

Jugendstil and Racism: An Unexpected Alliance

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Résumé de l'article

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Jugendstil and Racism: An Unexpected Alliance

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Résumé

Associer dans un même souffle le *Jugendstil* au racisme semble un peu surprenant. À première vue, les lignes sinueuses et les motifs floraux géométrisants donnent une impression de grande liberté et de bonheur. Affirmer que cette période "digne" était traversée par les courants politiques racistes et anti-sémites "indignes" reste fort désagréable, mais pourtant juste. Le racisme et les germes de l'idéologie fasciste—définie largement comme un nationalisme exacerbé et un anti-libéralisme dévoué à la cause d'un dictateur—apparaissent clairement dans le mouvement *Jugendstil* allemand. Dans cet article, nous analyserons un texte populaire des

années 1890 de même que l'art et la vie de Fidus en essayant de montrer les rapports qui existent entre cette "fin de siècle" germanique et le racisme du Troisième Reich. Pour affirmer la place cruciale de la "fin de siècle" dans la formation des courants artistiques qui la précèdent comme dans ceux qui lui succèdent, nous tenterons d'établir des liens visuels et idéologiques entre le *Jugendstil* et les Romantiques allemands, Runge et Friedrich, et nous conclurons en nous interrogeant sur des agencements d'images du *Jugendstil* et des débuts expressionnistes du Bauhaus.

To speak of *Jugendstil*, the German variant of European *Art Nouveau*, in the same breath with racism, is fairly unusual. At a glance, *Art Nouveau* with its sinuous lines and abstracted floral ornaments emits a care-free aura of pleasure. The claim that this "decorous" era was infested with the "un-decorous" and political tendencies of racism and, in particular, anti-semitism is disagreeable yet true. Racism and the seeds of fascist ideology — broadly defined as extreme nationalism and anti-liberalism, devoted to the principle of a dictatorial leader — were particularly discernible amidst the German *Jugendstil* movement. In this paper, I will use a popular text of the 1890s as well as the art and life of one *Jugendstil* artist to exemplify links between the German *fin de siècle* and the racism of the Third Reich. In order to further affirm the *fin de siècle's* crucial place at a crossing point for past and future *Weltanschauungen*, I will then propose visual and ideological relationships of the *Jugendstil* era with German Romanticism and conclude with a speculative, iconographical juxtaposition of *Jugendstil* and the German Expressionist beginnings of the Bauhaus.

Jugendstil was meant to be the new or "young style" that would disperse the stuffiness of academicism and the suffocating eclecticism of 19th-century historical styles. The rejuvenation of art and life via an all-inclusive *Gesamtkunstwerk* — a total work of art, the consummation of all art media in one work of art, and the total union between art and life — was the ideal goal of the *Jugendstil* movement.¹ But *Jugendstil*, besides translating as "young style," also means "the style of youth," and much hope was placed in the young people of the German Empire to function as the agents of this cultural regeneration.² With the attention of *Jugendstil* on the renewal of art and life, the movement resembled other reform crusades, in particular

the *Lebensreform* (life-reform) movement that was saturated with *völkisch* ideas and contained seeds of fascist ideology. (The German word *völkisch* derives from the concept of *das Volk*, denoting the Germans not only as a nation but also as a race; henceforth I will use the anglicized version of *volkish*).³ Anti-modernist positions were frequent among *Jugendstil* practitioners: though *Jugendstil* meant the rejection of academicism and historicism, this position did not necessitate the acceptance of modernist trends. For many *fin de siècle* Germans, modernism signified the cultural decline of Germany and it was the Jews who were blamed for modernism.⁴ Julius Langbehn in his widely read book *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Rembrandt as Educator), published in 1890 and by 1928 in its 38th edition, laid the foundations for this anti-modernist, anti-semitist position by carefully unfolding the surreptitiously aggressive and racist stance of a Germanic ideology. In the popular imagery of Hugo Höppener, known as Fidus, who had read Langbehn's book as soon as it was published, the formal elements of *Jugendstil* are transformed into a picture book of emerging anti-semitic Nordic nationalism.⁵

Historian Fritz Stern has pointed out that Langbehn's book was so successful because "it expressed that curious mood of despair and hope that had suddenly gripped so many Germans ... everywhere sprang up the cry for freedom, for self-expression, for more experience and less theorizing, for a fuller life."⁶ Langbehn's book and Fidus' art were timely manifestations of this cultural climate; writer and artist both utilized and fostered the *fin de siècle* contradictions to which Stern alludes, such as the faddish co-existence of a "golden age" utopia with dystopias of doom and decadence. In five imperious and tediously repetitive chapters, Langbehn unfolds his discourse on German art, science, politics, education and the German race (*deutsche*

Menschheit), and in exasperating and confusing meditations prescribes a program for the reform of contemporary German life. Paradoxically, it is the Dutch Rembrandt whom Langbehn declares to be the perfect German. According to Langbehn, being Dutch means also being *Niederdeutsch*, referring both to a region — the northern and northwestern lowlands of Germany — as well as to the ancient dialects (*Plattdeutsch*) of that region; similar to Dutch, these forms of Low German eventually were integrated into the German language. In a gesture of shifty verbal imperialism Langbehn incorporates Rembrandt's home, known to Germans as the *Niederlande*, into his idea of *Niederdeutschland*. Langbehn himself was *Niederdeutsch*, born in what is now the state of Schleswig-Holstein. Not surprisingly therefore, he locates the true representative of the German race in that region and in the figure of the peasantry (*bäuerlich*) Rembrandt:

The resident of Niederdeutschland is foremost the peasant, and Prussia is... essentially a peasant state. ... For a long time now, Prussia has attracted its prominent instructors in art and science...from northwestern or low Germany. ... The ancient Germans were...politically, socially and morally a pure peasant people. Such ancient Germans still exist...in the (Southafrican) Boer Republic. ... Boers and Prussians are politically related and morally equal. ... Prussia should borrow its creative powers from this peasant- and Boer-spirit (*Bauern- und Boerengeist*). These powers are manifested in Rembrandt, a living and striking symbol.⁷

In his characteristic manner of distorted logic, Langbehn makes Rembrandt the exemplary peasant due to the artist's "friendly proximity" to the earth (*erdbefreundeter Künstler*), and his *Bauerntum* in general, referring to homely and benighted qualities Langbehn associated with the virtuous naïvety of peasant life. The peasant, typified by Rembrandt, thus becomes the keeper and mitigator of all that is true and good in German life, the preserver of the race and guardian of the earth. Such views are blatantly suggestive of Hitler's blood-and-soil (*Blut und Boden*) ideology that declared only the man and woman who have tilled the soil for centuries capable of protecting pure German blood since they would have procreated exclusively within their own class; consequently, the stereotype of the "wandering Jew," pervasive in Germany since medieval times, would surface as a convenient scapegoat for this ideology. Langbehn continues by calling for the "peasantization" (*Verbauerung*) of Prussia as a means to counter the "fluctuating and destructive tendencies" of the masses in the cities and points out that even in Prussia "un-German elements" (*undeutsche*

Elemente) — he names Slavs, Jews and the French — are spoiling the purity of German blood.⁸ By thus elevating the peasant to a cultural hero, Langbehn not only intimates the fascist ideology of blood-and-soil but also rejects modernism and the locus of modernism, the metropolis.

