

# Ludwig Börne, *Letters from Paris* (1833)

## Abstract

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Ludwig Börne (1786–1837) was born Loeb Baruch into an important family in the Jewish community of Frankfurt am Main. He was a minor official in the Grand Duchy of Frankfurt during the Napoleonic period, but following the restoration of the city government after 1814, he was removed from his post because he was a Jew. He took the name Ludwig Börne upon his conversion to Lutheranism in 1818 and became famous under that name as a liberal and radical editor and author in the following years. He is often associated with the “Young Germany” movement in German literature as well. After one of his newspapers had been suppressed by the police, Börne spent time in exile in Paris and Stuttgart. He later returned to Paris in 1830 after the outbreak of the July Revolution. There, he witnessed the unfolding events and reported on them as a political journalist for a German readership. His observations became the basis for his multivolume *Letters from Paris* [*Briefe aus Paris*], written between 1830 and 1833 and published from 1832–1834. As this letter shows, Börne used his position in Paris to launch biting critiques and satirical portrayals of the political and social situation, not just in France but in the German states as well. The excerpt also offers insight into Börne’s life in Paris as an expatriate German while shedding light on the cosmopolitan networks and salon society that he and other educated Germans in Paris accessed in those years.

## Source

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### Letter Fourteen

**Paris, Wednesday, December 14, 1831.**

[...]

My letters from Paris have now arrived at the local booksellers, and I have read them with the same calm and equanimity with which one reads a bill from the tailor when one lacks neither the money nor the good will to pay it. I would not take back a word if I wrote them today, nor would I make a single phrase one iota less vehement. They are, to be sure, as crude as people found them to be. But who told the stupid people to approach them so closely and to look at them through spectacles? They are crude like frescos and must be crude if they are to be examined from a certain distance. Painted upon the fresh, still damp present, the strokes had to be slapped on quickly by a determined hand, and not creep in behind timorous hesitation. The common people, who stand around in wide circles and require no magnifying glass, notice this in precisely the proper measure. How glad I am to have succeeded in this; how happy that I rejected the pastel niceties that so please the pampered diplomats, because they can smile them out of existence as soon as they become uncomfortable. No, this time I have drawn deep furrows through their sensibilities, and this will bear fruit; for even the seeds for their own fields are not in their hands—God sees to this. Let them only open their hearts to me, whether as foe or friend is all the same; both are welcome to me, for both serve the good cause.

Heine has written an article against the Hamburg artists Meyer and Wurm, whose works are even more fresco-like than mine. I have not read it; he only spoke to me of his plans. His intention was not at all to defend me, however, but himself, since he was attacked along with me. In this Heine possesses a truly childish vanity; he cannot bear the most subtle, or even the crudest, criticism. He told me he wanted to destroy those people. It matters little to me. Two sparrows fewer in the world won’t help, to be sure, but it won’t hurt either. He sent the article to Cotta for the *Allgemeine Zeitung*; now the latter wrote back: It is questionable to defend a text that expressly states that every people has the right to depose its king if

