'EXTRAORDINARY'
Andrew Roberts

'MAGNIFICENT'
Amanda Foreman

'SUPERB'
Robert Macfarlane

'GLORIOUS'
Richard Holmes

MAGNIFICENT REBELS

THE FIRST ROMANTICS AND THE INVENTION OF THE SELF

ANDREA WULF

WINNER OF THE COSTA & ROYAL SOCIETY AWARDS

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Contents

About the Author
Praise for Magnificent Rebels
Also by Andrea Wulf
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Dramatis Personae
Maps
Epigraphs and Sources
How to use this eBook

Prologue

PART I: ARRIVAL

1. ‘A happy event’ Summer 1794: Goethe and Schiller
2. ‘I am a priest of truth’ Summer 1794: Fichte’s Ich-philosophy
3. ‘The nation’s finest minds’ Winter 1794–Spring 1795: Where All Paths Lead
4. ‘Electrified by our intellectual friction’ 1795–1796: Love, Life and Literature
5. ‘Philosophy is originally a feeling’ Summer 1796: Novalis in Love
6. ‘Our splendid circle’ Summer–Winter 1796: The Schlegels Arrive

PART II: EXPERIMENTS

7. ‘Our little academy’ Spring 1797: Goethe and Alexander von Humboldt
8. ‘Grasp, then, a handful of darkness’ Summer–Winter 1797: Novalis’s Death Wish

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9. ‘Sublime impertinence’ Winter 1797–Spring 1798: The Dawn of Romanticism
10. ‘Symphilosophy is our connection’s true name’ Summer 1798: A Vacation in Dresden and Schelling Arrives

PART III: CONNECTIONS

11. ‘To be one with everything living’ Autumn 1798–Spring 1799: Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*
12. ‘Idol worshippers, atheists, liars’ 1799: Scandals Part One. Fichte’s Dismissal
13. ‘You lose yourself in a dizzy whirl’ 1799: Scandals Part Two. Divorce, Women and Sex
14. ‘The Schlegel clique’ Autumn 1799: Work and Play
15. ‘Solemnly calling a new confederation of minds’ November 1799: A Meeting in Leutragasse

PART IV: FRAGMENTATION

16. ‘The republic of despots’ Winter 1799–Summer 1800: Estrangements
17. ‘O what a black fog’ Summer 1800–Spring 1801: Darkness Falls
18. ‘When philosophers start eating one another like starving rats’ Spring 1801–Spring 1803: Separations
19. ‘The current exodus’ 1804–1805: Jena Abandoned
20. ‘The French are in town!’ October 1806: The Battle of Jena

Epilogue

Acknowledgements
Picture Credits
Notes
Bibliography and Sources
Picture Section

Copyrighted material

Footnotes

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Dramatis Personae

Auguste Böhmer (1785–1800)
The oldest daughter of Caroline Böhmer-Schlegel-Schelling. She lived with her mother and stepfather August Wilhelm Schlegel in Jena from 1796 to 1800.

Caroline Böhmer-Schlegel-Schelling, née Michaelis (1763–1809)
A writer, translator, literary critic and muse to the Jena Set. She was married to Franz Böhmer from 1784 to 1788, to August Wilhelm Schlegel from 1796 to 1803, and to Friedrich Schelling from 1803 to 1809. She lived in Jena from 1796 to 1803.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814)
A philosopher who lived in Jena from 1794 to 1799. He moved to Berlin in July 1799. He was married to Johanne Fichte, née Rahn (1755–1819).

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832)
A poet and privy councillor to Duke Carl August in the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar. Goethe lived in Weimar but visited Jena regularly, often for several weeks. His lover and later wife Christiane Vulpius (1765–1816) was the mother of his son August von Goethe (1789–1830).

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)
A philosopher who joined his friend Friedrich Schelling in Jena at the beginning of 1801. He lived in Jena until 1807.

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Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859)
A scientist and explorer who often visited his older brother Wilhelm von Humboldt in Jena between 1794 and 1797.

Caroline von Humboldt, née Dacheröden (1766–1829)
Wife of Wilhelm von Humboldt. She lived in Jena (with interruptions) together with her husband from 1794 to 1797.

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835)
A linguist and Prussian diplomat who lived in Jena (with interruptions) from 1794 to 1797. He was married to Caroline von Humboldt and was Alexander von Humboldt's older brother.

Novalis (1772–1801)
Friedrich von Hardenberg was a poet, writer and mining inspector who used the pen name Novalis. He studied in Jena from 1790 to 1791. His family estate Weißenfels was not far from Jena and he visited his friends regularly between 1795 and 1801. He was first engaged to Sophie von Kühn and then to Julie von Charpentier.

Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854)
A young philosopher who lived and taught in Jena from 1798 to 1803. He had an affair with Caroline Schlegel and married her in 1803.

Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805)
A playwright and poet. Schiller lived in Jena from 1789 to 1799. He moved to Weimar in December 1799. He was married to Charlotte Schiller, née von Lengefeld (1766–1826).

August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845)
A writer, poet, translator and literary critic. He lived in Jena from 1796 to 1801. He was married to Caroline Böhmer-Schlegel-

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Schelling and was Friedrich Schlegel's older brother.

Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829)
A writer and literary critic. He lived in Jena from 1796 to 1797 and from 1799 to 1801. He met his married lover Dorothea Veit-Schlegel in Berlin in 1799. They married in 1804. He was August Wilhelm Schlegel's younger brother.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834)
A theologian and chaplain. Although Schleiermacher never visited Jena, he was a regular correspondent with members of the Jena Set and his views on religion became important to them. Friedrich Schlegel met him in 1797 in Berlin and shared his lodgings.

Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853)
A writer, poet and translator. He met Friedrich Schlegel in Berlin and lived in Jena from 1799 to 1800. He was married to Amalie Tieck.

Dorothea Veit-Schlegel, née Brendel Mendelssohn (1764–1839)
A writer and translator. She was married to Simon Veit from 1783 to 1799. Friedrich Schlegel was her lover for several years before they married in 1804. She lived in Jena from 1799 to 1802.

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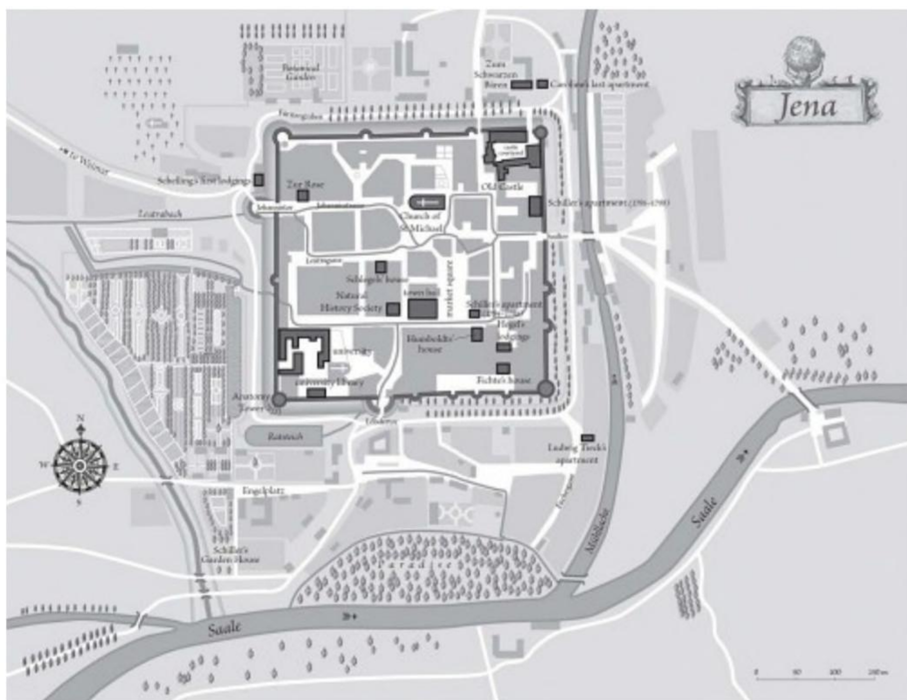

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Epigraphs and Sources

Attend to yourself; turn your eye away from all that surrounds you and in towards your own inner self. Such is the first demand that Philosophy imposes upon the student. We speak of nothing that is outside you, but solely of yourself.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte

From where do I borrow my concepts? – necessarily I – necessarily from myself. I am for myself the ground of all thoughts.

Novalis

I am definitely happier the freer I am.

Caroline Schlegel-Schelling

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Prologue

I HAVE DONE THINGS the wrong way round all my life. Or maybe it was the right way. Or maybe it was just an unconventional way. In protest against my clever, liberal, loving and academic parents, I refused to go to university and worked instead in restaurants and bars. That didn't mean that I was not educating myself. I read. Mainly fiction and philosophy. I've always been an insatiable reader, but I wanted to decide for myself what to read and not be bound to a university curriculum. I also began an apprenticeship as a painter and decorator; I was a guide in a museum; I did an internship at a theatre. With the obnoxious confidence of adolescent selfishness, I saw the world through the prism of my own – admittedly narrow – perspective.