Langbehn's hostility towards modernism further manifests itself in his critique of German over-education, a critique in line with the author's particular propensity for art education reform. Claiming that over-education (*überreife Bildung*) is actually more crude than no education (*Unkultur*), Langbehn calls for a re-education of the people towards nature rather than away from it (*...das Volk muß nicht von der Natur weg-, sondern zu ihr zurückgezogen werden*); he believes that the people itself can achieve this goal by seeking its primeval forces (*Urkräfte*).⁹ In a formula alarming in its simplicity, Langbehn puts the blame for modernism and thus for the decline of German culture squarely on the shoulder of the Jews; the formula runs as follows: Modernity equals the Age of Science which equals rationalism, liberalism, cosmopolitanism and materialism which in turn add up to the sum of values that Langbehn attributes — first implicitly, later categorically — to the Jewish population, mostly residing in the cities.¹⁰ In yet another typical and self-serving twist of logic — in retrospect, Langbehn's manipulations of logic and language function as haunting omens of Hitler's mindbending orations — the author expresses respect for the Jews of the Old Testament (*altgläubiger Jude*), whom he calls "Rembrandt's Jews" and considers to be "true" (*echte*) Jews, while detesting contemporary Jews.¹¹ Though all editions of the book are permeated by anti-semitism, in later editions Langbehn adds a maliciously passionate and unambiguously aggressive anti-semitic diatribe on "Youth and Jews" (*Jugend und Juden*) to the end of his book. The following two quotes are from the 1928 edition:

The endeavor of today's Jews to obtain spiritual and material predominance must be countered with a simple phrase: Germany for the Germans (*Deutschland für die Deutschen*). A Jew cannot become a German, just like a plum cannot become an apple.¹²

Langbehn proceeds to establish one more simplistic formula, this time meant to agitate the German youth against the Jews. He argues that, since the Jewish people are a much older people than the Germans, they are likely to have a corrupting effect:

To grow old means: to decay; physically, the Jew has always been an agent of decay but now he is even more so on a spiritual (*geistig*) level. ...The modern Jew has

no religion, no character, no homeland (*Heimat*), no children. He is a piece of humanity that has gone sour, and the childlike Aryan spirit (*arische Kindergeist*) reacts against that. Youth against the Jews!¹³

Langbehn's ultimate remedy for the "miserable modernism" reigning in Germany was the creation of a new Germanic society, carried by the German youth and based on primeval German values. According to Langbehn, however, this new Germanic ideology could only be achieved if the Germans would reject science and turn towards art.¹⁴ But it had to be a *volkish* art, to be sure, that would bring about the desired regeneration of German culture. This new Germanic society had to be permeated by the *Volksseele* (the soul of the *Volk*), it had to show its *Volkscharacter* (*volkish* character), emphasize its *Volkstümlichkeit* (its uneducated, uninhibited qualities) and its *Volksindividualität* (its coherence as a unique *Volk*).¹⁵ Langbehn's repetitive insistence on this *volkish* terminology is nauseating and painfully foreshadows the language of German fascist propaganda.

In the art and life of the *Jugendstil* artist, nudist, vegetarian and life-reformer Fidus (1868-1948), many of Langbehn's Germanic fantasies would be realized. It is no accident that Langbehn's book as well as Fidus' art and *Weltanschauung* coincide in the last decade of the 19th century. As an advocate of the life-reform movement, which worked towards the regeneration of the individual, of culture and of the community by way of a "natural" life-style, Fidus answers the call of "back to nature" by first living in the rural commune of his teacher, the Munich painter Diefenbach.¹⁶ In 1892, Fidus moves to Berlin where he settles in the countryside outside the city. There, he and his friends try to follow the example of other, more structured and larger life-reform communes. The strongest influence was probably the Berlin agricultural commune called *Eden*; to this day, *Eden* remains the name for a brand of preserves which were grown, canned and commercially distributed by the original *Eden* commune through the so-called *Reformhäuser* stores; a legacy of the life-reform movement, *Reformhäuser* still provide the Germans of a new *fin de siècle* with a popular, alternative source of groceries and health care products.¹⁷ In their commune, Fidus and his friends practice free love, vegetarianism and nudity; they try to be economically self-sufficient by growing their own food; they wear the so-called reform-dress, made out of natural fibers; men let their hair grow long and women forego the artificiality of fancy hairdos; they favor alternative religions, such as theosophy, monism and occasionally

Figure 1. Fidus, *Walzer* (Waltz), 1894. Colour lithograph. 35.9 x 24.1 cm (Photo: courtesy of Weltbild Verlag GmbH, Augsburg, Germany).



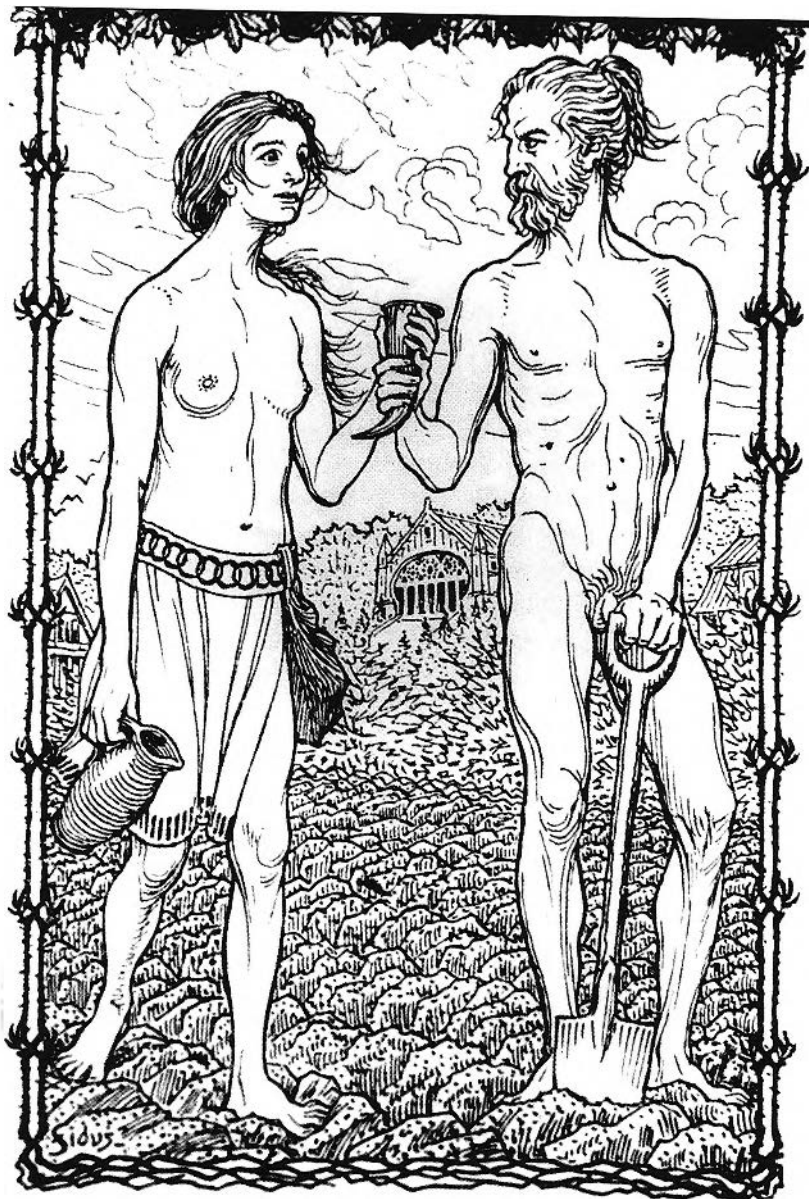
the occult. Looked at this way, the life-reform movement inspires comparison with the 1960s hippie generation, or even with current trends towards ecological and environmental consciousness. While today we may speak condescendingly of "granola freaks," Fidus' teacher Diefenbach was known as the "Kohlrabi apostle."¹⁸ Ultimately, Fidus remains indecisive in his *Weltanschauung*, oscillating between various fashionable worldviews, adopting aspects of the one or the other. He is, however, consistent in returning to a tenet shared by many of the trendy *fin de siècle* philosophies, namely the metaphysical qualities of nature and possibility of mystical communication with the cosmos.

