One of the most radical aspects of early Romanticism was the attempt to replace history painting—large formal depictions of historical or religious scenes—by landscape. It is not that painters turned their attention to landscape and away from the large-scale painting—frescoes and oils—of scenes from the Bible and the lives of the saints or from ancient or modern history, but that a few of them had great and astonishing ambitions. They wished to make pure landscape without figures carry the weight, attain to the heroic and epic significance, of historical painting. Landscape was to be the vehicle of the Sublime.

In the seventeenth century, the landscapes of Poussin and Claude reached their full dignity as depictions of Classical Nature, with figures in antique dress, and often a mythological subject discreetly integrated into an ideally "Arcadian" countryside. The Romantic artists wanted to make the elements of Nature alone carry the full symbolic meaning. Their project was, in fact, identical with the contemporary attempt by Wordsworth and Hölderlin to give pure landscape poetry the force and gravity of Milton's and Homer's epic style.

That the replacement of history painting by landscape had an ideological purpose directly related to the destruction of traditional religious and political values at the end of the eighteenth century cannot be doubted. The artists were themselves acutely conscious of this. In 1802, the most brilliant and articulate of the young German painters, Philipp Otto Runge, identified the greatest achievements in art with a decline of religion:

How can we even think of trying for the return of the art of the past? The Greeks brought the beauty of their forms and shapes to its height when their gods perished. The modern Romans brought historical representation to its farthest point when the Catholic re-
With us again something is perishing, we stand at the brink of all the religions which sprang up out of the Catholic one, the abstractions perish, everything is lighter and more insubstantial than before, everything presses toward landscape art, looks for something certain in this uncertainty and does not know how to begin. They grasp mistakenly at historical painting [Historie], and they are bewildered. Is there not surely in this new art—landscapery, if you like—a higher point to be reached? Which will be even more beautiful than before?

In one sense, the Romantic landscape was a return to the serious tradition of the seventeenth century and a revulsion from the largely picturesque styles of the eighteenth. An essay by Schiller in 1794 (on the landscape poetry of a very minor versifier, Matthiessen) prepared the way. Landscape painting and poetry for Schiller could be raised to the dignity of major arts only by the awakening of sentiment and by the representation of ideas. We demand, he wrote, that the art of landscape should work upon us like music. Sentiment is stimulated by the analogy of sounds and colors with the movements of the emotions. Ideas are stimulated in the imagination of the reader or spectator by the form of the work of art, and this form controls the imaginative response. For Schiller, as later for Freud, the symbolic function of the imagination follows certain laws and can be both interpreted and predicted.

In 1808, a patron of the thirty-four-year-old Caspar David Friedrich asked him to turn a landscape into an altarpiece. The picture created a scandal, was fiercely attacked and as fiercely defended. The frame, with its angels that look down on the scene and with the ear of wheat and the wine branch below as symbols of bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, firmly defines the work as a picture intended for an altar. Yet the crucifix in the landscape, the only piece of traditional religious symbolism in the picture itself, is clearly not a representation of a historical event, but almost a part of Nature, a crucifix upon a moun-

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* Runge is alluding here to the exact coincidence of the High Renaissance style of Raphael and Michelangelo with the beginnings of the Reformation.
tains such as we may still see today in the German countryside. Moreover, the figure of Christ is turned away from the spectator toward the setting sun, and ivy grows around the stem of the crucifix.

In this, Friedrich's first important oil painting, the firm rock upon which the crucifix stands and the evergreen trees that grow round it are symbols only too easy to read. The symbolism of his later works is far less intrusive, more nuanced, and more dependent on the structure of the work—although even in this altarpiece an essential part of the effect comes from the perspective, which seems to place the spectator in midair before the scene, a sensation about which early critics complained.

"Here is a man who has discovered the tragedy of landscape," said the French sculptor David d'Angers after visiting Friedrich in his studio, and indeed Friedrich was one of the first European artists to restore landscape to the status of a major genre. The contemporary development in England, with Constable and Turner as the major figures, took place in a more empirical atmosphere, and gave landscape painting an explicitly scientific dignity as a means of investigating the visual aspect of Nature. The moral gravity is the same, however, and the explicit symbolism of Turner's work is comparable to Friedrich's. In return, the exactness of natural appearance is an essential aspect of Friedrich's art.