What was wrong with reading all day? What was wrong with changing my mind? What was wrong with dancing all night? I fell in and out of love easily. I had a daughter at the age of twenty-two. Suddenly aware that I might not be able to work in restaurants and bars forever, I began to study at a university in Germany. The only seminars I enjoyed, though, were about philosophy. In these lectures it was as if a vortex opened up, pulling me into an intoxicating world of thinking. It felt as if I had discovered the answers to the questions of life: What is evil? What does it mean to be good? Who are we? Why are we? Now, thirty years later, I can hardly remember what I read but the books and discussions with my professors and peers gave me the tools to think and question. I also began to understand history not as a sequence of events and dates that sit neatly in a row,

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like pearls strung on a necklace, but as an interconnected web. I began to look at the present through the lens of the past.

I took life more seriously but continued to make impulsive choices. I felt free, though, determined to be in control of my destiny. Maybe some of the choices were reckless but they were mine – or so I thought. Now, of course, I know that I was only able to behave in this way because I had the privilege of knowing that if it all went wrong, I would always have been able to knock on my parents' (middle-class) door.

After all, my parents had taught me to follow my dreams. They had done so themselves when they moved from Germany to India in the 1960s, to work for the Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst (the German equivalent of the Peace Corps). Where my parents' childhoods began in the bomb shelters of the Second World War, mine did so in the riotous colours of India. When they boarded a plane in 1966, they left behind a secure life in which my mother had been a secretary and my father had worked in a provincial bank. They returned with two small children and began again. Both in their early thirties by this point, they went to university, the first in their families to do so. My mother became a teacher and my father an eminent academic in the field of Peace and Conflict Studies.

When my own daughter was six, we moved from Germany to England. It was a snap decision. I quit my studies, sold my few possessions and moved to London. I was a single mother with a half-finished education, a trunk full of books, no income, and a seemingly never-ending supply of confidence. I moved in with a friend (the best kind of friend), applied for a fellowship and began (and finished) a new master's degree in London. I worked hard. I had my doubts. I worried. We scraped by. Just. But it was a life full of love, warmth and happiness. I might have been impulsive but I was also always very organised and structured. It wasn't chaotic impulsive, it was life-affirming impulsive.

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In England I found my voice. Literally. I found it in a language that wasn't mine by birth. And I became a writer. I was older but still not wiser. One might ask, surely there are better-paid jobs? Yes, but none that I love so much. Most days my job doesn't feel like work. It's what I want to do. Every single day of my life. I write. I tell stories. I try to make sense of the past so that I can learn something about the present. I am lucky. Incredibly lucky. It could have all gone horribly wrong. But it didn't. Until now, I have had the privilege of having lived *my* life. I'm also very aware that it might not always remain like this.

There have been times when my ferocious appetite for independence became egotistical. I'm sure my daughter would have preferred not to move as frequently as we did. But despite these upheavals, she turned out to be a beautiful human being. And I became an adult as I grew up with her. That little girl grounded me and anchored my determination to be free into something bigger: to be a good person. She enabled me to find a balance between being free-spirited and being responsible.

We live in a world in which we tiptoe along a thin line between free will and selfishness, between self-determination and narcissism, between empathy and righteousness. Underpinning everything are two crucial questions: Who am I as an individual? And who am I as a member of a group and society? I live in London, a big dirty metropolis full of people, where every morning hundreds of thousands of commuters pile into the Tube to travel to their workplaces. As they push against each other in this great human wave, they share a physical space but they are also each in their own world. They stare at their small flickering screens, reading emails, checking social media accounts, playing games or scrolling through photos. It's a city where in front of Big Ben or St Paul's Cathedral tourists hustle for the best spot to take the perfect selfie. But it's also a city

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where people risk their lives helping others in stabbings or terrorist attacks, and where people look after their neighbours.

We've entered into a social contract with those who govern us. We've accepted the laws that frame the society in which we live – though not in perpetuity. They are negotiable. Laws can be revised or changed in order to adapt to new circumstances – but are there moments when I as an individual or we as a society can protest or even violate these laws? Mostly, these changes happen gradually – they are discussed, voted on and then implemented. And though often riddled with setbacks, frustrations and injustice, the legal scaffold is nonetheless an essential part of our democratic relationship with the state and with one another. Sometimes, the changes are more radical or only temporary. Take the global pandemic, for example, when millions of us voluntarily surrendered our basic rights and liberties for the greater good. For months, we didn't see our friends and families, and followed draconian rules because we believed it was the morally right thing to do. Others didn't. They simply refused to obey these restrictions, insisting that their individual liberties were more important.

For most of my adult life, I have been trying to understand why we are who we are. This is the reason why I write history books. In my previous books, I have looked at the relationship between humankind and nature in order to understand why we've destroyed so much of our magnificent blue planet. But I also realise that it is not enough to look at the connections between us and nature. The first step is to look at us as individuals – when did we begin to be as selfish as we are today? At what point did we expect to have the right to determine our own lives? When did we think it was our right to take what we wanted? Where did this – us, you, me, or our collective behaviour – all come from? When did we first ask the question, how can I be free?

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It was while researching Alexander von Humboldt, the subject of my book *The Invention of Nature*, that I found the answers to these questions in Jena, a barely known town some 150 miles south-west of Berlin, in Germany. For it was here, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, that Humboldt joined a group of novelists, poets, literary critics, philosophers, essayists, editors, translators and playwrights who, intoxicated by the French Revolution, placed the self at the centre stage of their thinking. In Jena their ideas collided and coalesced, and the impact was seismic, spreading out across the German states and on into the world – and into our minds.

The group was bound by an obsession with the free self at a time when most of the world was ruled by monarchs and leaders who controlled many aspects of their subjects' lives. 'A person', the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte shouted from the lectern during his first lecture in Jena, 'should be self-determined, never letting himself be defined by anything external.' This emphasis on the self and the value of the individual experience became this group's guiding light.

For the roughly ten years from the mid-1790s that they were living together in Jena, the small town on the banks of the Saale River became the nexus of Western philosophy – a mere blink in time yet one of the most important decades for the shaping of the modern mind. Today, few outside Germany have heard of Jena, but what happened there in those few years remains with us. We still think with the minds of these visionary thinkers, see with their imaginations and feel with their emotions. We might not know it, but their way of understanding the world still frames our lives and being.

One of them was Caroline Michaelis-Böhmer-Schlegel-Schelling, a woman who carried the names of her father and three husbands but who also refused to be restricted by the role

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that society had intended for women. Caroline stands at the centre of this inspirational story.

30 March 1793. The carriage came to an abrupt halt. Soldiers surrounded the vehicle and one of the Prussian officers stepped forward. When he opened the door, he saw a well-dressed woman and child. He asked for names and papers, and from where they had come. 'From Mainz? Böhmer?' he said when he unfolded the pages, and with that simple question the young woman's destiny was sealed. The Prussians had heard of the young widow Caroline Böhmer and her connection with the French revolutionaries who were occupying the German city.

Incensed by the questioning and allegations, Caroline refused to cooperate and behaved so rudely, friends later said, that she was escorted screaming and shouting to Frankfurt. She and her seven-year-old daughter Auguste were placed under house arrest, under the vigilant eyes of three guards. During her interrogation she sarcastically told the officer who was recording her answers that 'he would have made a great editor, since he was so good at putting everything in such concise form'.

After that, she stood no chance. Her luggage was seized and she was charged with being a French sympathiser and imprisoned without trial. Her prison was the old fortress of Königstein, ten miles north-west of Frankfurt and twenty miles north-east of Mainz. On 8 April 1793, nine days after her arrest, she and young Auguste were forced to follow a procession of chained and shackled German revolutionaries. As they left Frankfurt in a guarded carriage, bystanders showered them with rotten eggs, stones and apples. It was even worse for the male prisoners who had to walk and were beaten till they bled.

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A few hours later, Caroline made out the fortress, towering over the ruins of Königstein, which had been bombarded by the Prussians while they wrenched it out of French hands. When the prisoners arrived, they were herded through an arched gate in the high ancient walls and into the fortress's shadowed courtyard. It was a frightening sight and certainly no place for a child. No sun touched the cold stones, and as they waited they could hear the rattle of iron locks and the guards' booted steps echoing down the corridors. Once in a while, there was a distant moan. Finally, Caroline and little Auguste, along with several other women, were shoved into a dark, dirty room furnished with filthy straw mattresses, a couple of rough wooden benches and a tub of murky water. The air was stale and the walls were damp. In the days and weeks that followed, they ate potatoes without cutlery and scooped water from the tub with mugs. Soon their clothes and hair were crawling with vermin.