With his young men and women, who are always blond and fair-skinned, tall and slender, even to the point of emaciation, usually naked (if clad at all, then only in Germanic

Figure 2. Fidus, untitled book illustration from Adalbert Luntowski, *Menschen* (Leipzig, 1910), 9 x 14 cm (Photo: permission of Andreas Höppener-Fidus, Germany).

costumes), frolicking in virgin landscapes, Fidus has pictorially realized just that ideal of the Nordic, or better yet *Niederdeutsche* type which Langbehn conceives in his book (Fig. 1). Comparisons with propaganda photography of the National Socialists or even the films by Leni Riefenstahl, promoting the ideal Aryan, reveal the influence of Fidus-figures: streamlined Aryans, in the prime of their youth, display their often naked, always idealized and sculpturesque bodies in splendid natural or artificial light conditions (Fig. 2).¹⁹ Fidus' idealized Nordic type, however, has little in common with the robust and feisty figures we may associate with Rembrandt. When Langbehn turns to Rembrandt, it is not for copying the old master's *style*, but for exhibiting *character traits* he ascribes to Rembrandt's art and life as guidelines for the Germanic renaissance. Though Langbehn never actually describes physical attributes of this ideal German, his character sketches and his insistence on the Nordic region of *Niederdeutschland* as the homeland of the "new German," make Fidus' *Naturmensch*, this "noble savage," a visual match for Langbehn's literary model. The artist's figures are never indoors; they are children of nature, workers of the land, born out of the soil — the Germanic soil. It is always a ritualistic, sacred landscape; the *Jugendstil* obsession to frame everything is largely responsible for this effect, especially since Fidus uses the frame to fill it with mystical signs and symbols. In this sacred ur-landscape these "new Germans" enact the rites of life that would secure the pure blood of the race: procreation, harmony of the clan and defense of the tribe against enemies, mystical union with the land (Figs. 3–5). Langbehn's assertion that the destiny of the Germans is to be Aryans, could be an appropriate legend for Fidus' images:

If you look for the most solemn destiny of the modern German, you once again will discover the old demand: they shall be what they have been from ancient times on, what they were destined to be by nature. They are, were and will be Aryans.²⁰



The signs and symbols symmetrically placed into the frames derive from a complex repertoire of Germanic runes as well as Rosicrucian and theosophical symbols. Prominent are the life-rune (Fig. 6) — which is a variation of the Egyptian hieroglyph "ankh" for life — and the swastika. The latter, of course, in its rotation to the right has taken on a sinister significance as the official emblem of the Nazi party while the original rotation to the left is an ancient symbol, denoting the "action of the Origin, the mystic Centre, upon the universe" and the sun's power.²¹ There are also variations of the so-called Hagal- or wisdom-rune which symbolizes the God-Man unity, the central doctrine of theosophy and monism.²² In the 1913 carbon print "*Aufschwung*" (Elation)

Figure 3. Fidus, *Empfängnis* (Conception), 1942. Watercolour (Photo: permission of Andreas Höppener-Fidus, Germany).



for example (Fig. 7), the Hagal-rune is in the top-center of the frame, while the man's gesture describes the life-rune. In many other works the central location of the Hagal-rune is taken up by the swastika, presumably functioning as the ancient mystical symbol of the sun, yet ominously rotating to the right. Already experiencing a strong revival by *volkish* scholars during the 1890s, the study of runes and Germanic myths would be enthusiastically fostered by Nazi ideologues.²³ Fidus' combination of frame and image thus represents a visual ideology of *Deutschtum*, of Germanic identity, as Langbehn suggests it in his book. Since Fidus' art was available in form of reproductions in popular *Jugendstil* magazines such as *Jugend*, inexpensive collector's portfolios and eventually postcards, its impact should not be underestimated.²⁴ It was indeed the graphic work and reproductions that established Fidus' dubious fame. One particular motif was reproduced in such abundance and so many versions that it took on qualities of a cult image for reformist ideas in German art and life of the *fin de siècle*. The motif was that of the "Lichtgebet," or "prayer to light," which I henceforth will refer to as "sun-prayer" (Fig. 8).

Throughout the 1890s and up to World War I, this motif was distributed in various print media and in at least four different modifications. It probably experienced its ultimate popular success as a postcard when it became a treasured image of the *Wandervögel* on the occasion of their annual meeting in 1913.²⁵ The *Wandervögel* (literally: Migratory Birds) were the largest contingent of the German youth movement, which began forming around 1896 in revolt against the alienation originating with the proliferating industrialization and stale bourgeois values. Dependent on their ideological inclinations, the myriad branches of the youth movement were either prohibited or absorbed into the Hitler youth after 1933.²⁶ The sun-prayer motif also appeared in the vignettes and decorative borders of the art magazine *Jugend*.²⁷

All versions of the sun-prayer motif consist of the following ingredients. A solitary youth is perched on a cliff high above the clouds, facing away from us and into the bright sunlight with outstretched arms in an open gesture of jubilation, exaltation and desire. He is naked and blond and his pose describes the life-rune.²⁸ Though usually typified as

Figure 4. Fidus, *Eins ist not — ja Einssein* (Unity is Essential), ca. 1913/14. Ink drawing with handwritten caption by the artist (Photo: permission of Andreas Höppener-Fidus, Germany).