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ever it dislikes his nose. Patience, heavenly patience! What shall I do with such people who quite seriously believe that I advised nations to drive out their princes the minute they become dissatisfied with their noses? What would happen to me if I had to defend myself against such accusations before German judges? If I said: Gentlemen, you don't have to take me so literally. Now I think they might even believe me. But what good would that do me? They would reply: You should have considered that you are writing not just for educated people, but that your works are read by a great number of the unlettered who are incapable of reflection, but only go by the words on the page. I would remain silent, then, and say: Take me back to jail. Anything I said would be in vain. If, however, I stood before a German secret court, if there were jurors, and if common people sat in the galleries, I would defend myself as follows. "Gentlemen! The German is a crocodile (universal cries of outrage. Crocodile!! Crocodile!! Order in the court, order in the court!) . . . Gentlemen, the German is a crocodile (Order in the court! The presiding judge: You are abusing the right of defense . . . ) Gentlemen, the German is a crocodile, but I beg you to allow me to finish. When I say the German is a crocodile, I certainly do not mean that the German is a savage, cruel and predatory beast like the crocodile and weep hypocritical childish tears. I think precisely the opposite. The German is tame, kindly, predatory but not at all predatory, and weeps honest tears like a child when caned. If I called the German people a crocodile, I did so solely because of their clothing, which greatly resembles that of the crocodile. It has thick, hard scales and is like a slate roof. When solids fall upon it, they bounce off, and when liquids fall, they run down. Now, gentlemen, you may be thinking that you would like to subject such a crocodile to animal magnetism; secondly, in order later to cure it of weak nerves, firstly, in order to make it clairvoyant, so that it may look inside itself, recognize its disease and divine the proper remedies. Where would you start? Would you stroke the crocodile's armor with your gentle, warmed hand? Surely not, you are too sensible for that. You would realize that such stroking makes as little impression on the crocodile as on the moon. Nay, gentlemen, you would kick the crocodile, drive nails into its scales, and, if that proved insufficient, you would shoot hundreds of bullets into its body. You would calculate that 99 percent of this expended energy was wasted, and that the 1 percent remaining would have precisely the gentle and modest effect you aim for with animal magnetism. That is also how I did it. If the German people were not a crocodile, however, but had soft skin like the lovely Princess of \* \* \*, then I would not have said it has the right to expel a prince with an unpleasing nose but would have spoken with them as follows: 'Princes—whether installed by God or the Devil, by their own grace, by wise providence or foolish chance—are destined to rule the peoples who become subject to them not simply with wisdom but also with strength, not just with strength but also with clemency. Where they do not do this, or are incapable, where they disgracefully violate the law, cultivate their own sins or those of their fellow pleasure-seekers; when they lend their ears not to the earnest voice of prudence but to the farcical songs of foolishness; when they are too weak or cowardly to resist the temptations or threats of foreign princes; when they take bloody and spiteful revenge on every misdemeanor as an insult to their power—a people so abused and maltreated may and must cast its criminal ruler from the throne and drive him from the land.' If, however, I had spoken thus to the German crocodile, how many of my words would have penetrated his shell? Little, nothing, indeed, less than nothing. A deficit of resistance would have been the result, and the crocodile would have interpreted my lesson as follows: a prince who rules despotically must have his civil list doubled. Thus, I said to them: You may expel any prince as soon as his nose displeases you. German good nature deducts 99 percent from such a lesson, and what remains is just enough that it is good for them to know and as I intended to teach them" . . . (applause all around). The presiding judge: All signs of approval or dissatisfaction are forbidden; if the peace is disturbed again I shall clear the courtroom . . . The German jurors thereupon retire to their room. After ten months, eleven days, twelve hours and thirteen minutes they return to the courtroom and declare the defendant to be not guilty. Deathly silence. The jurors look around them and go pale. During their consultations the accused, judge, royal procurator, defense attorney, all of the advocates and spectators had died of starvation and were decomposing. This sad story had caused quite a sensation in Germany, and Herr von Kampe in Berlin used it adroitly and had an essay published in Jarke's anti-revolutionary little rag demonstrating from the most recent experience that trial by jury was utterly unsuited to Germany.

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You, though, what do you think of it? Don't you think I am right? But my God! You were not paying attention at all. You were distracted and I know why. During my long speech you were thinking of nothing but who the princess might be whose complexion I praised. I will be careful not to divulge it. By remaining silent on the matter, all German princesses will apply the flattery to themselves, and I will win thirty-six reigning hearts, which may prove most useful when, sooner or later, I bump into the rough fists of some German police.

Yesterday I attended a world banquet. Not a banquet where, as in some European countries, the world is fed by a few mouths but rather one where the world itself dines via its representatives. I saw North and South Americans, Egyptians and East Indians, Swedes, Poles, French- and Englishmen, Germans, Swiss and Italians gathered around a table. Only the Russians were absent for, pleasantly occupied with the marrow bones of the Poles, they now disdain the lean beefsteaks of common oxen. For many years now, M. Jullien, editor of the well-known *Revue encyclopédique*, has been gathering his friends and those who are to become his friends—in other words, everybody—for a monthly encyclopedic dinner. This company is usually more than one hundred strong, but yesterday there were at most thirty guests. To name the little gods, the famous Poles, Italians and Frenchmen, would take us too far; to enumerate the famous Frankfurters would be quicker, but modesty forbids me. Only one man of European reputation was present, Sir Sidney Smith, whose biography you can find in an encyclopedia. He is a handsome man and robust for his age and, quite strikingly for a naval hero, he has the manner and attitude of a sophisticated Parisian. He would never smoke tobacco in a king's antechamber like Jean Bart. But, my God, I am amazed by the people who are not disgusted by all the ambition in Paris. This city is a cesspool of fame, which washes it through dark and dirty channels into the next stream, in which it flows further and further into the sea of oblivion. Sidney Smith has lived in Paris for many years. His daughter also lives here and is married to Baron Delmar (Ossianic name), a baptized Jew and ennobled purveyor from Berlin. People told me that he receives only persons of the highest rank, and that in order to gain admission to his house one needs more ancestors than were once required of a German canon. But this is the way of things in all countries: Christian nobility and Jewish money have an uncanny affinity for one another, which is why every residence in the Faubourg St. Germain is actually a suburb of Jerusalem.