Few paintings by Friedrich are to be seen outside Germany. An exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London in 1972 was, astonishingly, the first large-scale showing of his work outside his native land. The entries in the catalogue for this exhibition were by Helmut Börsch-Supan; here and in his succeeding books on Friedrich, he has imposed a doctrinaire reading that does the paintings a disservice and distorts the tradition of Romantic symbolism. Börsch-Supan claims that "if one is to decipher Friedrich's pictorial symbolism, one has to look at his entire oeuvre," and it is with this apparently reasonable proposal that he goes astray. A study of the entire oeuvre may bring a deeper comprehension of Friedrich's art, but his symbols are to be read (not deciphered) within the individual works. That is, the meaning of the elements of Friedrich's style are revealed in each picture and are not an esoteric, private code accessible only to the initiate.

Perhaps the masterpiece of Friedrich's last years is The Great Reserve, a picture of inundated meadows where the Elbe overflows its banks. In the foreground is the water, with a very small ship that drifts near the edge of the mainland. The point of view of the observer is from far above, so that the body of water seems to have a gentle curve as if it were the curvature of the earth, and small plots of land stand out from the inundating water like continents on a globe. The inverse curve of the horizon responds symmetrically to the gentle curve of the foreground: the land between appears only as a few clumps of trees on a thin strip between the water and the immense sky. The broken, agitated forms of the water are unified by the evening colors of the sky reflected inversely so that the cool, distancing blue is in the foreground.

The painting is a religious meditation, an image of the relation of heaven to earth. It has a significance, but no message: the concentration is visual, and the meaning is general and inexhaustible, diffused through the forms; the strange symmetry and the unusual perspective force a reading upon us; Börsch-Supan's catalogue entry, however, is egregiously specific. We give it complete:

Painted in 1832, this picture marked a high point in Friedrich's development as a colourist. It recreates with great vividness the atmosphere of the time of day just after the sun has set. The striking perspective of the foreground may well be the result of the view being taken from a bridge. Both the ship drifting over the shallow water where it is in danger of being stranded, and the abruptness with which the avenue of trees comes to an end in the open country, are images of approaching death.

In similar fashion Börsch-Supan goes through the other works: every distant view represents paradise; every blade of grass, the transience of life; every birch tree, resurrection; every river, death.

There is no evidence that in this picture Friedrich intended a break in an avenue of trees or a boat in shallow water to be an image of death. Even if we discovered—improbably—he actually believed this, we would have to say he was wrong: these symbols do not function that way within the total form of The Great Reserve, whatever they may do in other paintings. The speculation about the view being taken from a bridge is gratuitous. We know that many of Friedrich's pictures were not drawn from life but constructed in his mind; one might even say that he followed his own metaphorical advice to painters and closed his eyes before he began to paint. The suggestion of a bridge serves only to obscure one of the characteristic effects of Romantic painting and poetry: the sense of being suspended in space, detached and poised over emptiness, so that what is seen takes on the quality of a vision.

The ambition of the Romantic artist was to create a symbolic language independent of tradition. It was no longer enough to initiate a new tradition, which would in turn harden into an arbitrary system. What was needed was a natural symbolism, which would remain eternally new. This ambition may have been hopeless, its achievement a delusion; but to substitute a private esoteric code for the traditional iconographical one would have been absurdly self-defeating. What the artists and poets did was to attempt to disengage the latent meaning of the natural elements, the significance hidden in Nature herself.

When traditional iconography was rejected, then the symbols of Nature themselves had to be made to speak, and this they could only do when reflected through an individual consciousness. Nature was seen at once diffused with feeling and at a distance—the distance freed the senses from the distortions of a particular moment and made the significance of the work general and even universal in range. Wordsworth writes of the crag on which he waited anxiously, trying to sight the carriage that would take him home after the holidays. Ten days later his father died . . .