male, it seems more appropriate to characterize this sun-worshipping adolescent as androgynous, especially since the view from behind forfeits unequivocal gender identification. Indeed, throughout his oeuvre Fidus tends to downplay gender to a minimum of physical difference, in the process obliterating any trace of sensuousness. Contrary to both the liberating sexual “decadence” of the *fin de siècle* avant-garde as well as the repressive Victorian obsession with sexuality, advocates of German life-reform movements, Fidus included, promoted a different viewpoint. They sought to liberate the human body into its natural state of being without either sliding into so-called “excessive” forms of anti-bourgeois sexual behavior such as homosexuality, or yielding to the sickly eroticism played out in the female-vamp-versus-male-victim *tableaux* of *fin de siècle* academic art. The lack of sensuality and sensuousness as well as a certain inclination towards androgyny in Fidus’ figures is thus explained by the peculiar prescriptions of German life-reform movements, favoring nudism but rejecting eroticism. Interestingly, in the very last version of the sun-prayer from 1938, when Fidus’ popularity had long since faded and the National Socialists had coldly rejected his offers of artistic service, the youth has lost the previous ambiguity of gender: the body is indeed more muscular than in earlier versions, he stands with his legs firmly planted apart and, according to Fidus himself, he has matured into a self-confident young *male*.²⁹ Explanations why Fidus’ sun-worshipper should undergo this delicate shift towards increased gender specificity can only but remain tentative. As historian George L. Mosse remarks, “the so-called fascist style demanded a strictness of form which did not allow for ambiguities or vague definitions.”³⁰ During the Third Reich, the sexual-social roles of women and men were defined rigorously by party ideologues; eroticism, gender ambiguity and homosexuality had no place in their doctrines.³¹ In an attempt to beguile Nazi ideology and clarify “ambiguities or vague definitions,” Fidus may have decided to alter his 1938 sun-prayer by rendering the figure more assertively masculine, thus also more emphatically spotlighting his concept of the quintessentially male — the sun and light in



„Eins ist not“ — ja Einssein!
Fidus

general.³² One would expect that such visual discrimination coincided with the national socialist requirements for clarity of gender differentiation and platonic sexuality. But Fidus’ flirtations with the party were rejected. Another transformation taking place in the 1938 sun-prayer might have contributed to this dismissal. The young man’s hair and the clouds surrounding him have become stylized so as to resemble tongues of fire; the overall impression is not that of a prayer but of a mystic incantation, an almost pentecostal revelation or even sorcery. The youth’s object of desire was no doubt still too unspecified, cryptic and elusive, his vision too personal, introverted and supernatural for national socialist standards of categorical propaganda. It is in the

Figure 5. Fidus, *Meeresmittagweiten* (The Vast Expanses of the Ocean's Noon), 1911. Watercolour (Photo: permission of Andreas Höppener-Fidus, Germany).

slightly more subtle, romantic versions of the 1890s and early 1900s (see Fig. 8) that Fidus creates the personification of Langbehn's Germanic "noble savage," displaying the childlike nature (*Kinderthum*) — less tense, less muscular, less tall — Langbehn praised as one of the foremost qualities of the Germanic race. Here is indeed that folk hero, that cultural leader so passionately yearned for by Langbehn in his book. In these versions, the source of light is never visible, but it is obviously the sun, whose rays are dispersing the background clouds. Sometimes the youth's position of dizzying height has been emphasized by snow-capped mountain peaks and a soaring eagle barely visible below him in the lower right. The young person usually is standing on tiptoes as if to accelerate his/her union with the sun and the cliff's incline seems to catapult the figure out towards the sun, thus furthering the urgency with which the youth desires to reach or receive the light.

But the sun-prayer also represents the visual synopsis of the many related tangents of theosophy and monism, pantheism and especially the so-called *Lebensphilosophie* (life-philosophy). At the *fin de siècle*, these vague concepts offered alternative spirituality to institutionalized religion, such as protestanism and catholicism, which had been robbed of their spiritual and mystical appeal by Darwinism, rationalism and the sciences. Theosophy, a *Weltanschauung* since antiquity and in many aspects related to mysticism, astrology and occultism, believes in immortal-

ity and holds that life is a cyclical sequence of reincarnations and, most importantly, that all living souls are identical with the highest Divinity, that God and Human are one. Monism may be considered the *fin de siècle* version of theosophy. The name itself means everything-in-one (*das All-Eine*) and, comparable to theosophy, denotes a God-World unanimity (recall that the Hagal-rune, used by Fidus, signifies this very core of both theosophy and monism). Whereas traditional Christianity is dualistic — here, God the creator; there, separate from him, the world, his creation — monism denies dualism and teaches that Creator and Creation are one, that God is everywhere *in* the world, indeed that God *is* his own creation.³³

Related to these concepts is the *Lebensphilosophie* in which life itself is considered to be the ultimate source of all spiritual and material truth and which proposes that all life is a slow but constant flux of interrelated phenomena. Fidus and Langbehn were adamant disciples of both a theosophi-

Figure 6. Life-rune, drawing by the author.

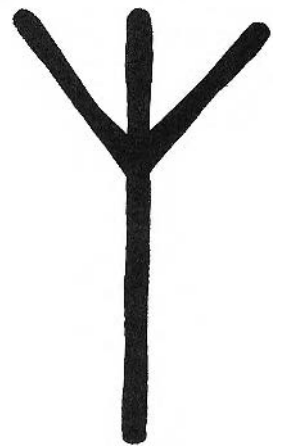


Figure 7. Fidus, *Aufschwung* (Elation), 1911. Tempera (Photo: permission of Andreas Höppener-Fidus, Germany).

cal-monistic religion and of the life-philosophical world-view. Fidus even designed a cover-illustration for *Theosophie*, a monthly for the “preservation and dissemination of a higher world- and life-view (*Welt- und Lebensanschauung*).”³⁴ In the sun-prayer motif, the many threads of these *fin de siècle* reformist discourses and ideologies, diffused throughout Germany (and indeed beyond), come together and are crystallized into a simplified, easily legible and optimistic image of a new future, headed by the *volkish* ideal of the Germanic natural man whose gesture of sun-worship expresses the late 19th century’s desire for that mystical God-World unity, for a life more spiritual and meaningful. That such ideals in Germany became married to aggressive nationalism cannot be simply justified as coincidence; preconditions for this alliance were deeply rooted in German intellectual history of the entire 19th century. I therefore want to conclude this paper by briefly tracing several visual and ideological relationships of the German *fin de siècle* with German Romanticism of the early 19th century.

