The Rural Enlightenment of Johann Heinrich Voss

It is easy to forget how much the Enlightenment was sustained, not by prominent intellectuals, but by relatively obscure figures in marginal locations. There were many country clergymen, like Jean Frédéric Oberlin in Alsace, who tried to support and enlighten their parishioners by preaching a liberal and moral Christianity, discouraging superstition, and promoting new and improved methods of farming. Johann Heinrich Voss spent a significant part of his life as a country schoolmaster, first at Otterndorf, a village among the marshes on the lower Elbe which could only be reached by boat, and then, since Otterndorf was also an unhealthy place subject to malarial infection known as ‘Marschfieber’, as rector of the school at Eutin in Holstein, in the extreme north of Germany. It was there that he wrote his famous pastoral poem *Luise*, which is best known nowadays as a partial model for Goethe’s *Hermann und Dorothea*, but is, as I have argued before and will argue again, a major literary achievement in its own right as well as a document of the Enlightenment.¹

Voss receives little space in present-day histories of the Enlightenment. In the massive recent book by Steffen Martus, for instance, he is mentioned only as a member of the Göttinger Hain.² But we get a very different picture if we turn to Heine’s *Die romantische Schule*, which, like his *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*, mounts a retrospective defence of the German Enlightenment in order to attack the politics of Romanticism. Heine says of Voss: ‘Dieser Mann ist in Frankreich gar nicht bekannt, und doch gibt es wenige, denen das deutsche Volk in Hinsicht seiner geistigen Ausbildung mehr verdankt als eben ihm. Er ist vielleicht nach Lessing der größte Bürger in der deutschen Literatur.’³ To place Voss alongside Lessing is a remarkable tribute. Another tribute was formulated, a few years earlier, by Goethe in conversation with Eckermann:

Ein Mann wie Voß wird übrigens sobald nicht wiederkommen. Es haben wenig Andere auf die höhere deutsche Kultur einen solchen Einfluß gehabt als er. Es war an ihm Alles gesund und derb, weshalb er auch zu den Griechen kein künstliches, sondern ein rein natürliches Verhältnis hatte, woraus denn für uns Anderen die herrlichsten Früchte erwachsen sind. Wer von seinem Werte durchdrungen ist, wie ich, weiß gar nicht, wie er sein Andenken würdig genug ehren soll.⁴

These two tributes give us several handles on Voss, and also several questions to be answered. Heine, writing in the early 1830s, was looking in the past and the present for sources of resistance to the political reaction that weighed on Metternich’s Germany. He sees in Voss a spokesman for the middle-classes, in implied contrast to the nobility, like, presumably, the Lessing of *Emilia Galotti*. Goethe places the emphasis on Voss’s relation to Greek literature, alluding to Voss’s extensive translations from Homer and many other Greek and also Latin authors. Voss, he

¹ Ritchie Robertson, *Mock-Epic Poetry from Pope to Heine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 208–10, 213–15.

² Steffen Martus, *Aufklärung. Das deutsche 18. Jahrhundert: Ein Epochenbild* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2015), pp. 719, 723, 738–39.

³ Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Klaus Briegleb, 6 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1968–76), 3, p. 382.

⁴ FA, 39, p. 630 (7 October 1827).

suggests, enormously strengthened the relation between Greek and German culture, helping the Germans to develop not just a bookish relationship to the Greeks but a vital one. In what follows I want to develop these two themes – Voss as *Bürger*, Voss as Hellenist – and show how they form part of Voss's advocacy of enlightenment.

Voss came from a humble background.⁵ His father had been a reasonably prosperous innkeeper at Penzlin in Mecklenburg, but was ruined by the economic fall-out from the Seven Years War and supported himself and his family by keeping an elementary school. Young Voss was encouraged by a schoolmaster who spotted his unusual talents and was enabled to study at the Latin school in Neubrandenburg, where he was supported by free meals (*Freitische*) in various houses, as the young Karl Philipp Moritz was according to *Anton Reiser*. The headmaster in Neubrandenburg was a man of the old school who disapproved of the study of Greek. Voss's Greek was therefore largely self-taught. This experience gave Voss a disrespect for authority, along with the over-confidence, disguising an inner insecurity, characteristic of the autodidact. He moved on to a bad experience as private tutor (*Hofmeister*) in a noble family. Many writers of the time – Hölderlin, Hamann, Lenz and others – suffered the humiliations that went with such a post. Voss found himself treated with contempt, classed among the servants and paid less than the cook. Like Moritz, he would suffer all his life from what Richard Sennett has memorably called 'the hidden injuries of class'.

