

Berthold Auerbach on his Approach to Village Tales from the Black Forest (1844)

Abstract

[Berthold Auerbach](#) (1812–1882) was one of Germany's most widely read realist novelists. In 1843, in a published letter to German reviewer Joseph Eduard Braun, Auerbach described the realistic, non-idealized literary style that he used for *Village Tales from the Black Forest*, his detailed account of peasant life in southwest Germany. Portions of this letter were later used as a preface in the complete edition of Auerbach's *Village Tales*. Though subscribing to realism in method, Auerbach nevertheless portrayed rural village life as a simpler, more authentic, non-decadent counterpart to urban bourgeois existence.

Source

Your favorable and penetrating review of certain *Village Tales* that I published in magazines was the reason why I did send a preface for the recently published complete collection; it was a real relief to see that my endeavors were understood by a man whom I do not know personally. Nevertheless, I would still like to say a few things to you, and to the general public, about the aforementioned work, and for this I have chosen the form of an open letter.

[...]

Forewords spare after-talk,

so goes a good German proverb, and therefore a few introductory words shall precede the *Village Tales*. These accounts were composed far from their settings; the reader may decide whether the viewpoint and tone are correct. I endeavored to present these life portraits from a vantage point that was neither amidst the peasantry nor from an urban perspective; I believed that city dwellers and country folk alike could thus regard them with interest. The peculiarities of dialect and manner of speech are therefore only retained to the extent that they convey an essential impression. I have always thought of myself as narrating orally; the events are there as historical facts. Thus, it must sometimes occur that some life rule or general remark is inserted.

I have intentionally not reached back into the historical past, although such a past would have offered freer scope for imaginative creations and for the reference to great events. Instead, I sought to give form to all aspects of peasant life today. First of all, I did not intend to try to put an end to errors and abuses and that sort of thing. If this happens as a result of these stories, then that would bring joyful satisfaction to me. That I touch upon the ills of the Catholic clergy has solely to do with the geographic setting of these tales. I expressly reject the notion that such ills only occur among the Catholic clergy; in Protestant regions they assume different forms. Religious life, which here is first and foremost church life, is a fundamental element in German folk life. It is the historical consciousness of the infinite, standing fast in its entirety, fulfilling its character. If individual consciousness already establishes itself here, if some individuals raise themselves above the given forms, then they give the characters in general their essential imprint. It is thus frivolous to ignore the religious foundation of peasant life, and it would be poetically untrue on top of it.

In centralized nations, where there is historical unity and uniformity, it is easier for a poet to propose national types. The English and the French have grown up under the same laws and similar living conditions and historical impressions. Their character has something in common, not merely in a general

way, but rather in details, in habits, views, etc. We, however, separated by history, are much more an expression of the development of provincial life. Thus, analogous to the recent tendency in historical research toward the provincial, the poetry that is taken from folk life must concentrate more and more on the local. Just as we have the duty to give political form to the individual detail, we also have this duty in literature. The consciousness of unification and unity must still sink in, and thus here, too, the portrait of a life divided into itself must emerge. Of course, the rearrangement of regional borders has torn apart provincial life in many ways, but its core remains unchanged.

I have unabashedly named a certain village, my birthplace. It was from reports from my hometown that I based the story "The War Whistle" [*Die Kriegspfeife*], previously published in the journal *Der Schwarzwälder-Bote*. The peasants are now utterly upset with me and say that it is all a lie and that I wanted to make them appear ridiculous. One sees why both high and low circles call for a fictitious setting when contemporary life is represented. But I think it is our duty, the closer we want to get to life, to choose a real setting and to name it without hesitation. Authors of historical novels seek an authentic foundation and do not shy away from naming the actual locations where their stories take place. This should be the case as well when the setting is contemporary; in this way, a picture of contemporary life becomes historical. By shrouding specific places with images, modern folk literature can thus consciously take up and continue what, in earlier times, legends had done in a naïve way.

I have attempted to portray an entire village from the first house to the last. The customs and mores are taken from real life. The songs do not come from any printed work; they have not to my knowledge previously been published.

It has been nineteen years since I have left you, you quiet hometown, to wander along paths which led far from your peaceful boundaries. The silent pull of childhood love has drawn my spirit back to you and with wordless movements I revived the tones that had almost faded away. Outside of my window the mighty Rhine rushes, Germany's artery, a shining band of light rolls through from beyond like silver, the waves ripple and shimmer in the moonlight. The waves of the Neckar, which rolled past by hometown—the great German river peacefully absorbed them and carried them off to the sea. So, too, may these images, which I now send out to my fatherland, so, too, may they take their place in the great stream of German life as a modest wave which issued forth from native mountains.

Mainz. Berthold Auerbach

Source: Berthold Auerbach, "An J. E. Braun vom Verfasser der *Schwarzwälder Dorfgeschichten*," in *Europa, Chronik der gebildeten Welt*, edited by August Lewald. 1843. Fourth Volume. Karlsruhe and Baden, 1843/44, pp. 33–36; reprinted in Max Bucher, Werner Hal, Georg Jäger, and Reinhard Wittmann, eds., *Realismus und Gründerzeit: Manifeste und Dokumente zur deutschen Literatur 1848–1880*, 2 vols. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1975, vol. 2, pp. 148–51.

Translation: Jonathan Skolnik

Recommended Citation: Berthold Auerbach on his Approach to Village Tales from the Black Forest

(1844), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormarz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-326>> [July 02, 2025].