Indeed, one aspect of Fidus’ and Langbehn’s reformist idealism — the belief that art alone is life-giving and offers salvation — even reaches into the late 18th century when *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) dissidents thundered against enlightenment gone sour. Like Fidus and Langbehn, the *Sturm und Drang* era proclaimed “art’s capability as teacher of man and guide to morality and the artist’s role in personifying the human condition and the quintessence of humanity.”³⁵ This faith in art as the sole redeemer of a life infested with the deadening qualities of science and materialism was not unique to Fidus’ and Langbehn’s *Weltanschauungen* but was common among German artists and intellectuals of the late 19th century.³⁶

The stronger link, however, exists between the *Weltanschauungen* of life-reform/life-philosophy and the German Romantic attitude of *Naturphilosophie* (metaphysics of nature). In the early 19th century, proponents of a *Naturphilosophie*, like the German pantheists Fichte and Schelling, already had proclaimed the synchronism of a God-Nature entity with humankind and its possibility of absorption through contemplation.³⁷ As mentioned, the



theosophy and monism of the late 19th century similarly proclaims a God-World unity. Moreover, *Naturphilosophie*, German idealism and metaphysics of the early 19th century were resonant with German nationalism. Among German intellectuals, especially Francophobia and hostility grew strong as a result of Napoleon’s occupation of Germany. The hoped for unification of the many petty German states under the leadership of Prussia and with the help of the French Revolution had not been achieved. The Vienna Congress of 1814-15 failed to establish a sovereign German nation-state with unified national politics and France, though defeated, even managed (through Talleyrand’s diplomacy) to emerge from the talks with its hegemony in Europe re-affirmed. Germany’s struggle for national unity

Figure 8. Fidus, *Lichtgebet* (Sun-prayer), 1913. Watercolour (Photo: permission of Andreas Höppener-Fidus, Germany).



would continue throughout the 19th century while the other major European powers had long since achieved this status. Disappointed and envious, Germans turned inward and backward, to ideas of tribal nationalism, of common ancestry in a shared Germanic past. Gradually, this idea of an integral German nation and people (*Deutsche Nation und Volkstum*) degenerated into the myth of blood-and-soil; antisemitism emerged as a “logical” consequence of this tribalism and the Nazi battlecry “One People, one Empire, one Leader” (*Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*) epitomized the desire for national unity spanning the entire 19th century. Even after the Vienna Congress, the “glorious power of French nationhood” was experienced by the Germans in painful contrast to their own lack of national unity.³⁸

Hannah Arendt distinguishes between early 19th century French and German race-thinking when she observes:

If, in the early form of French aristocracy, race-thinking had been invented as an instrument of internal division and had turned out to be a weapon for civil war, (the) early form of German race-doctrine was invented as a weapon of internal national unity and turned out to be a weapon for national wars.

And, later on, she mentions tribal nationalism and political Romanticism as being at the root of German race-thinking:

The insistence on common tribal origin as an essential of nationhood, formulated by German nationalists during and after the war of 1814, and the emphasis laid by the romantics on the innate personality and natural nobility prepared the way intellectually for race-thinking in Germany.³⁹

Many post-1945 intellectuals, such as writer Thomas Mann or historian Friedrich Meinecke, believe that German Romanticism resides at the very heart of a “German essence,” that Romanticism is indeed the determining factor in German intellectual history of the 19th century. Mann, for instance, also suggests that the nature of German Romanticism was the paradoxical coexistence of sin and sublimity.⁴⁰ Base nationalism and exalted liberalism could stand side by side here. The yearning, wanton *Weltschmerz*, boundlessness and irrationalism of Romanticism was fertile soil for the germination of nationalist philosophies in the art and culture of the early 19th century.

The Romantic nationalism of early 19th-century artists such as Philipp Otto Runge and Caspar David Friedrich exemplifies this position.

Runge’s two famous versions of “*Morgen*” (Morning; Fig. 9), painted in 1808 and 1809, according to Victor H. Miesel symbolize “a moment of terrestrial regeneration placed within the transcendental context of eternal cosmic processes... It is...the beginning of a new day, a new year, a new life and...a new age.”⁴¹ This aura of regeneration and cosmic union between human and nature emanating from Runge’s hopeful vision of a new future is comparable to the equally optimistic vitalism of Fidus’ sun-prayer motif.⁴² A series of drawings by Runge entitled “*Fall des Vaterlandes*”

Figure 9. Philipp Otto Runge, *Der Morgen* (The Morning — small version), 1808. Oil, 109 x 85.5 cm (Photo: ©Elke Walford, Hamburg, courtesy of Hamburger Kunsthalle).

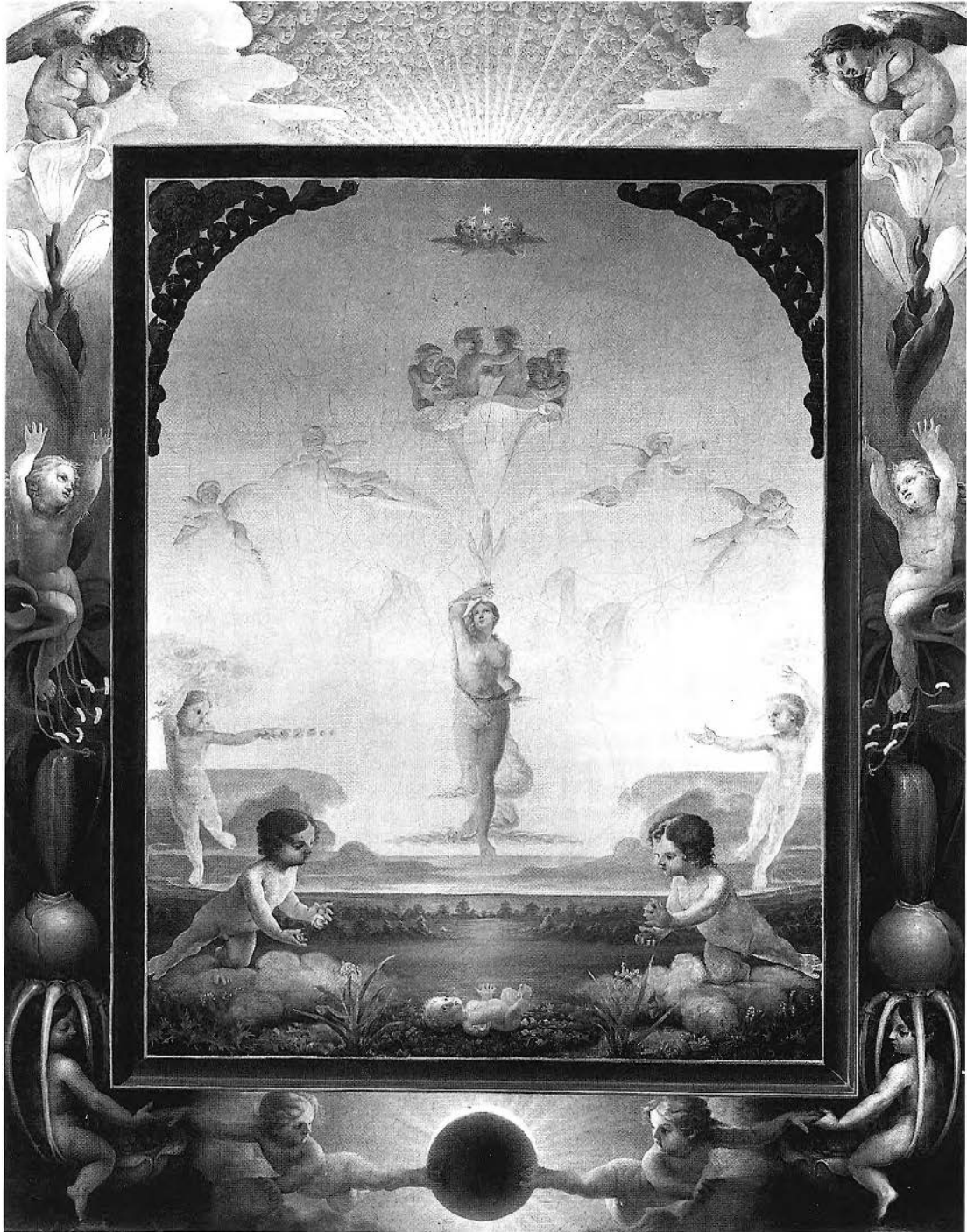


Figure 10. Philipp Otto Runge, *Fall des Vaterlandes* (Decline of the Fatherland), 1809. Ink drawing, 19.3 x 13.4 cm (Photo: © Elke Walford, Hamburg, courtesy of Hamburger Kunsthalle).