When he heard my name, a young man from Geneva had himself introduced to me, saying that he had long wished to make my acquaintance. You know how I wag my pagoda head on such occasions; I always laugh at myself, and only later at the other person. The curious young man took his place beside me at table. I asked him how he liked Paris. He replied that politics was ruining his entire sojourn. I hesitated, but I can easily understand such thinking. In my own head, an entire wide highway is paved with this attitude. I responded that it is indeed sad that politics, government, the state, the law, liberty [are] all mere instruments to make mankind happy; mere paths to lead them to art, science, trade, domestic happiness, fraternal society, the full enjoyment of life—that these instruments are confused with the artwork itself, and these paths with the destination; that for sheer tasks one accomplishes no work; that governments' cruel wars against their peoples and the foolish nations amongst themselves drain all the energies of humanity; that the last imprecation will emit the last gasp and peace will find no one left to enjoy it. But the young man did not follow my way of thinking in these matters; he was disgusted by politics, like the poet Robert in Baden-Baden. This surprised me. I asked him whether he was studying in Paris, and if so, what? He replied that he had devoted himself to German philosophy and was now occupied with translating a work by Schelling into French. He was familiar with all of German philosophical literature, even the work of Carove, God's biographer. He intends to go to Munich next spring. So that was it! It is unnecessary for me to speak any more of this; I have done so often enough. As I passed him the salad, which was not yet dressed, I thought: As a German philosopher, he might not have noticed this at all.

During dessert people proposed toasts, as usual. First, à l'union des peuples! Then we drank our way through all the nations. First the Poles. M. Jullien announced that the company would organize festivities

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next month for Generals Romarino, Langerman and Schneider and Countess Plater, the Polish amazon, who would be arriving here soon. Thereupon a young Pole, von Plater, the countess's cousin, stood up and thanked us on behalf of his nation. Finally, it was the turn of the Germans—last of all. Jullien did not, however, drink to the health of the whole German body, but only that of its weak feet, to the health of *cette partie de l'Allemagne* that has, promotes and defends liberty. I, \* \* \*, and a Berliner I do not know were the three Germans present. The Berliner was probably a Hegelian or was thinking of the cholera or Köpenick and remained silent. I thought better of speaking since my French is poor. But I called on \* \* \*, who speaks it well, to respond. He remained silent, however. And not only that, he went red, as if he had spoken. Red and silent as a crab! I felt ashamed; no, that is the wrong word; I felt pained. And why did I not speak? The Pole before me spoke far worse French than I. And my heart was so full that I could have spoken for an entire hour, and I could have written everything down as quickly as it would have needed to be spoken. But it occurred to me what likely excused my timorousness but made the feeling all the more bitter. I thought: A Pole, a Spaniard represents his fatherland, his people stand behind him; what he says are not words, he touches keys that echo deeds, he remembers, and one hears not him but the past; one sees the distant land. But what do I represent, what deeds do I recall? I stand alone, I am a lackey, and like all Germans, I wear the livery of the count of Münch-Bellinghausen. I would have been judged as an author, an orator; after speaking well or poorly I would have been applauded or booed like an actor. The blood freezes, the tongue stands still. Let he to whom it applies feel ashamed. Arndt, to be sure, would not have been at a loss for words. He would have spoken of the Sicambri and Cherusci, of the Chatti and Franks, the Alemanni, Frisians, Chauci, Vandals, Burgundians, Quadi, Marcomanni, Bajovarians, Hermunduri and Teutons. He would have spoken of provinces, of Arminius the Cheruscan, of the Teutoburg Forest, of Marobodus and the Hohenstaufen. But I am not Arndt. I only know the Germans of the Regensburg Imperial Diet and the Peace of Vienna, and they are not far away.

It was announced at table that a society of Polish and French scholars had the intention of translating the classic literature of the Poles, some fifty to sixty volumes, into French and of using the proceeds from sales to support needy Poles. Certainly, the French have a fine manner of doing good. It is necessary, too, in order to make up for the harshness of their government. Disgrace and misfortune to the hypocritical legacy hunters of the July Revolution! None of the expelled Poles are allowed to enter Paris; like vagabonds, they are sent by predetermined routes to the South of France. They are to be led to the Mediterranean Sea, where they will be forced, on pain of death by starvation, to serve among the troops of Algiers. Africa or Siberia—this is the choice offered to you by Louis Philippe! This was the price that the shopkeeper Perrier paid for the fraternal kiss of the Count of Nesselrode!

[...]

Source: Ludwig Börne, *Briefe aus Paris, 1831–1832*, vol. 3. Paris: E. Brunet, 1833, pp. 258–78.

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