radical opposition to the freedom won in the art of ancient Greece, and, for Bauer, at least, precariously renewed by the politics of the French Revolution. For only if such radical
opposition exists does it make sense to interpret the cultural policy of Frederick Wilhelm IV as a regression to the bondage of archaic fetishism. What that means, of course, is that Bauer's theoretical project is fundamentally untenable. Hegel's philosophy of art cannot be used as a weapon against political and artistic reaction. But neither does this imply that the Right Hegelians are the faithful heirs of Hegel's aesthetics. For Hegel, art does indeed achieve its most adequate expression in the self-governing Greek *polis*, but that expression cannot be sustained in light of Spirit's advance to more inwardly subjective configurations. The modern, Christian, "Romantic" epoch is the acid in which art must eventually dissolve. The Nazarenes and their royal Prussian sponsor deny this Hegelian position, and so must any Right Hegelian stance in solidarity with them. In short, Hegel's aesthetic philosophy lies outside the battle between left and right, without lying at the center either, since the center has no meaning apart from these two extremes. Having a fundamentally different purpose as a reflection on one ultimately surpassed stage in the development of Absolute Spirit, it simply cannot be used as a weapon of politico-aesthetic struggle, left, center, or right.
Did Marx come to recognize this? Is that why he abandoned his contribution to Bauer's book? Probably not. More likely, he stopped working on the project because of a more profound break with the Hegelian Left. At the end of 1842, Marx had taken over editorship of a newspaper funded by liberal industrialists, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. His brilliant and scathing coverage of sessions of the aristocrat-dominated Rheinland Assembly had brought down the wrath of the Prussian state, which in response subjected the paper to two separate levels of censorship. Marx knew that the continued existence of the journal was hanging by a very slender thread, and in fact the state was to shut the paper down shortly after the beginning of the new year. Marx was in this precarious position in November 1842 when he was criticized rather vehemently by a group of Left Hegelian writers whose articles he had refused to publish. In a letter to Arnold Ruge, an erstwhile comrade in *Die Freien*, Marx attempts to defend his editorial decision. The passage is significant, and worth quoting at length, because it indicates a sharp theoretical break with the Left Hegelian orientation:

A few days ago I received a letter from little Meyen, whose
favourite category is, most appropriately, what ought to be. In this letter I am taken to task over my attitude 1) to you and Herwegh, 2) to "The Free", 3) to the new editorial principle and the position in relation to the government. I replied at once and frankly expressed my opinion about the defects of their writings, which find freedom in a licentious, sansculotte-like, and at the same time convenient, form, rather than in a free, i.e., independent and profound, content. I demanded of them less vague reasoning, magniloquent phrases and self-satisfied self-adoration, and more definiteness, more attention to the actual state of affairs, more expert knowledge. I stated that I regard it as inappropriate, indeed even immoral, to smuggle communist and socialist doctrines, hence a new world outlook, into incidental theatrical criticisms,
etc., and that I demand a quite different and more thorough discussion of communism, if it should be discussed at all. I requested further that religion should be criticised in the framework of criticism of political conditions rather than that political conditions should be criticised in the framework of religion, since this is more in accord with the nature of a newspaper and the educational level of the reading public; for religion in itself is without content, it owes its being not to heaven but to the earth, and with the abolition of distorted reality, of which it is the theory, it will collapse of itself. Finally, I desired that, if there is to be talk about philosophy, there should be less trifling with the label "atheism" (which reminds one of children, assuring everyone who is ready to listen to them that they are not afraid of the bogy
man), and that instead the content of philosophy should be brought to the people.

The locus of the break is the relationship between religion and critique. In a formulation we will find repeated in *The German Ideology* three years later, Marx takes the Left Hegelians to task for making religion into the principal object of critique. It is not that Marx recommends abandoning the critique of religion entirely, since, for him, religion remains a false theory about the nature of the world and the place of humankind within it. Since the liberation of human beings requires a true account of reality, religion must be replaced by genuine knowledge. But religion rises up from the earth, it does not drop down from the sky; as a distorted form of thinking, it is the expression of a distorted form of life, and so will not fall before a critical assault that leaves that form of life intact. Religion has it origin in a more fundamental sphere, a reality whose distorted character it expresses on the level of thought. In the letter to Ruge, Marx identifies this more basic sphere as that of politics. The critique of religion must be conducted within the context of the critique of politics, not the other way around. In a couple of years, with his trip to Paris, Marx will come to root
the critique of politics in the critique of an even more basic level of reality, that of the "economy," or the social reproduction through labor of the material conditions of life. But that further shift does not alter the crucial point. By the end of 1842, Marx no longer shared the theoretical framework that would have allowed him to contribute to Bauer's book. At that point he was beyond the unmediated critique of religion and religious art.