Things looked up, however, after Voss had a poem published in the *Göttinger Musenalmanach*. Its editor, Heinrich Christian Boie, helped Voss to study at Göttingen. There he was a founder member of the Göttinger Hain, along with Boie, the Stolberg brothers, Leisewitz, Hölty, and other once well-known names. He initially studied theology, then switched to classical philology, where he was unwise enough to challenge the authority of the eminent Christian Gottlob Heyne. He left Göttingen without completing his studies, married Boie's sister Ernestine, and became a schoolteacher. Even at Ottersdorf, despite his heavy teaching load, he published the first of his many translations, Homer's *Odyssey* (1781). In 1802 he left Eutin with a good pension and lived for three years in Jena, where he used to discuss classical metrics with Goethe and others. From 1805 onwards he held a professorship of classical languages in Heidelberg, though without teaching duties.

From the 1770s onwards Voss published poems. These included idylls. His idylls, however, are very different from the pastoral poetry of Virgil or Salomon Gessner. They follow rather the tradition of Theocritus, who set his idylls not in an imaginary Arcadia but in recognizable locations and used realistic language. Some of Voss's idylls are actually in dialect, such as 'De Geldhapers' (1777). Three of Voss's idylls are particularly significant because they treat the subject of serfdom.⁶

Serfdom or *Leibeigenschaft*, in various forms, was still widespread throughout the eighteenth century.⁷ In France there were about a million serfs, called *mainmortables*, who held their land from their lord and could not sell any of it without obtaining the lord's permission and paying a fee. Even nominally free farmers had many unwelcome obligations, such as providing labour for the *corvée*. In Northern

⁵ For his life, see Adrian Hummel, 'Bürger Voß. Leben, Werk und Wirkungsgeschichte eines schwierigen Autors', in Elmar Mittler and Inka Tappenbeck (eds.), *Johann Heinrich Voß: Idylle, Polemik und Wohllaut* (Göttingen: Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, 2001), pp. 137–67.

⁶ For the literary and historical context of Voss's critical idylls, see Eda Sagarra, 'Literature of Peasant Life in Eighteenth-Century Germany', *MLR*, 78 (1983), 79–90.

⁷ Jerome Blum, *The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 29–79.

and Eastern Europe, servitude was much more onerous. Peasants were required to cultivate their lord's lands as well as their own. This compulsory labour (called *Fron* or *Robot*) not only doubled their work but took precedence over their own needs: thus the lord's harvest had to be brought in before the peasant's, even if the latter was thereby exposed to unsuitable weather. In Denmark, two-thirds of tenant farmers in the islands and between 55 and 60 per cent in Jutland were obliged to work for their lords on at least 200 days a year, and from 1733 onwards all male peasants were subject to *stavnsbåndet* which forbade them to leave their place of birth.⁸ Serfdom was abolished in Denmark in 1788, and in neighbouring Holstein only in 1805. Voss's own grandfather had been a serf in Mecklenburg, but set free by his lord.

The first of Voss's socially critical idylls, 'Die Leibeigenen' (originally published in 1775 as 'Die Pferdeknechte'), is a dialogue between two serfs who are badly treated by their lord. The first speaker, Michael, has laboriously saved up money in order to buy his freedom and be able to marry, but his lord has charged him with all sorts of petty offences punished by fines. Thanks to this chicanery, although Michael can marry, his liberation is postponed indefinitely. Moreover, the lord has sold Michael's younger brother as a soldier to the Prussian army. In his desperation, Michael thinks of putting the 'red cock' on the squire's roof, i.e. burning down his house, but is dissuaded by his friend Hans, who points out that revenge is reserved for God. Hans however agrees entirely about the squire's oppressions, which include the abuse of young girls. They are mitigated only by the efforts of the vicar and the verger, 'Welche, gehaßt vom Junker, Vernunft uns lehren und Rechtthun'.⁹ Hans advises Michael to take his complaint to the court at Schwerin. Peasants did in fact seek legal redress against unfair exactions by their lords, and were sometimes successful, especially when they could prove that their lord's demands conflicted with long-established custom.¹⁰ The poem implicitly warns landowners against the possible consequences of oppression. Its companion piece, 'Die Freigelassenen' (also published in 1775, initially as 'Der Ährenkranz'), is a positive idyll, showing the happiness of a young couple, Henning and Sabine, after the abolition of serfdom. Finally, written much later, we have 'Die Erleichterten' (1800), in which an elderly couple resolve to set their serfs free the next day. The serfs are contented enough, but human dignity also requires freedom:

Freiheit, zwar mit Vernunft, ist göttliches Recht und beseligt.
Fesselung, selbst an das Brod, macht Sklavische, mehr an den Erdkloß,
Der nicht Brod, kaum Futter bei Pferdarbeiten gewähret.
Frei muß werden, sobald an Vernunft er gelangte, der Mitmensch!
Längst auch hab' ich das Werk mit bedachtsamem Fleiße gefördert,
Daß reif würd' und dem Volk nicht unwohlthätig die Wohlthat.¹¹

⁸ Peter M. Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment: Knowledge, Technology, and Nature, 1750–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 148.

⁹ Johann Heinrich Voss, *Poetische Werke*, 3 vols. in one (Berlin: Hempel, n.d. [1879]), 2, p. 15. This is the later revised text. The original published texts of *Luise* and of a selection of Voss's poems can be found in Voss, *Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. by Adrian Hummel (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1996).

¹⁰ See Axel Lubinski, 'Johann Heinrich Voß und "Die Leibeigenen" – Perspektiven auf die ländliche Gesellschaft Mecklenburgs in der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts', in *Johann Heinrich Voß. Kulturräume in Dichtung und Wirkung*, ed. by Andrea Rudolph (Dettelbach: Röhl, 1999), pp. 161–91 (p. 166).

¹¹ Voss, *Poetische Werke*, 2, p. 23.

Voss is also capable of biting satire on bad landowners. In ‘Junker Kord’ (1794) he gives a pungent portrait of a booby squire or *Krautjunker*. The poem follows Kord from his birth, which is described as ominous for all the game on his estate. Even in the cradle the baby responds with pleasure to the sound of the hunting-horn and the yelping of the hounds. Later his father shows him an array of hunting trophies, as a model to emulate, and warns him against study:

Auch weiß der Mensch, ein Wust von Wissenschaften ziere
Nur Bürgervolk zur Noth, doch schänd’ er Kavaliers.¹²

Young Kord becomes expert at drinking, smoking, cards and skittles. He is active among the local girls, and his favourite, Lenchen, is married off to a compliant and ambitious young clergyman. He hunts obsessively, and any peasant who complains will be punished by having his cornfield trampled down. On his father’s death, Kord, still in his twenties, entertains the local nobility lavishly, and looks with complacency at the poor thatched cottages surrounding his magnificent mansion. When not hunting, he amuses himself with such sports as fox-tossing (*Fuchsprallen*). This, grotesque as it may seem, was a popular amusement among the eighteenth-century German aristocracy: a fox was tossed in a blanket until it died, usually in the palace courtyard with the prince, ladies, and gentlemen looking on.¹³ Kord’s compliant clergyman supports him in oppressing his serfs, leaving them as ignorant as possible, and trading in corn and horses (with the dishonesty implied by ‘Schacher’):

Der Baur und Bürger wird Kanalj’ und Pack betitelt,
Und seinem Anwachs früh die Menschheit ausgeknittelt!
“Schulmeister”, spricht er, “macht die Buben nicht zu klug!
Ein wenig Christentum und Lesen ist genug!”
Beim Pfeifchen schwazt mit ihm von Korn- und Pferdeschacher
Sein Pfäfflein, und beseufzt der neuen Büchermacher
Gottlosigkeit. Verdammt zum Galgen und zum Rad
Wird dann durch beider Spruch Freigeist und Demokrat!¹⁴

Devastating portraits of the booby squire occur in other works of the time. In the novel by Voss’s Göttingen friend Johann Michael Miller, *Sieghart: Eine Klostergeschichte* (1776), we have Veit von Kronhelm, a country squire, recalls with pleasure his military service and especially attacks on convents. He likes only hunting and drinking. When he sees a book, he throws it out of the window onto a dunghill. In English literature we might recall the brutality of Fielding’s Squire Western and the stupidity of Goldsmith’s Tony Lumpkin.