(Decline of the Fatherland, Fig. 10), done between 1809 and 1810, have been interpreted, again by Victor Miesel, as images in which the artist “pictured the history of his nation, not in terms of specific individuals acting in specific situations — there were no heroes, no enemies, no battles — but in terms of the destiny of what could be called a *Volksgeist*, the German Spirit, evolving in harmony with the *Weltgeist*.”⁴³ Though the idea of a singular hero — a *Führer* figure — does surface in Langbehn’s book, he, like Runge, ultimately believed the communal *Volksgeist* to be the foundation and source of any German cultural regeneration. Fidus’ *Weltanschauung* and art, as we have seen, were suffused with *volkish* ideals and theosophical-monistic philosophy, a combination that absorbs the *Volksgeist*-*Weltgeist* merger also informing Runge’s art and life.⁴⁴ Therefore,

nationalism was the motivating factor for Runge as well as Langbehn’s and Fidus’ *Weltanschauungen*.

Caspar David Friedrich, Runge’s contemporary and compatriot, had even stonger nationalistic sentiments. In the wake of the German defeat by the French army at Jena in 1806-07, and in nostalgic escapism to legendary Germanic tribal supremacy in Europe, Friedrich began a series of paintings and drawings spanning some twelve years, which depict the dolmens or pre-historic tombs of ancient Germanic heroes, such as that of Arminius, chief of the Germanic Cherusci tribe, who defeated the Romans in the famous battle of 9A.D. in the Teutoburg forest of what is now Saxony.⁴⁵ Again Victor Miesel: “The context for such a theme was one established by the romantic conception of a heroic, primitive Germany unspoiled by civilization and alien cultural influences” and “...in Friedrich’s pictures the tombs of German chieftains can be easily understood as symbols for what was purest and best in Germany.”⁴⁶ Though there is no immediate visual correlation, the aura of Romantic patriotism in Friedrich’s oeuvre, manifested by both the artist’s Teutonicism and his well-known, solemn, pristine German landscapes — including the archetype of the unquenchable German *Volksgeist*, the *Deutsche Eiche* (German oak-tree) — is matched and surpassed by the nationalistic ambiance in Fidus’ and Langbehn’s oeuvre.⁴⁷ The style informing Friedrich’s politics of landscape is unique to German Romanticism: the sense of geographical, spiritual and even historical wilderness suffusing his images is conspicuous within the repertoire of European Romantic landscape painting. The haunting battlecry “Germany for the Germans” was not first heard at the *fin de siècle*; it already seems to hover above the plains, mountains and woods of Friedrich’s vistas.

More direct visual parallels can be found in Fidus’ sun-prayer and Friedrich’s favored motif of solitary figures in nature (compare Figs. 8 and 11). The relationship between these visually similar motifs is emphasized by their comparable sense of cultural and political discontent. Friedrich was disillusioned with the lack of spirituality in enlightened religion and hoped for the “dawning of a new age, of a rejuvenated, Christian Germany” after the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire by Napoleon, which, as Miesel points out, many Germans likened to the apocalypse.⁴⁸ Friedrich’s own answer to these hopes was his escape into nature and, influenced by the teachings of *Naturphilosophie*,

Figure 11. Caspar David Friedrich, *Frau in der Morgensonne* (Woman in the Morning Sun), ca. 1881. Oil, 22 x 30 cm (Photo: courtesy of Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany).



he depicted men and women in solitary meditation, participating in that mystical God-Nature entity, reinterpreted in the late 19th century through fashionable theosophy and monism. Though Friedrich's lonely figures are more earthly and somber than Fidus' sun-worshippers and emanate a mood of resignation rather than elation, Friedrich's patriotism and Fidus' megalomaniac nationalism anticipating the world domination of the German race, have uncanny visual parallels in such juxtapositions.

The final parallel I would like to suggest between late and early 19th-century *Weltanschauungen* is found in architecture. One of Fidus' life-long obsessions was the creation of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, his never-realized, many-versioned "temple of art," "a temple of a new faith, a place where art in its totality (*Gesamtheit*) would be accessible to the people."⁴⁹ That, so Fidus proclaimed, would be a *Gesamtkunstwerk* just like Richard Wagner's *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth, which had been especially built in 1873 for the performance of the composer's synaesthetic operatic works. Fidus' temple would represent the ultimate ideological synthesis of the capricious reformist *Weltanschauungen* embraced by the artist and many of his *fin de siècle* contemporaries. The conception of the "temple of a new faith" as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* holds possible parallels with the art of the early 19th-century architect-painter Karl Friedrich Schinkel who, in 1814-15, designed his utopian "cathedral of lib-

erty" (*Freiheitsdom*) in response to the European liberation wars against Napoleon. For Schinkel, who like Friedrich and Runge was influenced by *Naturphilosophie*, the artistic re-creation of the Gothic cathedral became, as Toni Stooss has pointed out, both a "religious and national symbol"; the cathedral stood as a:

...pictorial metaphor for the power of spirit over matter, for the crowning of nature by a work of art. Believing that the Gothic style was an invention of the Germans, Schinkel used the cathedral as a symbol of the German struggle against Napoleonic Imperialism which of course borrowed from the stylistic repertoire of Roman antiquity.⁵⁰

Schinkel's utopian *Freiheitsdom* might seem less aggressive in its nationalism because it was both based on an already time-honored architectural precedent and more general in its message of freedom from imperialism. Fidus' utopian "temple of art" on the other hand, is blatant in its ultimate destination as "Nordic consecration hall" (*Nordische Feuerweihe-Halle* — 1938 design).⁵¹ Despite all differences, both Schinkel's and Fidus' designs received their impulse from virulent nationalist sentiments pervasive in Germany and I contend that even moderate nationalism more often than not leads to excessive nationalism which inevitably leads to racism. Thus, the ideological roots of

the Third Reich were already present in the art, architecture and literature of men like Runge, Friedrich, Schinkel, Fidus and Langbehn.