* A ship approaching a port has the natural connotation of the end of a voyage, and an association of this with death is clearly made in other pictures by Friedrich, but the meaning there is brought out by the pictorial context.

And afterwards, the wind and sleet and rain
And all the business of the elements,
The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
And the bleak music of that old stone wall,
The noise of wood and water, and the mist
Which on the line of each of those two Roads,
Advanced in such indisputable shapes,
All these were spectacles and sounds to which
I often would repair and thence would drink,
As at a fountain. . . .

All the traditional paraphernalia of Nature poetry have disappeared; the rhetoric is hidden. In their place are a stone wall, a single sheep, one tree, and the music of Nature.

Wordsworth gives each of these elements an extraordinary significance merely by naming them in a certain order. They are barely described; by juxtaposing them, Wordsworth allows the as-
sociations to build. The narrative of his anxiety to return home, followed by the death of his father, acts like a frame around a landscape; it enriches the meanings but is not indispensable. The meanings come directly from the order and gravity of the list. Nor do the elements of Nature have primarily an autobiographical significance for Wordsworth: he does not value them solely for their power to recall the past. On the contrary, that single moment in his life served to release the powers of speech in Nature. The ambition (and the achievement) of Friedrich and Constable are similar to Wordsworth's: the forms of Nature speak directly, their power released by their ordering within the work of art.

The fundamental principle of Romantic symbolism is that the meaning can never be entirely separated from its symbolic representation: the image can never be reduced to a word. Börsch-Supan treats Friedrich as an enemy whose code must be cracked so that we may discover his strategy. But there is no code, no idiolect, no totally private language to be deciphered and translated. Friedrich's art—like any art—resists translation: it can only be interpreted, and not even that without constantly returning to the specific images as they figure in each painting.

To read into Friedrich's paintings an esoteric code is to falsify not only their art but even their religious meaning. It makes the works appear to convey a systematic doctrine, whereas they clearly reject religion as dogma. It is significant, as William Vaughan remarks in his introduction to Börsch-Supan's catalogue, that churches never appear in Friedrich's work except in the distance, as unreal visions, or as ruins. The visible Church is dead, only the invisible Church, in the heart or revealed through Nature, is alive. This is part of Friedrich's Pietist heritage, a personal religion that refuses all outward forms, all doctrine. To put a landscape on an altar is an aggressive act, as destructive of the old forms as it is creative of a new sensibility.

His contemporaries, even when they disliked his works, sometimes seem to have understood Friedrich better than we do today. A simple painting of leafless bushes in the snow inspires Börsch-Supan to thoughts of death and resurrection. A reviewer of 1828 was more down-to-earth: "The greatest truth to Nature, but the selection of such a limited appearance from the whole of Nature can hold our attention as little as the aspect of the trifling detail in Nature generally does." In his unsympathetic way, the reviewer had grasped the profound realism that links Friedrich to Constable: there was, for him, no phenomenon in Nature too insignificant for art. If this painting had a message that could be put into words, it was just that.

When Friedrich appeared on the scene during the first years of the nineteenth century, landscape played an important role in the theory as well as the practice of European art. The catalogue of a 1974 retrospective of Friedrich in Hamburg contains a collection of texts on the theory of art, especially German ones, from around 1800; a similar anthology of French texts would be equally impressive, but almost a quarter of a century was to pass before Corot and Théodore Rousseau carried theory into practice.* The new place of landscape in art derived, of course, from the cult of Nature that had grown and remained fashionable since Jean-Jacques Rousseau; the picturesque "English" landscape garden was one of its earliest manifestations. More profoundly, however, the development of landscape was one element in the general ferment within the language of art, at a moment when everything was called into question, not only in politics but also in all aspects of culture. The Romantics believed that the simplest forms of Nature could speak directly to us, could express sentiments and ideas without the intervention of culture; they dreamed of creating through landscape an art both personal and objective, an immediate, nonconventional, universally intelligible expression, a language that would be not discursive but evocative.