Prison was a far cry from Caroline's normal life. She was the daughter of a celebrated professor at the University of Göttingen, in the German state of Hanover. Her father was a respected orientalist and theologian who was known for his wit and rude jokes as much as for his learning. The family had lived in a large and elegant town house in the city centre, where their guests had included the famous German poet Goethe and the American revolutionary Benjamin Franklin, as well as the many students who attended her father's lectures in the auditorium on the first floor.

Caroline had been raised surrounded by books, intellectual conversation and knowledge. The university's library had been at her disposal and private teachers had provided an extensive education. She learned easily, spoke several languages fluently and, unlike most educated women of her age, her spelling was as accurate as any literary man's. Confident, fearless and known to be 'a little wild', she had as a fifteen-year-old declared: 'I never

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flatter, I say what I think and feel.' She was small and slender with blue eyes that sparkled with curiosity and brown hair that tumbled in thick curls around her face. Though beautiful, smallpox had blemished her skin, and she also squinted a little. She dressed elegantly, had many admirers, and was sure of herself. Not much frightened Caroline.

She and her daughter had attempted to flee Mainz on 30 March 1793, when almost fifty thousand Prussian and Austrian troops had approached to recapture the city from the French revolutionary army. Caroline had lived in Mainz for a little more than a year. She had been there when the French had arrived the previous October and when German revolutionaries had founded the so-called Society of the Friends of Liberty and Equality the very next day. Terrified aristocrats, clergy, civil servants and the ruling prince-elector had fled the city, but others had welcomed the invading French army and their new democratic beliefs. Those who remained pinned a red, blue and white cockade to their hats as a symbol of the revolution, and shouted 'Vivre libre ou mourir' – 'Live free or die' – as they marched through the streets.

Like other liberal Germans, twenty-nine-year-old Caroline Böhmer had welcomed the French Revolution and the French. Four years earlier, in July 1789, she had read how France's feudal roots had been ripped out by the storming of the Bastille, in Paris, and how the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* had deemed all men equal. As thousands of protesters marched to the palace of Versailles, and the panicked French king and his queen fled, Caroline had told her younger sister about the glorious events in France. 'Let the wealthy step aside, and the poor rule the world,' she had said.

Liberty, equality and fraternity – the rallying calls of the revolution – promised a new world. After centuries of being ruled by despotic monarchs who favoured a few and let the rest

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starve, the French people had founded a republic and executed their king. Instead of a privileged few, it was now the people of France who would govern. Caroline was thrilled by the possibilities. 'After all, we are living in very interesting political times,' she wrote shortly after her arrival in Mainz. She couldn't wait to tell her future grandchildren that she was witnessing the greatest upheaval of all time. It was exhilarating, momentous and dizzying. 'Who knows when I'll end up with a bullet in the head!' Caroline said, but she wouldn't want to miss a thing.

During her year in Mainz, Caroline had spent much of her time with Georg Forster, an old friend from Göttingen and an intrepid explorer who had joined Captain Cook's second circumnavigation of the globe in the early 1770s. Forster was also one of Germany's leading revolutionaries. Every day, Caroline would walk the short five-minute stroll from her apartment to his house. In the evenings the Mainz revolutionaries met in Forster's parlour to debate, over a cup of tea, the news from France and their own plans for a republic in Mainz.

Excited to be at the very centre of the action, Caroline discussed politics and revolutions with friends and strangers, read the latest newspapers and was swept up by the turmoil. She was in Mainz when a Tree of Liberty was planted, everybody singing and dancing around it until deep into the night. She went to dinners and parties organised by the French – and soon rumours began to spread. Some alleged an affair with General Custine, the French commander of the troops occupying Mainz, with whom Caroline had dined several times. Others suspected a liaison with Georg Forster. It didn't help that Caroline was flirtatious by nature and had declared French men more handsome than Germans.

In mid-March 1793, six months after the French had arrived, the German revolutionaries declared the Mainz Republic, the

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first one on German soil. But it was over almost as soon as it had begun. Two weeks later, the Prussian army marched towards the city to take it back from the French. Caroline had thought it wise to leave, but she had only travelled ten miles before she was arrested by the Prussians.

Her imprisonment in Königstein couldn't have happened at a worse moment. She and Auguste could endure the cold and hunger, and sharing mattresses with strangers, but in prison Caroline was shocked to discover that she was pregnant. Worse still, the pregnancy was the result of a wild encounter at a ball, in early February, during the French occupation of Mainz. The father was an eighteen-year-old French officer whom she had met only once. At a time when women of her standing were chastised for even being alone in a room with a man, Caroline's behaviour was regarded as scandalous.

The combination of being widowed with a young daughter, pregnant by a French soldier, imprisoned by the Prussians and accused of colluding with the enemy alarmed even the formidable Caroline. She had three, maybe four, months before the pregnancy became obvious. If discovered, her reputation would be destroyed and the authorities might remove her beloved Auguste from her care.

As her belly grew, she cinched her corset tighter and sent letters to friends and acquaintances with political connections. One old suitor had contacts at the Prussian court, and she also wrote to August Wilhelm Schlegel, a young writer and devoted admirer from her time in Göttingen. The Prussians, though, held firm. Caroline's dinners with General Custine and the French were public knowledge, and little Auguste enthusiastically chanting 'Vive la nation!' and singing the Marseillaise didn't help the situation. With every passing day, Caroline's despair grew. 'A long imprisonment will be life-threatening,' she wrote

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to the husband of her oldest friend, finally revealing the truth in a desperate plea for help, 'but don't tell anyone'.

Imprisoned in early April, she was still at Königstein in the middle of June, when unseasonably cold storms froze the grapes on the vines in the vineyards outside. In their damp cell, as mother and daughter struggled to keep warm, Auguste coped better than Caroline, who suffered from morning sickness and infected gums. Caroline felt the lack of exercise and fresh air, and her health declined steadily. She suffered from persistent headaches and a cough became chronic. She was scared. Even here, some twenty miles from the front, she could hear the thunder of French and Prussian cannon fire as Mainz was bombarded. Hundreds of new prisoners were brought to the fortress, where they were beaten by the Prussians, many dying from their injuries.

Caroline's greatest worry, though, remained her advancing pregnancy. She continued writing letters underlining how urgent her situation was becoming – 'how desperately I need to be saved soon' – only to find one friend after another turning away. Meanwhile her old admirer from Göttingen, August Wilhelm Schlegel, did his best to help, writing letters to anyone who might be able to assist. He never wavered – not when Caroline admitted the pregnancy, nor when his brother told him about Caroline's alleged affair with General Custine. If August Wilhelm couldn't get her out of prison soon, Caroline warned him, he would have to supply her with poison so that she could take her own life. Far better for Auguste to be orphaned than to live with a dishonoured mother.

After several months, Caroline was freed from prison in July 1793 with the help of her younger brother, who had pulled some

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strings with an old friend who was the mistress of the Prussian king. In November she secretly gave birth to a son. For the next two years, she zigzagged across Germany, followed by vicious rumours and treated like an outcast. Her life seemed over, but then August Wilhelm Schlegel came to her rescue. They married in 1796 and moved to Jena where Caroline became the heart and mind of a group of young men and women who hoped to change the world. She was a muse and critic who contributed to their literary works – and her home was the physical space where they met, thought, talked, laughed and wrote.

This extraordinary group of rebellious twenty- and thirty-somethings included the enigmatic poet Novalis, who played with death and darkness, the brusque philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who put the self at the centre of his work, and the brilliant Schlegel brothers, Friedrich and August Wilhelm, both writers and critics, one as impetuous and short-tempered as the other was calm. There was Dorothea Veit, a writer who scandalised Berlin's high society by her affair with the much younger Friedrich Schlegel. Also in Jena was Friedrich Schelling, a mercurial philosopher who examined the relationship between the individual and nature. There was Germany's most revolutionary playwright, Friedrich Schiller, as much a magnet for the younger generation as he was a divisive force.

At the periphery was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, one of history's most influential philosophers, and another pair of brothers – Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt, the former a gifted linguist and founder of the university of Berlin, and the latter an intrepid and visionary scientist-explorer. And at the centre of this galaxy of dazzling minds was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Germany's most celebrated poet. Older and more famous, Goethe became something of a stern and benevolent godfather to the group. Often acting as their mediator, he was inspired by their new and radical ideas, and they in turn

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worshipped him. Goethe was their god and they put him on a pedestal.

Each of these great intellects lived a life worth telling. More extraordinary than their individual stories, however, is the fact that they all came together at the same time in the same place. That's why I've called them the 'Jena Set'.

They were born into a world so different from ours that it's hard to imagine – a Europe ruled by monarchs who determined much of their subjects' lives. The French king's palace at Versailles, with its gilded halls of mirrors and glorious gardens, radiated absolute power across France, at a time when many of the nation's people lived in abject poverty. Just as the gardens and trees were corseted into clipped topiary, laid out in rays of straight avenues and forced into elaborate patterns, so too the French people were bound to their destiny by birth and the king. Nothing was allowed to be out of place – everything was bent and shaped according to the divine right. And while the French queen Marie Antoinette played shepherdess to her flock of perfumed sheep in the small chateau Petit Trianon, peasants and labourers everywhere were starving.