What happens to the fetish after this transition? One thing is clear; it does not disappear from Marx's thinking. In fact, before the Prussian authorities decide to close down his newspaper, Marx introduces the concept on three occasions in the *Rheinische Zeitung*. The first occasion is the third in a series of six articles Marx published in the newspaper in May 1842, several months before he was offered its editorship, a series in which he critically analyzes the Rheinland Assembly's deliberations on freedom of the press. The crucial passage concerns the assertion by a speaker from the knightly estate of a privilege of the Assembly to decide whether or not to allow its proceedings to be covered by the press. Marx makes the point that the assertion of such a privilege subordinates, in feudal, medieval fashion, the province of the Rheinland, in
other words, the real people who comprise it, to the estates of the provincial assembly. For Marx, this is a form of fetishism, since, were the province to accept the privilege, it could do so only by forgetting that the estates are the creation of the people, and not the people the creation of the estates:

The speaker knows only the province of the estates, not the estates of the province. The Assembly of the Estates has a province to which the privilege of its activity extends, but the province has no estates through which it could itself be active. Of course, the province has the right, under prescribed conditions, to create these gods for itself, but as soon as they are created, it must, like a fetish worshipper, forget that these gods are its own handiwork.

Though brief, this passage is important, because it indicates that Marx, perhaps under the influence of Boettiger and Grund, has broken with de Brosses' concept of the fetish as a found object, and returned, however inadvertently, to the origin of the word fetishism in the Portuguese word *feticao*
(made by hand) and to the related Biblical critique of idolatry. As we will see, this return to the older thematic will enable Marx to link the concept of the fetish with an analysis of alienation in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.

The second occasion when Marx mentions fetishism in the *Rheinische Zeitung* occurs in July 1842 in a piece where he criticizes the lead article of issue 179 of the *Kölnische Zeitung*, written by a certain Herr H. In the relevant passage Marx begins by quoting his opponent:

"Religion is the basis of the state and the most necessary condition for every social association which does not aim merely at achieving some external aim."

*The proof.* "In its crudest form as childish fetishism it nevertheless to some extent raises man above his sensuous desires which, if he allowed himself to be ruled exclusively by them, could degrade him to the level of an animal and make him incapable of fulfilling any higher aim."

...
Truly, the erudition of a penny magazine! Fetishism is so far from raising man above his sensuous desires that, on the contrary, it is “the religion of sensuous desire”. Fantasy arising from desire deceives the fetish-worshipper into believing that an “inanimate object” will give up its natural character in order to comply with his desires. Hence the crude desire of the fetish-worshipper _smashes_ the fetish when it ceases to be its most obedient servant.

Herr H. adopts a view of the fetish similar to the one Hegel develops in his _Lectures on Aesthetics_, though he uses it in a much different fashion than the philosopher, namely, to support the reactionary political thesis that religion is the foundation of the state. Still, for Herr H., as for Hegel, fetishism suspends the practical orientation toward the object as something capable of satisfying the subject's sensuous desires and elevates the object to the realm of disinterested ideas. In accordance with the views of de Brosses, Boetigger, and Grund, Marx denies that this elevating role is any part of the fetishistic orientation, and characterizes fetishism instead as a form of immersion in practical need, indeed as nothing other than “the religion of
sensuous desire.” Because of the pressing character of his or her needs as well as ignorance of the pertinent causal connections, the fetishist endows the inanimate thing with an illusory subjectivity, and then treats the falsely personified thing as though it were capable, through an act of will, of fulfilling the fetishist's unsatisfied desires. So crudely instrumental is the attitude of the fetishist to the object of "worship," so Marx tells us, that the "worshipper" does not hesitate to destroy the fetish once it fails to perform its practical role.