There is, however, nothing revolutionary about Voss’s social critique. In ‘Die Leibeigenen’ Hans dissuades his friend from violence and urges him to seek recourse by legal means. When revising the poem, Voss inserted the lines (quoted above) about how the good influence of the clergyman and the verger helps to counteract the power of the squire. And in ‘Die Erleichterten’, as Axel Lubinski has pointed out, the peasants exercise no agency, but owe their freedom entirely to the will of their lord

¹² Voss, *Ausgewählte Werke*, p. 138. ‘Junker Kord’ is not included in the *Poetische Werke*.

¹³ Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648-1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 403.

¹⁴ Voss, *Ausgewählte Werke*, p. 141.

and his wife, so that the feudal hierarchy remains intact although the legal relationships are changed (Lubinski, p. 181).¹⁵

We find a positive picture of country life as it should and could be in *Luise*, first published in 1783-84 (the last canto in Wieland's *Teutscher Merkur*), and reissued in book form in 1795. The poem is set in a fictional village called Grünau, near Eutin. It has a small cast of characters: the lively Luise; her clergyman father and his wife; her fiancé Walter; her friend Amalia, daughter of the kindly local Countess; the servants Hans, Susanna and Hedwig, and the local musicians, with a brief Hitchcockian appearance by Voss himself. The first of its three parts recounts a picnic; the second, a visit from Walter to his fiancée; and in the third, the two are married by Luise's father – not in the Countess's mansion, as originally planned, but, impulsively, in their own parlour. This signals middle-class independence of even the most benign aristocracy.

Grünau is in the happy position of having an enlightened landowner – the Countess, whose principles are shared by her son, the Baron. The serfs have been freed, the estate pays for a teacher, who also instructs the peasants in improved methods of tree-planting, as well as music:

Ihm antwortete drauf der edle, bescheidene Walter:
Ja, wer Heilsames will mit Festigkeit, ohne zu stürmen,
Der führt aus; gern bietet die Hand gutartige Herrschaft.
Denn je klüger ein Volk, je thätiger Fleiß und Gehorsam.
Auch mein junger Baron, gleich unserer gnädigen Gräfin,
Will klaräugigen Muth um sich her, nicht dumpfe Verstocktheit,
Wie sie vergälleter Sinn mißhandelter Fröhnlinge brütet.
Schon ist dem Dorfanwachse bestellt ein verständiger Lehrer,
Welcher zugleich Baumzucht und, Väterchen, edle Musik lehrt.
Künftig schallen auch dort vielstimmige Chör' um die Orgel,
Bald dem Altar antwortend und bald der Gemeind' und der Predigt.¹⁶

In passages like this – added to the poem some years after its first publication and therefore long after the French Revolution – the ideal is not revolution but gradual, determined reform, which will produce an educated, intelligent, and self-respecting population. The centre of the community is the church, but it is made attractive by music, which enables everyone to join in, instead of just listening passively to sermons. The pastor of Grünau also keeps up with events by attentively reading the newspapers. His wife reports:

Klas hat die Zeitung
Eben gebracht. Sie erzählt von Amerika und von Gibraltar,
Auch von dem Parlament und der Reise des heiligen Vaters.
Eiferig liest der Papa und vergaß, sich die Pfeife zu stopfen. (*Luise*, p. 53)

¹⁵ Contrast the unconvincing claims for Voss's radicalism made by the poet's great-great-grandson, E. Theodor Voss, in 'Idylle und Revolution. Über die Rolle einer verkannten Gattung im Werk von Johann Heinrich Voß', in *Freiheit durch Aufklärung: Johann Heinrich Voß (1751–1826)*, ed. by Wolfgang Beutin and Klaus Lüders (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1995), pp. 35–54, and by other contributors to the same volume.

¹⁶ Voss, *Poetische Werke*, 1, p. 50. Future references in text as *Luise* and page number.

This enables us to date the action to the spring of 1782, when Pius VI travelled to Vienna to remonstrate with Joseph II about his Church reforms – the first visit a Pope had paid to German territory since the Council of Constance in 1415. Gibraltar is in the news because between 1779 and early 1783 it was under siege by Spain. But the key news item is the progress of the American war of independence, which the pastor eagerly follows. Washington and Franklin are mentioned several times in the poem and placed on a par with the Homeric heroes.