Further to the east, in Russia, Catherine the Great cast herself as an enlightened monarch and modernised the country, but she too ruled with an iron fist. Here, as well as in the eastern German territories, serfdom still prevailed. This ancient feudal system bound people to land and lords. Like slaves, they had to work for local landowners and were not allowed to leave. Dues, tithes and taxes were often so high it was not possible to survive on what remained.

Across Europe, philosophers were censored for their ideas, writers were banned from writing, professors lost their jobs for

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speaking out, and playwrights were imprisoned for their plays. Some rulers had the right to decide their subjects' heirs or profession while others could banish them, force them to work or refuse them permission to move. And though Friedrich the Great had prided himself on being an enlightened king, even in Prussia male aristocrats could only marry the daughter of a farmer or a craftsman by special dispensation. Some monarchs could even sell their subjects as mercenaries to foreign powers, others rented out whole regiments to subsidise their own expenditures. The world in which the members of the Jena Set grew up was one of despotism, inequality and control.

Then, in 1789, came the French Revolution – an event so pivotal and dramatic no one in Europe was unaffected. It was like an eruption or a detonation. When the French revolutionaries declared all men equal, it suggested the possibility of a new social order founded on the power of ideas and freedom. 'Things are becoming reality,' Novalis wrote in 1794, 'which, ten years ago, would have gone straight to the philosophical madhouse.'

The French Revolution proved that ideas were stronger than the might of kings and queens. 'We have to believe in the *power of words*,' the writer Friedrich Schlegel declared, wielding his pen like a sword. The group was excited about the revolution. Welcoming the ideas that spread from France, Caroline, who had witnessed the birth of the short-lived Mainz Republic, believed that 'writers ruled the world'. Schelling and Hegel had enthusiastically sung the Marseillaise while studying together in Tübingen, and the philosopher Fichte wrote a pamphlet in which he declared that the 'French Revolution seems to me important for all mankind'.

Fichte placed the self, the *Ich* as it is known in German, at the centre of his new philosophy. He imbued the self with the most thrilling of all ideas: free will. This was an idea lit by the fire of

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the French Revolution. The empowerment of the Ich was as much about the liberation of the individual as it was a rebellion against the despotism of the state. And this radically new concept of an unfettered self carried the potential for a different life. A person 'should be what he is', Fichte told his students in Jena, 'because he wants to be it and is right to want to be it'. They all believed, as Schelling said, in a 'revolution brought about by philosophy'.

For centuries philosophers and thinkers had argued that the world was controlled by a divine hand and ruled by God's absolute truths. While humans might come to understand these absolute truths, they could not make or shape them. The eighteenth century was an era of discovery in which natural laws, such as the physics of light refraction or the forces governing the motion of the moon and the stars, had been revealed. Mathematics, rational observation and controlled experiments had paved the way towards knowledge, yet humans remained cogs in a seemingly divinely ordained machine. They were certainly not free.

But humankind began to exert some control over nature. Inventions such as telescopes and microscopes had already uncovered such secrets as planetary movements and the nature of blood. New technologies such as steam engines pumped water out of mines, physicians inoculated against smallpox, and hot-air balloons lifted people to a place where no human had ever been. When Benjamin Franklin invented the lightning rod in the mid-eighteenth century, humanity had even begun to tame what had long been regarded as God's fury.

An ever-expanding network of roads laced the German states and principalities – and new detailed maps and road signs directed travellers as they ventured beyond their home towns. The tick-tock of new pendulum clocks became the beating heart of society. Minute by minute, hands moved with predictable and

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increasing accuracy across clockfaces in people's pockets and parlours, and on town halls and church towers. These new timepieces told everyone when to eat, work, pray and sleep. Their rhythm became a new chorus against which people raced. Life sped up, became faster, more predictable and more rational. According to Hegel, the motto of the Enlightenment was: 'Everything is useful.'

The downside of all this scientific ingenuity, productivity and utility, the Jena Set feared, was that humankind focussed too much on reason alone. Reality, they believed, had been stripped of poetry, spirituality and feeling. 'Nature has been reduced to a monotonous machine,' Novalis wrote, turning 'the eternally creative music of the universe into the monotonous clatter of a gigantic millwheel'. Whereas the British Enlightenment philosopher John Locke had insisted in the late seventeenth century that the human mind was a blank slate which over a lifetime filled with knowledge derived from sensory experience alone, the Jena Set declared that imagination had to be given its due, along with reason and rational thought. The friends began to look inwards.

Jena itself was small. A university town of only four and a half thousand inhabitants who lived in around eight hundred houses, it was part of the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar, a principality headed by Duke Carl August. Geographically, the duchy was located at the centre of the German territories and at the crossroads of many postal routes – with travellers and mail bags arriving from Bohemia, Saxony, Prussia, Westphalia, Frankfurt and elsewhere, bringing letters, books and newspapers filled with the latest political and philosophical writings.

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Like many old towns in Germany, Jena still had a medieval feel. At its centre was a large and open market square and just beyond, to the north, rose the huge Church of St Michael, with a tower that dominated the skyline. In the north-eastern corner of Jena, a block away from the church, was the Old Castle, once the seat of the duchy's rulers but then rarely used since the court had long since relocated to nearby Weimar, fifteen miles to the north-west. At the opposite end, in the south-western corner, was the university, Jena's centre of gravity. Housed in a former Dominican convent, it had a library of more than fifty thousand books along with a refectory, brewery and residences, although most students lodged and ate in town. Jena and its university was a transient place. People came and went, fell in and out of love, leaving behind a trail of scandals, children and broken hearts – a staggering quarter of all births in Jena were illegitimate, compared to just two per cent elsewhere in the German territories.

That Jena was dominated by its university was immediately apparent. Not only was there a thriving local economy of bookbinders, printers, tailors and taverns, but, with around eight hundred students in residence, more tea, coffee, beer and tobacco was consumed here than in other similarly sized small towns in Germany. Although the food served in Jena's taverns had a reputation for being unpalatable, the students insisted that their minds were fed with the finest fare. 'Here the torches of wisdom are burning at every hour of the day,' one student said.

Literature was everywhere. In addition to the university library, there was a lending library with more than one hundred German and international periodicals, as well as seven well-stocked bookshops. Walking through the cobbled streets on a warm summer evening, one would hear snatches of discussions on philosophy and poetry as well as the sound of violins and

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pianos. Then, late at night, when empty beer mugs covered the surfaces of rough wooden tables in the town's many taverns, students argued about art, philosophy and literature. After eight or nine bottles of beer, one Danish student recalled, the rowdy young men would stagger home through the streets, waking with sore heads in the early mornings to rush to the auditoriums, anatomy theatre and meeting rooms to learn from their young and radical professors. With no theatre, opera, music hall or art gallery, there were few other distractions, and students were practically forced to study for the lack of anything else to do.

Jena was a pleasant place. The town had expanded beyond the crumbling medieval walls, with more houses, gardens, nurseries and fields. To the north, also just outside the old walls, was the new botanical garden that Goethe had established and a meandering path, dubbed the 'Philosopher's Walk', for those who wanted to wander and think. Fields and vineyards crawled up the surrounding hills and rising above everything else was the Jenzig, a small mountain with a distinctive triangular shape that could be seen from almost anywhere in town.

To the south, paths snaked through a forested parkland that the locals called 'The Paradise'. Here, along the Saale River, trees fringed the gently sloping embankment and fishermen dropped their bait into the water. In spring the purple blossom of liverwort and yellow primroses carpeted the grass, and in the summer packed beer gardens did good business when revellers were serenaded by an orchestra of nightingales singing their crepuscular trills, whistles and purrs. In the winter, the town's students sometimes even glimpsed the great Goethe skating on the frozen river. How, though, did this small and decidedly rural location become the crucible of contemporary thought – a 'Kingdom of Philosophy', as Caroline called it?

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Why Jena? Indeed, why Germany? The answer is that at the end of the eighteenth century Germany was not yet a unified nation but instead a patchwork of more than fifteen hundred states, ranging from tiny principalities to large fiefdoms ruled by powerful and competing dynasties such as the Hohenzollern in Prussia and the Habsburgs in Austria. This colourful map was the so-called Holy Roman Empire, which, as the French thinker Voltaire once said, was neither holy nor Roman nor an empire. Almost thirty million people called this their home, but only a few ruled the many.

The Holy Roman Empire was divided by an intricate web of customs barriers, different currencies, measurements and laws, and connected by terrible roads and unreliable postal services, which made communication, unification and modernisation difficult. Power was not centralised but held by princes, dukes, bishops and their courts spread across this vast jigsaw puzzle. Unlike France, Germany wasn't ruled by one king from his distant throne, but this didn't mean that rulers were any less despotic or indeed more lenient.