* One might begin with the precepts of Girodet, and the important "Lettres sur le dessin dans les paysages" ("Letter on landscape drawing") of 1795 by Chateaubriand, written by that famous verbal landscape painter during his exile in England.
The impossibility of such a project not only is obvious to us today, as we have remarked above, but was undoubtedly felt by the authors of the program, by men such as Friedrich Schlegel or Novalis, who had meditated on the nature of language. The languages we speak are all too clearly founded on convention; therefore to the Romantics, as to Rousseau, the languages of everyday life are arbitrary and degenerate, fallen from the state of grace of the initial condition of humanity. In that primitive time, it was felt, there were no distinctions among the different languages or even between music, poetry, dance, and verbal expression; sign and meaning were not then related by arbitrary convention, but the sign was a natural and immediately understandable representation of sentiment and idea. This myth of original unity inspired the efforts for reform and renewal. It explains the privileged place given to music among the arts in Romantic theory (which later induced Walter Pater to say that all the arts “aspire to the condition of music”). Music seemed to express sentiments by acting directly on the senses. Figurative art, less satisfactory because less purely sensuous than music, had at least the advantage—that of basing its language on a natural relationship between a symbol and what it signifies.

Traditional allegory and iconography, however, obviously require knowledge of conventions. A woman holding a pair of scales is Justice only to a person who knows the code. Classical mythology itself had become, to many Romantic artists, nothing but another system of such conventional transpositions. In the Romantic struggle to escape from these conventions, landscape played an important part. First of all, it seems to put us in direct contact with Nature. Moreover, the genre was paradoxically favored by the humble status in which it had been kept by academic theory since the sixteenth century; the humility of the genre facilitated a break with its deep-rooted conventions, symbolism, and tradition. The problem for the Romantic painters was to endow landscape with profundity, loftiness of sentiment, an expression not only of appearance but of the reality hidden behind things, of the mystery, the infinity of Nature, and even the drama of the self facing the universe.

In the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century attempts to free the symbol from convention in figure painting as well as in landscape, three main tactics can be distinguished. The first one consisted in elaborating a new, totally personal symbolism, an idiosyncratic mythology belonging entirely to the artist. William Blake is the most characteristic example of an artist who used this tactic; and it also explains, at least in part, the success of the poems of Ossian, that extraordinary Romantic hoax, in which Homeric poetry appeared to have been brought closer to Nature, freed from its cultural ties. (Celtic nationalism also played a part in the European vogue of these poems.) The forgery was perceived by those critics who noticed that the symbolic language was not unfamiliar, the conventions only too clearly adapted from Homer. The second method consisted, on the contrary, in the use of symbols, like the association of dark hues with sadness, which are so familiar that they are taken for granted and appear to escape from convention. Such symbols are so deeply rooted in ancient tradition, so pervasive in the entire culture, that their artificiality is no longer felt and they appear to be part of human nature. The third method was the exploitation of the latent possibilities of meaning in natural phenomena, the coming of dawn as a new beginning, for example. We have here a mode of expression so closely related to experience that we feel that the objects themselves are communicating with us, and that the symbolism is not in art but is the very language of Nature herself. This is the way that Friedrich in The Great Reserve exploits the reflection of the colors of the sky in the water, strengthening the meaning of a foreshortened perspective that curves the marshy foreground as well as the horizon. Philipp Otto Runge, in his complex, confused, and even contradictory program for a new art, applied all three methods. His ultimate aim was an ideal of pure expressionism through color, in other words, an entirely “musical” art.

Friedrich was often drawn to a kind of symbolic language so familiar through long use that it had become unconscious and all sense of its conventional nature had been eroded: the cross, the anchor, or the ship. He also employed symbols derived directly from the kind of experience that seems to precede language:
In defense of a symbolic interpretation, his letter of 1815 to Louise Seidler has been cited: “The picture for your friend has already been sketched out, but there is no church in it, not a single tree or plant, not a blade of grass. On a bare and rocky seashore there stands, high up, the cross— for those who see it that way, a consolation, and for those who don’t see it that way, just a cross.”