The Homeric parallel gives us a first clue as to why Voss chose to write his pastoral in Homeric hexameters and with formulaic epithets in the Homeric style. Voss shared in the eighteenth-century exaltation of Homer as the primitive poet of natural feelings. The Renaissance had imagined Homer as a learned writer whose poems contained hidden wisdom and all the arts and sciences. Pope translated Homer into the elevated diction of neoclassicism. Thomas Blackwell, in *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735), dismissed such approaches as wholly wrong-headed. Homer was the poet of nature. If his characters often spoke or behaved in undignified ways, that was in accordance with human nature. Voss translated Blackwell's book into German. He not only made his characters speak in hexameters, but showed them performing everyday actions as Homer's heroes had done. As part of the picnic in Canto I, for example, the pastor's family make coffee in the open air:

Aber der Hausknecht

Fing die sprühenden Funken des Stahls im schwammigen Zunder,
 Faßt' ihn in trockenes Laub und schwang mit Gewalt, bis dem dickern
 Qualm aufleuchtendes Feuer entloderte; häufte geschickt dann
 Reiser und Kien, daß die Flamme das Holz durch, fröhlich des Harzes,
 Knatterte, finstern Rauch seitwärts aufdampfend zum Himmel.
 Jetzt, wo der Wind in die Gluth einsausede, stellt' er den Dreifuß,
 Und den verschlossenen Kessel darauf mit der Quelle des Waldes.
 Wehend umleckt' ihn die Loh', und es braust' aussiedend der Kessel.
 Aber das Mütterchen goß in die bräunliche Kanne den Kaffee
 Aus der papiernen Tüte, gemengt mit klärendem Hirschhorn,
 Strömte die Quelle darauf, und stellt' auf Kohlen die Kanne,
 Hingekniet, bis steigend die farbige Blase geplatzt war. (*Luise*, p. 13)

Neoclassical commentators had taken particular exception to the passage in Book IX of the *Iliad* where Achilles roasts pork and goat's-meat for Odysseus, salts it, and serves it with baskets of bread and cups of wine. Alessandro Tassoni, who, early in the seventeenth century, criticized Homer in an essay entitled 'That Homer is not such a great poet as the Greeks would have us believe', was particularly scandalized by this vulgarity.¹⁷ Voss, however, applies even more detailed realism to the brewing of coffee. What is good enough for Achilles is good enough for the pastor's family in Grünau. They are associated both with the plainness of Homer's heroes and with the dignity of Homer's language. So when Goethe said that Voss had a natural relation to Homer, he meant presumably that Voss had insight into the simple manners and customs and the natural emotions of Homer's characters. He did not see them through a haze of learned commentaries. And thus he gave the Germans access to what really mattered in Homer.

¹⁷ Alessandro Tassoni, 'Se Omero nell'*Iliade* sia quel sovrano poeta, che i greci si danno a credere', *Pensieri diversi* (1620) in *La secchia rapita: Rime e prose scelte*, ed. by Giovanni Ziccardi (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1952), p. 458.

Goethe of course benefited from Voss' example when evoking the lives of the townspeople in *Hermann und Dorothea*.¹⁸ His Homeric style treats them humorously but also enhances their dignity. And the concrete detail, such as the Rhine wine served in goblets, affirms their enjoyment of the material world. That enjoyment is even more strongly present in Voss, who presents the domestic world in immense specific detail. Defying the neoclassical precept that 'Poetry does not number the streaks of the tulip', he tells us, for example, about the four different kinds of pear served at dinner.

Another aspect of Voss's achievement, according to Heine, was to strengthen the morale of German 'Bürger'. The Homeric style underlines the determination of his middle-class characters, as we have seen, to maintain their self-respect with regard to the aristocracy. The famous opening of *Luise* announces an ideal of middle-class life which may raise some eyebrows:

Draußen in luftiger Kühle der zwei breitlaubigen Linden,
Die, von gelblicher Blüthe verschönt, voll Bienengesurres,
Schattend der Mittagsstub', hinsäuselten über das Moosdach,
Hielt der redliche Pfarrer von Grünau heiter ein Gastmahl,
Seiner Luise zur Lust, hausväterlich prangend im Schlafrock. (*Luise*, p. 1)

Many people might be repelled by the phrase 'hausväterlich prangend im Schlafrock'. The 'Schlafrock' might seem to imply someone sleepy and housebound. It accretes considerable symbolic meaning in the course of the poem. On his wedding day, Walter receives from his mother-in-law 'den stattlichen Bräutigamsschlafrock', rather as though the dressing-gown were the badge of adulthood and sexual maturity (*Luise*, p. 98). This motif has especially created the impression that *Luise* celebrates the petty self-satisfaction of the German 'Philister'. But the characters in *Luise* are the reverse of 'Philister'. The pastor not only keeps in touch with the wider world by reading the papers and supporting the American war of independence, but he also avoids the narrowness of rural life by reading the classics. When he feels depressed by the selfishness so prominent in modern life, he reads Homer, Plato and Pindar, and appreciates their 'Sinn für gleiches Gesetz, Freiheit und großes Gemeinwohl' (*Luise*, p. 49).