One unintended advantage of such fragmentation, though, was that censorship was much more difficult to enforce than it was in large, centrally administered nations such as France or England. Every German state, however small, had its own set of rules. There were also more universities in Germany than anywhere else, with about fifty such institutions compared to just Cambridge and Oxford in England. Admittedly, some were tiny, but their profusion made it much easier for poorer families to send their sons to get an education.

The Germans were also fanatical readers. Literacy rates soared, with Prussia and Saxony leading the world by the end of the eighteenth century. 'In no country is the love of reading more widespread than in Germany,' one visitor noted. Craftsmen, maids and bakers were reading just as avidly as

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university professors and aristocrats. The appetite for novels was huge, and in the last three decades of the eighteenth century the number of authors doubled – by 1790 there were an astonishing six thousand published writers in Germany. With the German book trade enjoying a market that was four to five times larger than that in England, the era became known as the 'Age of Paper'.

Whereas France, Spain and England had powerful monarchies and a global reach through their colonies, and the United States had the great unexplored West, everything in Germany was small, splintered and inward-looking. The German imagination was fed by words, and German readers travelled to distant countries and new worlds along the black letters on printed pages. Most German towns had lending libraries and reading societies, and cheaply printed pamphlets and novels could be bought on every corner. Books were everywhere.

But, still, why Jena? The answer, Friedrich Schiller thought, was the town's university. Nowhere else, he said, could one enjoy such true freedom. At the time of its foundation in the sixteenth century, the university and the town of Jena had been part of the Electorate of Saxony. Over generations complicated inheritance rules had led to parts of the state being divided into ever smaller parcels between the male heirs. By the 1790s the university was controlled by no fewer than four different Saxon dukes, with Duke Carl August of Saxe-Weimar the nominal rector. In reality, no one was truly in charge.[fn1]

The result was that Jena's professors enjoyed far greater freedom than anywhere else in Germany. It was no surprise that here in Jena the visionary ideas of Immanuel Kant found a fertile ground. Jena's *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*,[fn2] for example, had been founded in 1785 with the express purpose of disseminating Kant's philosophy. As one British visitor remarked, Jena was the 'most fashionable seat of the new philosophy' and a town where

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readers discussed Kant's philosophy with the same passion as others did popular novels.

The philosopher-king argued that it was the human mind and experience that shaped our understanding of nature and the world, rather than any rules written and imposed by God. Instead of searching for absolute truths or objective knowledge, Kant turned his attention to subjectivity and the individuum. 'Dare to know', he had urged in 1784 in 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' In this famous essay Kant had also called for 'man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity'. Cultivate your own mind, he wrote, 'nothing is required for this enlightenment except freedom'. And Jena's students and professors set out to do exactly that.

The liberal atmosphere attracted progressive thinkers from the more repressive German states. 'The professors in Jena are almost entirely independent,' Schiller commented, with another scholar adding that 'here we have complete freedom to think, to teach and to write'. Of course, this didn't mean that Jena's intellectuals could do whatever they wanted – dissenting voices disliked what they regarded as a 'foolish obsession with liberty' – but they did enjoy more leeway. Thinkers, writers and poets who had been in trouble with the authorities in their home states came to Jena, drawn by the openness and relative freedoms of the university town. In consequence, the last decade of the eighteenth century saw more famous poets, writers, philosophers and thinkers living in Jena in proportion to its population than in any other town before or since.

Magnificent Rebels recounts one of these strangely magnified and exciting moments in history when a cluster of intellectuals, artists, poets and writers come together at a particular time and

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in a particular place to change the world. In this, the Jena Set resemble other influential groups: the North American Transcendentalists, for instance, comprising Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne and others, who lived in Concord, Massachusetts in the mid-nineteenth century; similarly, the Bloomsbury Set that coalesced in early twentieth-century London and included Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, Vanessa Bell and John Maynard Keynes; or the modernist circle of Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1920s Paris.

I believe that the Jena Set is, intellectually speaking, the most important of all these groups. In their lifetimes members became so famous that reports of their ideas and scandals filtered out through German newspapers to the wider world. Students came to Jena from all over Europe to study with their intellectual heroes – these 'Jacobins of poetry' – and then took their ideas home with them. 'We are on a mission,' Novalis wrote with unabashed confidence in 1798, because 'we are called to educate the world'. This group of writers, poets and thinkers changed the way we think about the world by placing the self at the centre of everything. In doing so, they liberated people's minds from the corset of doctrines, rules and expectations.

They became known as the 'Young Romantics'. In fact, they were the first to use the term 'romantic' in their writings, heralding Romanticism as an international movement by providing not only its name and purpose but also an intellectual framework. But what was Romanticism? Today, the term tends to suggest artists, poets and musicians who emphasise emotion and yearn to be at one with nature. Images of lonely figures in moon-lit forests or standing on craggy cliffs above seas of fog are as much associated with Romanticism as poems about forlorn lovers. Some say that the Romantics opposed reason and celebrated irrationalism; others argue that they rejected the

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idea of absolute knowledge. However, when we look at the beginnings of Romanticism we find something much more complex, contradictory and multi-layered.

That thinkers, historians and academics have failed to agree on one succinct definition of Romanticism would have pleased the Jena Set, who liked this indefinability of the concept. They themselves never attempted to provide rigid rules – in fact, it was the very absence of rules that they celebrated. They were not interested in an absolute truth but in the *process* of understanding. They tore down boundaries between disciplines, thereby transcending the divisions between the arts and the sciences, and pushed against the Establishment.

In 1809, long after he had left Jena, August Wilhelm Schlegel explained what the group had tried to do: they had woven together poetry and prose, nature and art, mind and sensuality, the earthly and the divine, life and death. They wanted to poeticise the increasingly mechanical clanking of the world. 'Poetry', said Hyperion in Friedrich Hölderlin's eponymous novel, 'is the beginning and the end of all scientific knowledge.' And at the centre of this Romantic project was the new emphasis on the Ich.

Today the English-speaking world celebrates the Jena Set's contemporaries, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, William Blake and the younger generation of Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats, as the great Romantic poets. They were all of that and more, but they were not alone and they were not the first. It was the Jena Set who first proclaimed these ideas, and over the ensuing decades the effects rippled out into the world. So enthralled was Coleridge by their ideas that he travelled to Germany in 1798, determined to learn German and to meet his heroes in Jena. 'Speak nothing but German. Live with Germans. Read in German. Think in German' had been his motto. Perpetually broke, however, Coleridge ran out of money before

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reaching Jena, but he did learn German. Equipped with his new language, he later translated Schiller's play *Wallenstein* and Goethe's *Faust*, read Fichte's philosophy and was deeply impressed by Friedrich Schelling's ideas on the mind and nature.

Coleridge's writings introduced the Jena Set to English readers but some thirty years later also to American thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose own philosophy would become infused with the ideas of 'this admirable Schelling', as he called him. Inspired, many of the American Transcendentalists then set out to learn German so that they too could read the Jena Set's works in the original and learn about 'this strange genial poetic comprehensive philosophy', as Emerson described it. Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, the Transcendentalists insisted, were the 'great thinkers of the world', and as important as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Leibniz.

The Jena Set tried to understand how we make sense of the world. Questions such as Who are we? What can we know? How can we know? and What is nature? were all questions that were approached through an investigation of the self. This self-reflection became the method through which to understand the world, and in turn this inward gaze became part of the Jena Set's lived reality.

As they investigated their selves, many of them broke conventions and freed their Ichs from unhappy marriages or dull careers. They were rebellious and felt invincible. Their lives became the playground of this new philosophy. And the story of their tiptoeing between the power of free will and the danger of becoming self-absorbed is significant on a universal level. The Ich, for better or worse, has remained centre stage ever since. The French revolutionaries changed the political landscape of

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Europe, but the Jena Set incited a revolution of the mind. The liberation of the Ich from the straitjacket of a divinely organised universe is the foundation of our thinking today. It gave us the most exciting of all powers: free will.

At the heart of *Magnificent Rebels* is the tension between the breath-taking possibilities of free will and the pitfalls of selfishness. The balancing act that the Jena Set negotiated between the tunnel vision of individual perspective and their belief in change for the greater good remains relevant today. Their ideas have seeped so deeply into our culture and behaviour that we've forgotten where they came from. We don't talk about Fichte's self-determined Ich any more because we have internalised it. We *are* this Ich. Put another way, today we take it for granted that we judge the world around us through the prism of our self: that is the only way that we can now make sense of our place in the world. We're still empowered by the Jena Set's daring leap into the self. But we have to decide how to use their legacy.

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PART I

Arrival

Now at last we've overcome all the obstacles in our path, and left them behind us too, on rails as smooth as the ones you've been on for so long. And alongside yours, too. I'm unspeakably happy ... and this valley is already a dear friend.