No one needs to have it explained that, in this picture, the cross and the anchor are the signs of faith and hope, according to the most elementary Christian symbolism. What matters is the rest of what Friedrich writes: his insistence on what is not present in the picture, the artistic asceticism, the elimination of the picturesque, and even the possibility held out of choosing not to adopt the traditional symbolism. Friedrich values the Christian meaning above all, but the picture must also bring something to those who see in its principal motif not a consolation but only a cross. As Friedrich himself said, “Just as the reverent man prays without uttering words, and the Lord hears him, the sensitive painter paints, and the sensitive man understands and recognizes him, but even the more obtuse carry away something from his work.”

These words of Friedrich invite us to examine more closely the manner in which he handles his motifs and impel us to consider them not as simple imitations of Nature but as subjects for meditation. The motifs themselves are very traditional. Each of them has a long history, as critics have easily shown; one can even find examples in German landscapes of the immediately preceding period, in the work of Adrian Zingg and Ferdinand von Kobell: archi-traditional motifs filled with significance but terribly threadbare. It was, in fact, by turning his back on the European tradition that Friedrich evolved his art, by cultivating a symbolic technique that seemed awkward to his contemporaries. (This awkwardness is analogous to the thinness of his paint; contemporaries, like Goethe, complained that his handling lacked sensuousness. It is obvious, both from Friedrich’s statements and from the works themselves, that he cultivated this apparent poverty to give an impression of ascetic spirituality, to convince one that his paintings are pure idea, pure emotion.) The poet Clemens Brentano’s criticism of The Monk by the Seashore helps us to comprehend the re-
action to this voluntary awkwardness: "If I had really wished to place a monk in my landscape, I would have shown him lying asleep or on his knees in prayer or in meditation, so as not to obstruct the view of the spectator." In other words, he would have integrated him into the landscape. Friedrich, on the contrary, stood him perpendicular to the earth in full view, straight up like a capital I, overlooking earth and sea, at the highest point of a dune, without any attempt to blend his forms with those of Nature. This figure has nothing in common with the mannequins one finds in landscapes from Claude Lorrain to Joseph Vernet. As tiny as he is, the monk, isolated and prominent, confronts the universe, and we confront it with him.

The manner in which Friedrich isolates each motif reminds one curiously of emblem books. He adhered to a tradition of using images in which the objects were detached, set in relief, shown clearly, juxtaposed didactically. Friedrich was undoubtedly influenced by popular books, by almanacks (for which a witty eighteenth-century illustrator like Chodowiecki produced so many prints), by illustrated fables, by a whole body of what might be called folklore, which certainly attracted him by its deep national roots. This is where one finds that particular visual rhetoric—announcing that the object signifies something beyond its simple appearance by contrasting it with what surrounds it—that almost hieroglyphic articulation of motifs, and finally that often aggressive compositional symmetry which leaves no doubt about the seriousness of intention.

The cross, the anchor, the rock, all these isolated signs, deprived of all picturesque encumbrance, of inventions—the "blades of grass" which are the usual connective tissue of landscape—speak, indeed, perhaps too clear a language in The Cross on the Baltic Sea. It is difficult to see in them simply a cross and an anchor rather than faith and hope. Those of Friedrich's pictures that "force one to dream" (in the words of David d'Angers) exhibit a disturbance of that neat order, a work in depth that converts the picture into more than the transcription of a concept.