We need also to understand the resonances of the word 'hausväterlich'. To us it may suggest an unacceptable domestic tyranny. But the 'Hausvater' was imagined as somebody who defended his family against the outside world, especially against aristocratic oppression. Thus the music-teacher Miller defends his daughter's honour against the President in *Kabale und Liebe*, proving much more resolute than the wretched Odoardo in *Emilia Galotti*. Within the family, the old notion of the father's absolute authority had been revised in Diderot's *Le Père de famille* (1758), a play which, though little read today, is very important in the history of sensibility. Paternal authority is advocated by the semi-comic figure of the Commander, whereas his brother, the actual father in the play, knows how to combine authority with sensibility and, once various misunderstandings have been cleared up, permits his children to marry the partners they want. Diderot's play was translated into German by Lessing. A German response, almost contemporary with *Luise*, is Otto von Gemmingen's *Der*

¹⁸ See Volker Riedel, 'Goethe und Voß. Zum Antikeverständnis zweier deutscher Schriftsteller um 1800', in Rudolph, *Johann Heinrich Voß*, ed. Rudolph, pp. 19–46; Friedrich Sengle, 'Luise von Voß und Goethes *Hermann und Dorothea*. Zur Funktion des Homerisierens', in his *Neues zu Goethe: Essays und Vorträge* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1989), pp. 49–68.

deutsche Hausvater, where the father sorts out a whole string of family crises – his daughter's marriage is on the rocks, one of his sons is in danger of being dismissed from the army for debt, his other son is involved with two diversely unsuitable women. Voss's pastor is a similar kindly 'Hausvater'. He is equally supportive of Luise and Walter.

The poem shows a remarkable sexual frankness. After the wedding, we hear much about the 'Brautbett' that is being prepared, and about the fact that by the next morning Luise will no longer be a maiden but a woman. At the end of the poem, delighted to be married sooner than they expected, the couple rush upstairs to bed, with the entire company laughing and cheering them on. This is very different from puritanism, but also different from aristocratic libertinism. It is a frank affirmation of sexual enjoyment within marriage.

In his tribute to Voss, Heine singles out for special mention the text *Wie ward Fritz Stolberg ein Unfreier?* (1819). Some thirty thousand words in length, this was originally published in a journal edited by the Lutheran theologian Heinrich Gottlob Eberhard Paulus, an associate of Voss in Heidelberg. Voss had been a friend of Stolberg's ever since their membership of the Göttinger Hain. Stolberg had given Voss a generous gift of money to help him get married, and had later used his influence to enable Voss to escape from marshy Otterndorf to become headmaster in Eutin. These two favours go unmentioned in Voss's tract. Later their friendship had cooled. Political and religious differences became irreconcilable once Stolberg had formally converted to Catholicism in 1800. In 1819 Stolberg's publication of a conservative article, 'Über den Zeitgeist', prompted Voss to publish thoughts on which he had clearly been brooding for many years.¹⁹

In his polemic, Voss looks back over Stolberg's life, perceiving with hindsight the signs prefiguring his conversion. Religion and politics were intertwined. Although Stolberg was initially enthusiastic about the storming of the Bastille, his ardour cooled, according to Voss, when the National Assembly abolished the privileges of the French nobility. His eventual attraction to Catholicism was strengthened by his friendship with various prominent religious figures. In 1775 the Stolberg brothers spent some time with Johann Caspar Lavater, on whom Friedrich published a eulogy in the *Deutsches Museum* in 1776. More fateful, however, in Voss's opinion, was Stolberg's intimacy with Princess Gallitzin in Münster and her Catholic circle. Voss ironically calls her his 'Diotima', after the priestess who instructed Socrates in the art of love.²⁰

Stolberg's conversion and Voss's sense of betrayal need to be seen against the background of the time. The late eighteenth century saw in Germany a reaction against the Enlightenment, fostered by the discovery of the Illuminati conspiracy in 1785. King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia, who ascended the throne in 1786 and died in 1797, was heavily influenced by his ultra-conservative advisers Johann Rudolf von Bischoffwerder and Johann Christian Wöllner. The French Revolution intensified the search for conspirators and the fear of Illuminati, 'Demokraten' and Jacobins. For somebody with Voss's outlook, it was an uncomfortable time. But for an aristocrat like Stolberg it was uncomfortable in a different way. Old certainties were being

¹⁹ On Stolberg's conversion and the subsequent controversy, see Jutta Osinski, *Katholizismus und deutsche Literatur im 19. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1993), pp. 57–60; Eleoma Joshua, *Friedrich Leopold Graf zu Stolberg and the German Romantics* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 142–51.