Caroline Schlegel to Luise
Gotter, 11 July 1796

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'A happy event'
Summer 1794: Goethe and Schiller

ON 20 JULY 1794 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe heaved himself into the saddle and rode from his house in the centre of Weimar to Jena, where he planned to attend a botanical meeting of the recently founded Natural History Society. It was a hot summer that would soon turn into a glorious autumn – long sun-baked months during which pears, apples, sweet melons and apricots ripened four weeks early and the vineyards produced one of the century's greatest vintages.

On the fifteen-mile ride from Weimar to Jena, Goethe passed farmers scything wheat in golden fields and great haystacks awaiting storage as winter fodder in the barns. After a couple of hours of riding through flat farmland, the countryside began to change. Little villages and hamlets snuggled into gentle dips, and then the forest closed in and the fields disappeared. The land became more hilly. Shell-bearing limestone cliffs rose to the left, exposing the geological memory of the region when this part of Germany had been a landlocked sea some 240 million years ago. Just before he reached Jena, Goethe crossed the so-called Snail, the steep hill named after the serpentine road that wound up to its top.

Then, finally, he saw Jena beneath him, nestled in a wide valley and held in the elbow of the Saale River with the jagged

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manufacturing, yet it maintained a bloated court of two thousand courtiers, officials and soldiers, all of whom had to be paid. The town of Weimar itself had a provincial feel. Most of the seven hundred and fifty houses had only one storey and such small windows that they felt gloomy and cramped inside. The streets were dirty, and there were only two businesses in the market square that sold goods which could be classed as luxury items – a perfumery and a textile shop. There wasn't even a stagecoach station.

Goethe became Carl August's confidant and his privy councillor – so trusted that it was rumoured that the duke didn't decide anything without the poet's advice. In time, Goethe took charge of the royal theatre and of rebuilding the burned-down castle in Weimar, in addition to several other well-paid administrative positions, including the control of the duchy's mines. He also worked closely with his colleague in the Weimar administration, minister Christian Gottlob Voigt. A diligent worker, Goethe was never idle – 'I never smoked tobacco, never played chess, in short, I never did anything that would have wasted my time.'

In 1794, Goethe was forty-four and no longer the dashing Apollo of his youth. He had put on so much weight that his once beautiful eyes had disappeared into the flesh of his cheeks and one visitor compared him to 'a woman in the last stages of pregnancy'. His nose was aquiline, and like so many contemporaries, his teeth were yellowed and crooked. He had a penchant for stripy and flowery long waistcoats, which he buttoned tightly over his round belly. Unlike the younger generation, who often wore fashionable loose-fitting trousers, Goethe preferred breeches. He wore boots with turned-down tops and always his tricorne. He kept his hair coiffed and powdered, with two carefully pomaded curls over his ears and a long, stiff ponytail. Knowing that everybody was watching him,

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he always made sure to be properly dressed and groomed when he went out. Ennobled by the duke in 1782, he was now Johann Wolfgang *von* Goethe and lived in a large house in Weimar, where he often tried and failed to work amid a constant stream of strangers knocking on his door to gawp at the famous poet. He loathed these disruptions almost as much as he hated noise, in particular the rattling of his neighbour's loom and the skittle alley in a nearby tavern.

Goethe might have turned his back on the *Sturm und Drang* era, but it seemed as if his creativity had done the same to him. For years he had failed to produce anything remarkable and his plays were no longer widely staged. He fussed over his writings for years. More than two decades earlier, he had begun to work on his drama *Faust* but only a few scenes had been published. He had rewritten and changed his tragedy *Iphigenia in Tauris* so many times – from prose to blank verse, back to prose, to its final version in classical iambic verse – that he called it his 'problem child'. And though he was the director of the Weimar theatre, he preferred to stage popular plays by his contemporaries rather than his own.

Botany was now Goethe's favourite subject, and the reason he often came to Jena. He was overseeing the construction of a new botanical garden and institute in Jena. Originally founded in 1548 as a medicinal garden, the university's existing botanical garden had been used to train physicians, but Duke Carl August had asked Goethe to extend and move it to a new location, just north of the old town walls. Goethe enjoyed every aspect of the project because it united his deep love of nature and beauty with scientific rigour. He was looking forward to the meeting of the Natural History Society.

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As always when he was in Jena, Goethe stayed in his rooms in the Old Castle, the largely unused former home of the duchy's rulers. Set around a large rectangular courtyard in the town's north-eastern corner, the castle was a jumble of buildings of different heights and ages. The oldest part was thirteenth century, and various other buildings had been added in the seventeenth. There was also a riding hall from the 1660s and a long narrow garden, parallel to the street, which had been planted on the site of the castle's former moat.

It was sweltering when Goethe arrived in Jena on 20 July 1794, but he set out on foot to walk to the meeting, which was being hosted by the director of the botanical garden in his apartment just beyond the town hall. Goethe always enjoyed a vigorous walk, no matter the weather. He needed fresh air and exercise to counterbalance the long hours at his desk. Unless the weather was atrocious, Goethe took his coat and tricorne and walked every day.

As he left the Old Castle and walked towards the town hall, Goethe could see the spire of the imposing Church of St Michael. The Gothic church was built of the same shell-bearing limestone that he had seen in the cliff faces while riding from Weimar. The streets were lined by a patchwork of houses of different heights and periods, some ornamented with stucco, others with exposed dark timber frames. Most were taller and more elegant than those in Weimar. Unlike the more rural feel of Weimar, where cattle were often driven along the town's muddy paths, Jena had the flair of a city despite its small size. A stream had been channelled into a narrow canal that ran along the cobbled alleys through town – twice a week the sluices were opened to flush and clean the streets. Jena was compact and square within its crumbling medieval town walls, and Goethe could cross it in less than ten minutes.

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It was a bustling town. During the day, the streets echoed to a cacophony of voices, rattling carts and the iron clank of horseshoes. There were more than twenty bakeries and forty-one butchers, as well as sixty-four shoemakers, sixteen wig makers and four hatters, among many other trades, such as bookbinders, tailors, bricklayers, jewellers, weavers and saddlers. At night, though, it could be pitch dark because there were no street lanterns, and all that could be heard was the sound of drunken students or the occasional splash of a chamber pot being emptied through a window.

Jena had plenty of taverns which Goethe knew from his various visits. He regularly joined the university's professors and some of the bright students at their weekly 'Professors' Club' at the Zur Rose. Next to the Church of St Michael was Der Burgkeller where the two billiard tables were perpetually enveloped in clouds of yellow tobacco smoke. Das Geleitshaus was known for its lack of light and Der Hecht for its freezing temperatures since the miserly landlord refused to stoke the oven. In Der Fürstenkeller men played boisterous card games, but in many taverns Goethe would also have been able to see groups of students sitting on benches at the wooden tables reading and discussing their lectures.

That summer all the students were talking about Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the new young professor who had arrived in Jena two months earlier, in May 1794. A philosopher, Fichte had declared the self to be the supreme ruler of the world. 'The source of all reality is the Ich,' he told his students, empowering them with the idea of self-determination and a free will. It had been Goethe who had suggested Fichte for a position at the university, and the two met regularly, but today Goethe didn't have time for a visit.

Goethe crossed the open market square. Men and women promenaded here, dressed in their best clothes and nodding at

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acquaintances. At its centre was a large fountain where maids filled buckets with water. Opposite, at the western side of the square, was the old town hall which dated back to the fourteenth century, its pointed arches and windows set into sturdy stone walls that had weathered into a soft sandy colour. Just beyond, in Rathausgasse, were the rooms where the meeting was being held. There Goethe greeted friends and acquaintances, then sat down to listen to the lecture. It was here that he would run into Jena's most famous inhabitant: Friedrich Schiller.

More than a decade previously, in the early 1780s, Friedrich Schiller had risen to prominence with *The Robbers*, a play featuring two aristocratic brothers torn between their opposing quests for power and freedom. Schiller was born in 1759, in the Duchy of Württemberg, and his early life had been overshadowed by the despotic Duke Karl Eugen – a ruler who spent flamboyantly on palaces, parties and the arts. Modelled on the French king's Versailles, the duke's court was lavish, formal and absolute. A hundred thousand gas lamps illuminated large greenhouses in magnificent gardens and the opera seated an audience of one thousand. Large hunting parties, spectacular fireworks, masked balls and other festivities devoured huge sums. The duke was famed for his extravagance, sexual exploits and volatile temper. He sold his subjects as mercenaries, imprisoned political writers and forced promising boys to enrol at the military academy. Schiller had been one such child.

Schiller's father, who was then an officer in the duchy's army, had begged Karl Eugen several times to spare his cerebral son, but to no avail. The duke demanded obedience and the father was overruled. Schiller was desperately unhappy in the harsh school environment where even reading Goethe's *Werther* was

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Schiller and his wife Charlotte had to live frugally. Though Charlotte came from an aristocratic family and Schiller was a famous playwright, there was little money. The yearly salary the thirty-four-year-old drew from the university was a meagre 200 thalers – roughly the annual income of a skilled craftsman such as a carpenter or joiner – and his writing wasn't particularly lucrative. Together, his salary, publishing honoraria, fees from his students and a small allowance from his wife's family only amounted to 800 thalers – enough to house and feed the family, but there was nothing extra for an elegant apartment, good furniture or clothes, or for other luxuries.