In The Ages of Man the sumptuous harmony of the sunset, the silhouettes, the large figure with its fantastic contour, create an immediate atmosphere of strangeness. The five figures are not simply a traditional allegory of the ages of man. We are in the presence of a complex psychological interplay. What we have is a family with its emotional ties and tensions. The two children are obviously the center of interest; the man seems to draw the old man's attention to them—and ours, of course, to remind us that the child is the creative force, and that genuine naïveté is the most highly appreciated quality of Romanticism. On the sea are five ships: we immediately sense the relationship between the human figures and the ships, not only because the numbers correspond, but also because they cut similar silhouettes against the sea and sky. The traditional significance of the ship as a symbol of human destiny is emphasized and reinforced.
The analogy between the figures and the ships is so obvious that it demands to be followed up—but here things become more complicated and the allegorical discourse is disrupted. The old man evidently corresponds to the largest ship; the size and the resemblance of the shapes proclaim it; both have a character at once heroic and fantastic. However, while the old man is the farthest to the left and nearest to us in space, the large ship is in the center, so that the parallelism between figures and ships is not exact. On the other hand, there is a legible contrast between the two small boats each with two sails nearer to the coast, and the big sailing ships farther away. Must one relate the two smaller vessels to the children? It is tempting to do so. If we now consider the grouping of the figures, the impressive old man is set well apart from, almost opposed to, the group of four figures. Within this group not only are the adults distinguished from the children, but the women at the right are opposed to the men at the left; the parallelism of the silhouettes insists on the relation between the woman and the little girl. Thus one can place the two boats that are nearer the bank, more domestic, in relation to the feminine figures, while the large seafaring vessels can be thought of as the men. The complexity of the visual counterpoint introduces symbolic ambiguities, enriches the web of significance, and helps save the work from the schematicism that sometimes threatens Friedrich.

If Friedrich turned his back on a great part of the tradition of painting, if he imprisoned himself in an over-refined poverty, which he invested with a patriotic value, if he sometimes composed in an emblematic manner in contrast with the powerfully synthetic method of the other great landscape painters, he nevertheless did not neglect certain expressive values that lend his pictures substance and life. He was a master of light, of the evocative arabesque, of expression by color, and, above all, of the correspondence of forms—what is called visual metaphor, a sort of counterpoint that weaves a network of relations among the depicted objects and suggests the multiple readings of the representation.

The most important among the procedures that helped Friedrich to avoid an ostentatious simplicity and bareness, an overartificial and allegorical language, is his naturalism, an exactness of representation that links him to the rest of European art. It is true that, in his aphorisms, he insisted on the importance of the interior, spiritual vision. The working out of the picture is, indeed, inward: an articulation of already prepared motifs, a mental composition, an expression of feeling. It is characteristic that Friedrich most often completed his conception in his head and then drew directly on the canvas. However, an aphorism counterbalances this: “Observe the form with precision, the smallest as well as the largest, and don’t make a distinction between the small and the large but between the important and the petty.” And, indeed, Friedrich’s drawings show an assiduous study of Nature in its minutest details. He could count on his intimate knowledge of appearance and on an almost scientific understanding of natural effects; at the moment of painting he would then consult his stock of drawings and use entire motifs literally unchanged, preserving the freshness and emotion of direct observation.

One is reminded of a sentence by Constable: “For me, painting is only another word for feeling.” If Constable and Friedrich may seem to be antipodal, they nevertheless shared a deep-rooted conviction, the fundamental postulate that sentiment and natural appearance are necessarily coherent. “Feeling can never be contrary to nature, it is always consistent with nature.” This time it is Friedrich who speaks, but one might easily think that it is Constable, for whom the creative act was the very act of perception.

There are some works by Friedrich in which a verbal message or a private reference is implied. A pair of pictures may be mentioned here. In one, a man on crutches stands in a winter landscape with dead oaks and tree stumps, and in the companion piece, the man has thrown away his crutches, the oaks are replaced by evergreens, and the shape of a visionary church in the distance clearly resembles an evergreen tree. The allegory is all too painfully
clear. But there are not many of Friedrich’s pictures, and none at all after 1815, in which the symbolism operates so crassly, and there is no justification for trying to reduce the greater works to this level.

A criticism of art that claims to break a private code and to provide a dictionary of the meanings of the encoded elements embodies two misconceptions about art and language which are generally benign and sometimes even useful, but which are particularly harmful when dealing with the early nineteenth century. The first is that art is in all respects a language. The analogies of art and language are many and suggestive, they are indispensable to any serious view, but art lacks exactly that characteristic of language which enables one to compile a dictionary: translatability, or the possibility of substituting one sign or set of signs for another.