²⁰ Voss, *Wie ward Fritz Stolberg ein Unfreier?* (reprint, Heidelberg: Winter, 1984), p. 30.

overthrown. Hence it was understandable that he, like many others, should look for security in the Catholic Church.

Voss's liberal Christianity was also opposed to Catholicism. He praises such liberal theologians as Johann Joachim Spalding, Johann Friedrich Wilhelm Jerusalem and Wilhelm Abraham Teller.²¹ The pastor in *Luise* is liberal and tolerant. For him, as for Lessing, religion is really morality:

O Himmelswonne! wir freun uns
Alle, die Gutes gethan nach Kraft und redlicher Einsicht,
Und die zu höherer Kraft vorleuchteten; freun uns mit Petrus,
Moses, Konfuz und Homer, dem liebenden, und Zoroaster,
Und, der für Wahrheit starb, mit Sokrates, auch mit dem edeln
Mendelssohn! Der hätte den Göttlichen nimmer gekreuzigt! (*Luise*, p. 16)

In denouncing Stolberg's conversion, Voss is not expressing a religious bigotry, which would be very uncharacteristic of him. His animus is political more than theological. Conversion or reconversion to Catholicism was a prominent trend of the time. Friedrich Schlegel and his wife Dorothea, the daughter of Moses Mendelssohn, had made a high-profile conversion to Catholicism in 1808. Equally notorious was the transformation undergone by Zacharias Werner, a one-time friend and lodger of Goethe; he not only became a Catholic in 1811, under the influence of the Viennese *éminence grise* Clemens Maria Hofbauer, but was ordained a priest three years later. Having attained theatrical success with his play *Martin Luther oder die Weihe der Kraft* (1806), he recanted by publishing *Die Weihe der Unkraft* (1813).

Conversion now meant ostentatiously turning one's back on the Enlightenment and its liberal tolerance. Many people shared Voss's view that it meant abandoning freedom of thought, becoming 'ein Unfreier'. It meant the belief – which Voss singles out for particular disapproval – that the only route to salvation lay through the Catholic Church. It also meant affirming the aristocracy and the conservative, hierarchical society which Voss hated. Writing in 1819 in Heidelberg, he was surrounded by the Romantic medievalism which he detested. Not only Protestants but even liberal Catholics were now on the defensive against a reactionary counter-attack, signalled by the Pope's restoration of the Jesuits a few years earlier in 1814. Hence what may seem the over-the-top rhetoric of Voss's polemic:

Das römische Pfaffenthum verbindet sich mit dem Ritterthum, beide mit feilen Schriftstellern, um die Roheit des Mittelalters zu erneun. [...] Römlinge in allerlei Form schlängeln umher, zischend und Gift spritzend: ein Graun, nicht uns Evangelischen allein, sondern auch unseren katholischen, nicht mehr unduldsam verkezernden [sic], Glaubensbrüdern.²²

Under these circumstances, it took some courage for Voss to write and publish his polemic. Eccentric, verbose, obsessive and one-sided, it nevertheless takes a stand for intellectual freedom at a time and in a place where the author felt beleaguered. The last word may be left to Goethe, who distanced himself from their quarrel in an untitled poem that runs:

²¹ On them and their liberal views, see Karl Aner's classic study, *Die Theologie der Lessingzeit* (Halle a.d. Saale: Niemeyer, 1929).

²² Voss, *Wie ward Fritz Stolberg ein Unfreier?*, p. 3.

Voß contra Stolberg! ein Prozeß
Von ganz besonderm Wesen,
Ganz eigner Art; mir ist indes,
Das hätt' ich schon gelesen.

Mir wird unfrei, mir wird unfroh,
Wie zwischen Glut und Welle,
Als läs' ich ein Capitolo
In Dante's grauser Hölle.²³

²³ FA, 2, pp. 767–68.