Goethe, by contrast, had already as a sixteen-year-old student received a one-thousand-thaler stipend from his father. By now Goethe drew a large salary from his many positions at the Weimar court, and he was the highest paid poet in the country. If he only had Goethe's money (or a rich wife), Schiller had told a friend in 1789, he would be able to produce as many plays, tragedies and poems as he wanted and 'the university in Jena could kiss my ass'.

The array of illnesses from which he suffered – fevers, infections, cramps, coughing, headaches and breathing problems – would prove steady companions until his death. Worried about catching a cold or other infection during the winter months, Schiller often stayed indoors for weeks on end. Each year, his mood sank during the miserable German winters, when long cold nights gave way to heavy iron skies during the day. 'Winter', he said, was 'such a gloomy visitor'. Over the past few years, Schiller had not felt optimistic. He was tall and thin – almost gaunt – with long reddish hair and pale blotchy skin. His face was dominated by a large nose and protruding cheekbones. He looked as ill as he felt. Schiller kept erratic hours, often writing at night fuelled by copious amounts of coffee and sleeping during the day. In the middle of the night, neighbours could see

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a lonely light in his study and Schiller pacing up and down. When the windows were open, they could even hear him reading aloud to himself what he had written.

Since moving to Jena, Schiller had worked on history and philosophy and moved away from plays and poetry. He hadn't written anything lyrical for almost six years. He had just begun to think about a new play, *Wallenstein* – set during the Thirty Years War that had convulsed Europe from 1618 to 1648 – but he was frightened of beginning. His imagination, he feared, had abandoned him. Philosophical enquiries into Immanuel Kant's philosophy had somehow eradicated his poetic sensibilities, and he felt that he was neither a poet nor a philosopher. 'Imagination disturbs my abstract thinking,' Schiller would tell Goethe later, 'and cold reason my poetry.'

That hot July day in 1794, as Goethe and Schiller walked out of the meeting of the Natural History Society, they began to talk about the lecture. Schiller remarked that botany, with all its observations and classifications, seemed a 'fragmentary way of looking at nature'. Goethe agreed, and explained that there was a different, more holistic way that saw nature as a living whole from which one could deduce the specifics. Strolling across the large open market square, they would have struck onlookers as an odd pair, the tall, thin and perpetually ill-looking Schiller towering eight inches over the rotund and rosy-cheeked Goethe. Once in a while they stopped, with Goethe gesticulating and drawing plants in the air. When they found themselves outside Schiller's house at the south-eastern corner of the market, the playwright invited Goethe in.

Goethe gladly accepted, and once inside took a quill and sketched a plant with a few strokes to elaborate how he

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understood botany. Behind variety was unity, Goethe explained, as each plant was the variation of a primordial form. He had observed that the leaf of a plant was this basic form from which all others developed – the petals, the calyx, roots and so on. 'Forwards and backwards the plant is always the leaf,' he had written in his diary after a visit to the botanic garden in Padua during his travels in Italy a few years previously. Goethe's thinking was wrong, Schiller objected after carefully listening. This was not an observation from experience, it was 'an idea'.

With this one comment, Schiller summarised the differences in their thinking and how they fundamentally disagreed on how to make sense of the world. Goethe described himself as a hard-headed realist, as someone who gained knowledge through the observation of nature. Schiller, by contrast, called himself an 'idealist'. Inspired by his intense study of Kant's philosophy, Schiller believed that our knowledge of so-called reality was perceived through the existing categories in our mind – such as time, space and causality. Goethe insisted that he had come to his conclusion by *looking* at plants – an empirical and scientific approach – while Schiller said that the 'idea' of a leaf had existed already in Goethe's mind. Goethe 'gets too much from the world of the senses', Schiller had told a friend, 'whereas I get things from the soul'.

The discussion was combative but also inspiring, and both agreed that neither had won the argument. The competition between realism and idealism, between object and subject, Goethe later said, was the foundation on which they sealed their connection and he admitted to not having had so much 'intellectual pleasure' for a long time. The day marked the beginning of the most fruitful literary friendship of the age.

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At the time both men were struggling with their writing, but over the next ten years each inspired the other to produce some of their best work. They collaborated closely, challenging and editing each other. That they had such opposing temperaments only seemed to foster their creativity. 'Each of us was able to give the other something he lacked, and get something in return,' Schiller recalled. Meeting Goethe, Schiller told a friend years later, had been 'the most beneficial event of my whole life'.

Schiller had given him 'a second youth', Goethe admitted. Earlier that year, Goethe had promised to 'force himself to fasten on to something', and that something turned out to be Schiller. He had lain fallow for too long. It felt like a new spring, Goethe said, with green shoots appearing everywhere. For the previous two years Goethe had felt miserable and unproductive. In spring 1792 France had declared war on Prussia and Austria, and the brutality of mass executions during Robespierre's Reign of Terror the following year had shocked even those who had welcomed the uprising of 1789. For many, the ideals of the French Revolution – liberty, equality and fraternity – had become drenched in blood. Goethe had become increasingly disillusioned. How was he supposed to concentrate on his work or enjoy life with weekly reports coming in of 'Robespierre's atrocities'?

Unlike many other poets and thinkers, Goethe had not embraced the French Revolution. He preferred evolution to revolution – his political beliefs mirrored his scientific ideas. There were two schools of thought about the creation of Earth at the time: the so-called Vulcanists argued that everything originated through catastrophic events such as volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. In the opposing camp were the Neptunists, who believed that water and sedimentation had been the main force – a slow geological process that gradually built up mountains, minerals and land. Goethe was a Neptunist, and this

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was also how he envisaged social change. He believed in slow reform, not in volatile uprisings.

Goethe had also experienced war himself. The previous summer, 1793, when Caroline Böhmer had been incarcerated in the fortress of Königstein, Goethe had accompanied Duke Carl August to Mainz, the city Johannes Gutenberg had called his home in the fifteenth century. The duke's army had helped the Prussians fight the French and wrest the city back into German control. As a confidant and a member of Carl August's privy council, this was not Goethe's first military campaign, but he detested this aspect of his duties. As German soldiers had bombarded the French occupiers, Goethe remained in his tent, trying to ignore the gunfire echoing outside, and instead concentrated on work, burying his field desk under papers. He had studied optics, edited a long poem and written letters to Jena to enquire about the progress of the botanical garden. If only he could redirect the money wasted on cannon fire into plants and greenhouses, Goethe lamented. At moments like these, he wrote from the battlefield, 'objects of thought' were more important than ever – he needed the distraction of ideas.

The bombardment was relentless, lasting throughout the night, and in the morning, as the sun rose behind Mainz's silhouette of broken church spires and collapsed roofs, Goethe saw the injured and dead scattered on the battlefield. The cathedral was in flames, together with its library of valuable manuscripts and documents, as were many churches, palaces, the theatre, and countless other buildings. As the city burned, Goethe felt his 'mind had come to a standstill'. Here he was, in one of the most beautiful areas of Germany, seeing nothing but 'destruction and misery'.

When he had returned home, Goethe turned inwards. As armies marched across Europe, he focused instead on his scientific studies. Science, for him, became like a 'plank in a

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erotic poems he had written after a two-year trip he had made to Italy in the late 1780s.

In the poems, the male protagonist describes how he falls in love in Rome.

> *But at the love-god's behest, by night my business is different;*
> *Half of my scholarship's lost, yet I have double the fun.*
> *And is not this education, to study the shape of her lovely*
> *Breasts, and down over her hip slide my adventuring hand?*
> *Marble comes doubly alive for me then, as I ponder, comparing.*

A few lines down Goethe continues:

> *Often I even compose my poetry in her embraces,*
> *Counting hexameter beats, tapping them out on her back*
> *Softly, with one hand's fingers. She sweetly breathes in her slumber,*
> *Warmly the glow of her breath pierces the depths of my heart.*

Roman Elegies illustrates Goethe's philosophical beliefs – an approach where he tried to bring together the senses and the mind, feeling and observation. As such the verses evocatively unite love and sexuality with scholarly studies of antiquity. In the years since his Italian travels, Goethe had kept adding more verses and collected them in a folder entitled 'Erotica'. Occasionally he had read a few to close friends, who had all advised him to keep them unpublished because they were too lascivious. Schiller loved the verses, writing home to his wife Charlotte – 'Lolo', as he called her – that it was 'admittedly risqué, and not especially proper, but among the best things he has done'.