Translation in the arts creates an immediate sense of discomfort, a decided uneasiness. We are not sure what proper translation would be. Does an engraved illustration of a poem translate even part of it? Can one be substituted for the other, as we can substitute a definition for a word or a French expression for an English one, and still keep approximately the same meaning? Can Schumann be translated into Mozart? Can a picture by da Vinci be translated into one by Rubens (to take the famous example of Rubens’s transformation of da Vinci’s Anghiari cartoon)? Is one a proper substitute for the other?

The last question moves toward nonsense, as if it were not already clear that the place of substitution in art is indeed very dubious. But the possibility of substituting one set of signs for another is necessary to the functioning of language and fundamental to the concept of a dictionary. The idea of compiling a glossary of meanings for art seems to challenge that essential aspect of art which insists on the uniqueness of each use of a symbol.

The second misconception is about language: the conviction that meanings can be isolated outside of any situation or context. A dictionary is only a convenient fiction. “What royal decree,” wrote Lichtenberg, “ordained that a word must have a fixed meaning?” Meanings fluctuate, although not absurdly or unpre-
dictably: they redefine themselves in new situations. The dynamics of this fluctuation may be studied and controlled, but we cannot maintain that a sign or word is always used with only one dictionary sense at a time. All the more reason to see that the signs in Friedrich cannot be given single, simple meanings in isolation: they take their meaning from a great variety of forces, few of them as direct and as easily definable as we might like to imagine.

This flexibility (or instability) of meaning is as essential to language as the possibility of substituting one word for another, which helps to stabilize meaning. Each use of a word may, if we choose, be considered as unique—related to all other previous and possible uses, but individual and irreplaceable, as untranslatable as a work of art. In this sense, the possibility of art is always present in language. No one was more conscious of this than the poets and artists of the early nineteenth century, for whom it became dogma. Everything for them was potentially language and therefore potentially art. “Anything can be a symbol,” wrote Novalis, and he added that the relation of a symbol to its meaning could always be reversed: the meaning could become the symbol, the content could become symbolic form. The freedom of the symbolizing power of the imagination implied a radically new vision of language.

Above all, as we have observed, the symbolic language they wanted for art was to be a natural one—that is, not derived from the arbitrary conventions that were handed down by tradition. If the elements of Nature—sounds, shapes, forms—had an inherent meaning, as they believed, then the traditional accretion of ascribed meanings had to be abandoned as far as possible. The painters threw overboard much of the traditional iconography, with its rich complexity and its resources of meaning. The poets ignored, tried to ignore, or affected to ignore the whole traditional baggage of rhetoric that had been handed down over the centuries.

What they tried to destroy, in fact, were those aspects of the “language” of art that could be codified, that were susceptible to lexicography. Useful dictionaries of traditional religious iconography have been published; but if a dictionary of Romantic icon-
ography could be compiled—at least for the years 1800 to 1835—it would be chiefly a measure of the artists’ failure. This early-nineteenth-century philosophy of art may appear today an aesthetic of crisis, a measure of desperation when traditional forms had broken down. We may doubt that forms have a meaning independent of culture, that language is immanent in Nature. But there is no question of the achievement: Wordsworth, Hölderlin, Constable, and Friedrich contrived to let the elements of Nature appear to speak directly and without intermediary; Schumann and Berlioz caused elements of abstract musical form to bear meanings that are analogous to verbal meanings if rarely coincidental with them.

All these artists were aware that they were radically changing the theory as well as the practice of their art. Each one expanded the limits of his art, triumphed over his medium by playing the conceptions of art and language against each other. For this reason, when dealing with their achievement, we must be doubly conscious of the limitations of both art and language: it was with these limitations that they worked. They counted on our sense of their art’s going beyond what was possible, only to find it once more reintegrated in a purely pictorial or musical form. The interpretation of each work can never be imposed from without, even by means of a generalization about the artist’s total style; it must begin again each time from within.