Just over a hundred years after Schinkel's and some twenty years after Fidus' failures with the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Walter Gropius accomplished the realization of his experiment in total art and technology — the *Gesamtkunstwerk* Bauhaus. At the ideological beginning of the Bauhaus, accompanying the 1919 manifesto, also rises a grandiose temple. It is Lyonel Feininger's Gothic-Expressionist cathedral, that "crystal symbol of a new faith," as Gropius called it.⁵² But the Bauhaus, with its celebration of technology and its socialist tendencies is the exact opposite of both Schinkel's political escapism and especially Fidus' reformist ideas. What Fidus fought so passionately — technology and modernism — was inescapable. With Feininger's crystal cathedral modernism boldly "usurped" a symbol that had seemed to belong to Schinkel's nationalist escapism and Fidus' visual language of anti-modernism.⁵³

Surprisingly — considering Fidus' devotion to the Führer manifested in at least one pathetically seedy portrait of Hitler, and, as mentioned, in his offer of artistic services to the Third Reich — the artist was rejected by the National Socialists and his art considered inappropriate for publication in the party journals. Ironically, as George L. Mosse points out, it was a Nazi publication called *Die Sonne* (the sun), that accused Fidus of too much spiritualism and too little *volkish* propaganda. It was also felt that Fidus' theosophy could have a "dangerous separate existence" which might leave room for dissent instead of unyielding loyalty to the party.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Fidus' art, in conjunction with Langbehn's book had called forth first a mental image, then the actual picture of the ideal German and despite the unfavorable judgment of the National Socialists, Fidus' Aryan prototypes were readily adopted by the official artists of the Third Reich.

1 An excellent collection of essays that offer definitions of this vague concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* can be found in Harald Szeeman, ed., *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien seit 1800* (Aarau & Frankfurt am Main 1983).

2 The older generation, however, was not excluded from this rejuvenation process. "Youth" was a state of mind rather than an age-group. See the inaugural editorial by editor-publisher Georg Hirth in the first issue of the weekly *Jugend* and R. Schmidt-Cabanis' poetic dedication: "Der Jugend sei mein Gruß geweiht, der Jugend, die niemals veraltet; die unberührt von Stunde und Zeit im Künstlerbusen walter" (To Youth I dedicate my greetings, to Youth which never grows old; which untouched by hour and time in the heart of the artist does rule). *Jugend*, 1896, no.1+2:2-5.

- 3 The adaptation of *völkisch* to *volkish* was taken from George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York 1964), 4. However, Mosse capitalizes *Volkish*.
- 4 Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley 1961), 142.
- 5 Frecot, Geist and Kerbs quote from Fidus' memoirs in which the artist mentions his enthusiastic reading of Langbehn's book along with Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*: "Neben dem Rembrandtbuche Langbehns verschlang ich schon 1890 etwa Nietzsches *Zarathustra*, der eben erschienen war." Janos Frecot, J.F. Geist, D. Kerbs, *Fidus 1868-1948: Zur ästhetischen Praxis bürgerlicher Fluchtbewegungen* (Munich 1972), 85.
- 6 Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, 117.
- 7 Julius Langbehn, *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Leipzig 1890), 124-125. Unless otherwise noted, all references are to the 1890 edition. The 1890 edition was still published anonymously "Von einem Deutschen." All Langbehn quotes will be given in translations by myself and this particular one condenses two pages of text. In this typically longwinded and labored discourse on the spiritual and physical relationship between Boers and Prussians, Langbehn even mentions that Bismarck and the President of the Boer Republic communicated via "the shared, familiar dialect of Low German" (*der beiderseitig heimischen Mundart, dem Plattsdeutsch*).
- 8 Langbehn, *Rembrandt*, 130.
- 9 Langbehn, *Rembrandt*, 3. I was first made aware of the theme of anti-modernism in Langbehn's book by the chapter on "Art and the Revolt against Modernity" in Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*.
- 10 Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, 116-152. See also Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 44, where the author points out that Langbehn's originally "finely discriminating prejudice" eventually would be replaced by flagrant racism.
- 11 Langbehn, *Rembrandt als Erzieher*, 42. It is exactly this kind of "finely discriminating prejudice" to which Mosse refers; compare footnote 10.
- 12 Langbehn, *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (1928), 274. I was only able to locate an 1890 and a 1928 edition of Langbehn's book and therefore cannot establish the exact date for the first appearance of this passage. The 1890 edition does not contain the section on *Jugend und Juden*. In the 1928 edition, this section has been inserted about three pages before the original ending, starting on page 274. Evidence for Langbehn's rapidly intensifying racism also comes from his 1892 statement in *Der Rembrandtdeutsche*: "For us, the Jews are only a passing plague and cholera" as quoted in Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, 142.
- 13 Langbehn, *Rembrandt* (1928), 277.
- 14 Langbehn, *Rembrandt* (1928), 2-3.
- 15 Langbehn, *Rembrandt* (1928), 3 and 27 (*völkische Kunst*); 56 and 199 (*Völkseele*); 19 and 293 (*Volkscharakter*); 55, 184 and