The poems were also Goethe's declaration of love for his mistress Christiane Vulpius. Weimar's high society had been shocked when Goethe had taken the seamstress, who worked in a small manufactory that made artificial flowers, as his lover after his return from Italy. A little more than a year later, in

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December 1789, she had given birth to their son August. Unlike others who either set up their mistresses and illegitimate children in a separate household or paid them off while marrying someone more suitable, Goethe moved Christiane and their son in with him.

They lived happily together, while remaining unmarried. As scandalous as the situation seemed, Duke Carl August remained open-minded and even agreed to be August's godfather. The vicious gossip, though, never stopped. People wondered why the celebrated Goethe had fallen so low. Many would have agreed with the Weimar poet Christoph Martin Wieland, who described Christiane as 'a pig with a pearl necklace'.

During Schiller's visit, Christiane and four-year-old August remained mostly invisible at the back of the large house. Like others, Schiller couldn't understand Christiane's allure and had gossiped about the relationship, but for now he accepted Goethe's domestic arrangements. Goethe's crime was not so much the affair itself as living with a woman so clearly below his social standing. Had Christiane been a member of Weimar's high society, no one would have cared. Schiller himself was no stranger to romantic complexity. Now happily settled in a conventional marriage with his wife Charlotte, he had preceded it with a rather indelicate and simultaneous courtship of both her and her sister.

For more than a year Schiller had dithered over which of the two sisters he really loved – the quiet, guarded and almost coy Charlotte, or Caroline, her older sister, who was literary, lively and unhappily married. His letters were so flirtatious and ambiguous that Caroline finally begged him to make up his mind and end this rather strange *ménage à trois*. But even after his engagement to Charlotte, Schiller continued to write letters filled with longing for both sisters. Nonetheless, all this had been more acceptable than Goethe's open relationship with the

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uneducated Christiane because Charlotte Schiller – then Charlotte von Lengefeld – and her sister came from an aristocratic family closely connected to the Weimar court.

Goethe didn't care what people said, nor that his works meant nothing to Christiane. She loved the theatre, dancing and nice clothes and 'managed the household efficiently', he said, running his domestic life so smoothly that nothing distracted him. She grounded him, provided him with the food he liked, with love and sex – and most importantly, she let him work whenever he wanted. She was cheerful and practical. 'What you do is easy,' she told him one early summer when she had just inspected the vegetable patch, because 'once you do something, it lasts forever'; it was different for her, because the snails had just devoured everything she had sown and planted.

Goethe's mother was one of the few who saw how the down-to-earth Christiane made her son happy, and called her 'your dear bedfellow'. Frau Goethe was glad that her son was not trapped in a terrible marriage. That there was love can be seen in the way Goethe sketched Christiane tenderly as she slept, drawing her brown hair as it framed her round and plump face in thick waves. She wasn't beautiful as such but she was sensual and curvaceous. Christiane was his 'dear little one', 'dear angel' and 'dear child', and he was her 'darling sweetheart'.

Despite his love for Christiane, Goethe began to spend more and more time in Jena. There, removed from the formality of his duties at the Weimar court and the stream of visitors, he felt rejuvenated. Instead of having to dine with the duke, Goethe shared his meals with Schiller and his other friends. In Jena, he became carefree and so invigorated that he soon moved into one of the most productive phases of his life. He worked on plays,

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poetry and scientific writings, as well as picking up his half-finished novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, which he had abandoned many years previously. 'The wood gathered and put in the fireplace so long ago is beginning to burn at last,' Goethe told Schiller, who read, commented and edited every page. Published in eight parts, the novel describes the eponymous protagonist's journey to self-fulfilment as he escapes his destined path as a businessman to follow his dreams of being an actor. It was the first coming-of-age novel, or *Bildungsroman*, ever published.

Goethe's rooms at the Old Castle were just a short walk from Schiller's apartment on Jena's market square. He was productive here, he wrote to Christiane, 'because the quiet castle is very good for thinking and working'. He spent the early hours of the morning in his bed, propped up on pillows and wrapped in blankets to keep out the cold, dictating to his assistant. The only distraction was the constant annoying yap of a neighbourhood dog. At around four in the afternoon, Goethe walked the few blocks to Schiller's apartment. If his friend was still working in his study, Goethe waited patiently in the sitting room and read or sketched. Sometimes Schiller's wild young son Karl came running in and Goethe, who adored children, played with him.

When Schiller emerged from his study – his long hair uncombed, wearing old yellow slippers and sometimes still in his dressing gown because of his erratic sleeping patterns – they often talked deep into the night. The table in Schiller's parlour was laden with books, notes and manuscripts, but also with tea and wine. They read to each other, discussed and scribbled down notes; only once in a while Schiller would leave the room to get some medicine for his cramps and headaches. He couldn't sit still, instead pacing the room. Friends remarked how tense Schiller often was and 'how the mind tyrannised the body'.

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The Schiller household soon became Goethe's second home and though he missed Christiane and son August, he left Jena only with great reluctance. When the two friends didn't see each other, they wrote letters which shuttled between Jena and Weimar several times a week. With the postal service so unreliable, they often used a maid to deliver them. They critiqued and edited each other's work, sending suggestions for improvements and changes, ranging from sweeping comments to editorial advice as detailed as 'I would add another verse after verse 14.'

They challenged each other, gossiped about friends and foes, and discussed the literary world but also the weather and other local news. Some letters were just short notes containing brief pieces of information about forthcoming visits and practical matters; others were long treatises on poetry, philosophy, commentaries on books and detailed descriptions of literary progress (or the lack of it); and some contained orders for wallpaper or fresh fish. All were imbued with deep affection. In one, Goethe wrote of his 'vivid longing' to see Schiller and hoped for good weather during the cold months to ensure a 'quick ride to see you'.

The two men were different in many respects. Goethe loved being outside in nature, whether vigorously walking in summer or skating in winter. He rarely took a carriage to Jena but instead rode on horseback. He once rode the sixty miles from Weimar to Leipzig in just over eight hours. Schiller, though, rarely ventured out, and so it was usually Goethe who travelled.

Where Goethe was easy-going, intuitive and relaxed, Schiller seemed forever to overthink things. He tried to force his creative output by working to a gruelling schedule. His illnesses danced like an evil shadow around him, a constant reminder that his time on earth was limited. With so much to do, he pushed his frail body relentlessly, never allowing himself to rest.

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'I am a priest of truth'
Summer 1794: Fichte's Ich-philosophy

THE ROOM WAS packed. Students spilled out into the corridors and stood on ladders at the windows to listen to their new professor. Even the largest auditorium in Jena was too small to hold the crowd. The young men at the back climbed on benches and tables to catch a glimpse. Everybody jostled for a seat. The air was hot and stale.

Thirty-two-year-old Johann Gottlieb Fichte stood at the lectern in riding boots with spurs and his whip. More bull than racehorse, he was of average height but muscular, with a forceful presence that could be felt throughout the room. Long hair fell to broad shoulders and dark eyes darted over a large nose. He wore a purple coat with large buttons and spoke so loudly that he was perfectly audible even from the seats at the back.

Fichte was the 'Bonaparte of Philosophy', as one student described him. Everybody wanted to hear how he redefined the relationship between the self and the external world – between the 'Ich' and the 'non-Ich', as Fichte had termed it. There was something urgent and defiant about him. Philosophy was not just the domain of philosophy students, he insisted, but important for society at large. 'I am a priest of truth,' Fichte insisted. He wanted nothing less than to incite a revolution of the mind, and

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to the big-boned Fichte, Kant must have looked even thinner and more painfully stooped than he already was. There was nothing spectacular or magnificent about the appearance of the most celebrated philosopher of the Western world. He dressed plainly and his powdered hair was tied with a ribbon into a pigtail. His feeble voice was almost inaudible, and what he said didn't make much sense. Kant, Fichte thought, 'is beginning to lose his memory'. The philosopher seemed sleepy and had only skimmed through a few pages of the manuscript but to Fichte's surprise he liked it. Suddenly Fichte didn't care that meeting his hero had at first seemed disappointing. His doubts about the quality of his treatise evaporated when Kant advised him to publish – even suggesting his own publisher. 'Can it be true?' Fichte later wrote in his diary, 'but that's what Kant said.'

Encouraged, Fichte dispatched his manuscript and when it landed on the publisher's desk, his name was missing and its title – *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* – was uncannily similar to Kant's own three books. Both the omission and the similarity were deliberate. Just a few weeks later, though, Fichte was having second thoughts about this decision. He needn't have worried. The publisher saw the opportunity for financial gain and printed two cover pages, one with Fichte's name for local circulation in Königsberg, and another without it for the rest of Germany. Even the preface, dated 'Königsberg, December 1791', was deceptive – although Fichte had indeed written the book there, the city was of course deeply associated with Kant. It was a risky plan.

On 30 June 1792, three months after the publication of *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, Jena's *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, Germany's most important literary journal, published an announcement that changed Fichte's life. Immanuel Kant, the journal reported, had finally written his fourth *Critique.* To the intellectual community this was seismic news. Anyone who had

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