The third occasion on which Marx discusses fetishism in the Rheinische Zeitung is his commentary in a series of articles appearing between October 25 and November 3, 1842 on a debate in the Rheinland Assembly over the criminalization of the act of collecting fallen wood. The ability to gather fallen wood and remove it from the land of proprietors was a customary right of the Rheinland peasantry. In retrospect, the move to abolish this traditional entitlement appears as an example of what Marx, in Capital, Volume One, will call the "primitive accumulation of capital " Like the enclosure movement in England, abolition of the right both brings into private ownership a resource previously available for communal appropriation, and weakens the economic viability of the peasantry, which is a precondition of its detachment from the land and therefore of its proletarianization. Primitive accumulation of
capital is also at work in an earlier debate of the Assembly on a bill to extend existing game regulations to include a prohibition against hunting hares, a debate that Marx refers to obliquely at several important points in his articles on the criminalization of wood collection. However, primitive accumulation is not the theme Marx's articles on the deliberations of the Assembly, which instead interpret the legislative assault on the right of wood-gathering as assertions of *feudal* prerogative. There are good reasons in support of this interpretation. First of all, the legislation abolishing the right was introduced by representatives of the knightly estate on its behalf, that is to say, on behalf of the old landed aristocracy. But second, and even more glaringly, the legislation included an section that established as a penalty for violating the new law labor services from the violator in fulfillment of the tax-obligations of the aristocratic "victim" of the crime. In other words, a form of servile labor, which Marx refers to as "serfdom," would be imposed under the legislation on the poor who dared to exercise their traditional rights. Forced labor on behalf of the aristocracy is normally a feudal practice, but what Marx fails to see here is that in this case such labor is part of a deeper trend to ruin the peasantry, and ultimately force it from the land. Primitive accumulation is "primitive" precisely because it generates forms of servility in the interest of extracting an extraordinary surplus from traditional
producers. However this may be, Marx frames his articles as a critique of "feudalism." He proceeds by adopting the rhetorical strategy of developing an analogy between feudalism and fetishism, at first under the specific form of animal worship.

The so-called customs of the privileged classes are understood to mean *customs contrary to the law*. Their origin dates to the period in which human history was part of *natural history*, and in which, according to Egyptian legend, all gods concealed themselves in the shape of animals. Mankind appeared to fall into definite species of animals which were connected not by equality, but by inequality, an inequality fixed by laws. The world condition of unfreedom required laws expressing this unfreedom, for whereas human law is the mode of existence of freedom, this animal law is the mode of existence of unfreedom. *Feudalism* in the broadest sense is the *spiritual animal kingdom*, the world of divided mankind, in contrast to the human world that
creates its own distinctions and whose inequality is nothing but a refracted form of equality. In the countries of naive feudalism, in the countries of the caste system, where in the literal sense of the word people are put in separate boxes [b], and the noble, freely interchanging members of the great sacred body, the holy Humanus, are sawn and cleft asunder, forcibly torn apart, we find therefore also the worship of animals, animal religion in its primitive form, for man always regards as his highest being that which is his true being.

... under feudalism one species feeds at the expense of another, right down to the species which, like the polyp, grows on the ground and has only numerous arms with which to pluck the fruits of the earth for higher races while it itself eats dust for whereas in the natural animal kingdom the worker bees kill the drones, in the spiritual animal kingdom the drones kill the worker bees, and precisely by
labour. When the privileged classes appeal from legal right to their customary rights, they are demanding instead of the human content of right, its animal form, which has now lost its reality and become a mere animal mask.

... In direct contradiction to those writers of fantasy who profess to find in the representation of private interests ideal romanticism, immeasurable depths of feeling, and the most fruitful source of individual and specific forms of morality, such representation on the contrary abolishes all natural and spiritual distinctions by enthroning in their stead the immoral, irrational and soulless abstraction of a particular material object and a particular consciousness which is slavishly subordinated to this object.
Wood remains wood in Siberia as in France; forest owners remain forest owners in Kamchatka as in the Rhine Province. Hence, if wood and its owners as such make laws, these laws will differ from one another only by the place of origin and the language in which they are written. This *abject materialism*, this sin against the holy spirit of the people and humanity, is an immediate consequence of the doctrine which the *Preussische Staats-Zeitung* preaches to the legislator, namely, that in connection with the law concerning wood he should think only of wood and forest and should solve each material problem *in a non-political way*, i.e., without any connection with the whole of the reason and morality of the state.

The *savages of Cuba* regarded gold as a *fetish of the Spaniards*. They celebrated a feast in its honour, sang in a circle around it and then threw it into the sea. If the Cuban savages had been
present at the sitting of the Rhine Province Assembly, would they not have regarded wood as the Rhinelanders' fetish? But a subsequent sitting would have taught them that the worship of animals is connected with this fetishism, and they would have thrown the hares into the sea in order to save the human beings. [9]