- 260 (*Volksthümlichkeit*); 5 (*Volksindividualität*); 226 (*Volksgeist*); 6 (*Volksphysiognomie*). These pages merely provide samples of Langbehn's abundant usage of *volkish* terminology.
- 16 Christoph Conti, *Abschied vom Bürgertum: Alternative Bewegungen in Deutschland von 1890 bis heute* (Reinbek bei Hamburg 1984), 74.
- 17 Conti, *Abschied vom Bürgertum*, 76, for the information about the Eden commune. See also Frecot, Geist, Kerbs, *Fidus 1868-1948*; chapter 1 provides excellent definitions and explanations concerning the complexities of life-reformist ideas.
- 18 Conti, *Abschied vom Bürgertum*, 70.
- 19 The celebration of the perfect Aryan body took place in an abundance of propaganda publications. A good example is Hans W. Fischer, *Menschenschönheit: Gestalt und Anlitz des Menschen in Leben und Kunst* (Berlin 1935). Also compare Fidus' art with illustrations in Berthold Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich* (New York 1979) and Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York 1992).
- 20 Langbehn, *Rembrandt als Erzieher*, 211.
- 21 J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd edition (New York 1971), 323.
- 22 For a detailed analysis of the runes as well as christian-rosicrucian-theosophical symbols used by Fidus, see Frecot, Geist and Kerbs, *Fidus 1868-1948*, 274-275. See also P.M.H. Atwater, *The Magical Language of Runes* (Santa Fe, New Mexico 1986).
- 23 In Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, the author cites a variety of *fin de siècle* publications devoted to the study of Germanic runes. In another book by the same author, he provides illustrations of the typically *Niederdeutsche* thatched-roof construction of the Hitler Youth Memorial on the isle of Rügen with quasi-runic inscriptions as well as a procession of *Bund deutscher Mädchen* dressed in Bronze Age Germanic costumes; see George L. Mosse, *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich* (New York 1966). Lastly, in the documentary exhibition *Topographie des Terrors: Gestapo, SS und Reichssicherheitshauptamt auf dem Prinz-Albrecht-Gelände* which I saw in Berlin, 1991, I noticed a photo that featured one of the highest officials of the SS in the process of "discovering" ancient runes in a deserted quarry.
- 24 The credit for being able to make such general observations belongs entirely to the outstandingly thorough and meticulous research on Fidus documented by Frecot, Geist and Kerbs who, in their exhaustive biography of the artist, have carefully traced and documented the reception and popularity of Fidus' art.
- 25 Frecot, Geist and Kerbs, *Fidus 1868-1948*, 288-301; 296.
- 26 There is an abundance of German scholarship on the *Jugendbewegung*. I find Conti's *Abschied vom Bürgertum* to be one of the best sources for a condensed though perspicacious account of this phenomenon. For another short yet quite insightful explanation of the *Jugendbewegung* and *Wandervögel*, see the 1931 edition of *Der Große Brockhaus* (Leipzig 1931).
- 27 It was while doing research for my doctorate on the art journal *Jugend* that I first became aware of Fidus' esoteric imagery. Fidus was a regular contributor to this art magazine. For a sample of his work see the following *Jugend* issues: 1906, no.13:258; 1906, no.27:578; 1906, no.37:791; 1906, no.41:875; 1907, no.39:862; 1907, no.50:1142.
- 28 Frecot, Geist and Kerbs, *Fidus 1868-1948*, 291. The pose of the worshipper coinciding with the life-rune is pointed out here. An interesting iconographical study of the "raised hands" motif, pervasive throughout the history of art, is Heinz Demisch, *Erhobene Hände: Geschichte einer Gebärde in der bildenden Kunst* (Stuttgart 1984). In my research on Fidus' sun-prayer, I came across "related" motifs from artists as varied as Frederick Holland Day, Edward S. Curtis, Gustave Courbet, Ferdinand Hodler and K. Schmidt-Rottluff.
- 29 Frecot, Geist and Kerbs, *Fidus 1868-1948*, 300-301.
- 30 George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York 1985), 153.
- 31 Hitler's homophobia is a well-known fact. Consider, for example, the assassination in 1936 of Ernst Röhm, ordered by Hitler. Röhm was Hitler's S.A. chief of staff and an alleged homosexual.
- 32 Frecot, Geist and Kerbs, *Fidus 1868-1948*, 272. The authors here point out Fidus' predilection for this particular separation of the male principle, embodied by lofty heights, sun and the mystique of light, from the female principle, embodied by the earth and night. A mere glance at his imagery confirms this observation.
- 33 Eberhard Roters, "Weltgeist, wo bist Du? Monismus, Pantheismus, Individualismus," in: *Berlin um 1900*, exhibition catalog (Berlin 1984), 375-383.
- 34 Frecot, Geist and Kerbs, *Fidus 1868-1948*, illustration on page 407.
- 35 Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, 133. *Sturm und Drang* is traditionally translated as "storm and stress" through "storm and urgency" would be more accurate.
- 36 Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, 131. Consider, for instance, the writings by Friedrich Nietzsche, Heinrich George and Rainer Maria Rilke, or the many secessionist movements in the visual arts.
- 37 Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, 132.
- 38 Quote from Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd edition (New York 1958), 166. Arendt, but also Georg Lukács and Walther Hofer offer sensible explanations of German Francophobia and early race-thinking. See Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (New Jersey 1981) and Walther Hofer ed., *Der Nationalsozialismus: Dokumente 1933-1945* (Frankfurt am Main 1957).
- 39 Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 167 & 170 respectively.
- 40 See Hofer, *Der Nationalsozialismus*, 363.
- 41 Victor H. Miesel, "Philipp Otto Runge, Caspar David Friedrich and Romantic Nationalism," *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, vol. 33, no 3, p. 37, 1972.

- 42 Vitalism is another vague philosophical concept of the late 19th and early 20th century. Mostly used in reference to Bergson's *élan vital*, vitalism sometimes appears in connection with German *Lebensphilosophie* and Nietzsche. See for example: Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass, eds., *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy* (Cambridge 1992). I am using the word here more in the sense of spiritedness and life-giving.
- 43 Miesel, "Runge, Friedrich and Romantic Nationalism," 43.
- 44 Fidus' *Küste von Kareol* of 1914, displays a composition similar to Runge's *Decline of the Fatherland* illustrated here; in Fidus' work two dead Germanic soldiers provide the "fertile soil" above, while in Runge's the dead husband lies as the foundation for the "bitter harvest." See illustration on page 425 in Frecot, Geist and Kerbs, *Fidus 1868-1948*.
- 45 Miesel, "Runge, Friedrich and Romantic Nationalism," 44.
- 46 Miesel, "Runge, Friedrich and Romantic Nationalism," 44.
- 47 Friedrich's nationalist landscape paintings, seemingly a-political, lend themselves to an investigative comparison with the slightly later American landscape paintings of Church or Bierstadt whose landscapes were also influenced by a pre-cursor of nationalism — manifest destiny — as well as by Transcendentalism, an Anglo-American relative of German *Naturphilosophie*.
- 48 Miesel, "Runge, Friedrich and Romantic Nationalism," 37-38. Another intriguing visual parallel between Friedrich and Fidus can be found in Friedrich's famous *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* (1818) and Fidus' *Ostsee Ostermorgen* (1942). For Fidus illustration see page 430 in Frecot, Geist and Kerbs, *Fidus 1868-1948*.
- 49 Toni Stooss, "Fidus," in Szeeman, ed. *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*, 252. Due to the limited amount of illustrations permissible for this type of essay, I have not included any images here. Furthermore, illustrative material is less important here since the *idea* of Fidus' utopian *Gesamtkunstwerk* was more significant than its practical execution. I have also abstained from illustrating Friedrich's *Freiheitsdom* as I trust the reader's familiarity with this famous image of a supernaturally lit Gothic cathedral.
- 50 Stooss, "Fidus," 155, 159; translation by myself. Paradoxically, Schinkel's *realized* designs are all in the Neo-Classical style.
- 51 For more uncanny and confounding reverberations, on an architectural level, back and forth between Fidus' and Langbehn's ideologies, early 19th century *Weltanschauungen* and Third Reich reality, consult Robert R. Taylor, *The Word in Stone: The Role of Architecture in the National Socialist Ideology* (Berkeley 1974). Taylor illustrates the supremacy of the traditional, volkish, *Niederdeutsche* and Bavarian building styles in official Nazi architecture, quotes Albert Speer on the light spectacle at the Nuremberg Party Congress ("A fantastic thing, like being in a Gothic cathedral") and features the *Haus der Deutschen Kunst*, the Nazi "temple of art" which was built in the typically stripped-down, thus more authoritarian Nazi version of Neo-Classicism rather than in Fidus' admittedly impractical, visionary Nordic architectural concoctions.
- 52 Quoted in Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus* (Cambridge, Mass. 1969), 31. As with Friedrich's Gothic cathedral, I assume the reader's familiarity with Feininger's drawing in the Bauhaus manifesto.
- 53 A thorough comparison between Fidus' visionary architectural yearnings and utopian German Expressionist architecture — see, for instance, Bruno Taut, Peter Behrens, Hans Poelzig or Erich Mendelsohn -might further contribute to more firmly establish the *fin de siècle's* crucial position as a pivot for past and future *Weltanschauungen* in German art and culture.
- 54 Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 86.