

Heinrich Heine: Excerpts from *The Romantic School* (1836)

Abstract

[Heinrich Heine](#) (1799–1856), the famous poet, critic, and representative of “Young Germany,” offers a critique of the Romantics in his book *The Romantic School* (1836). “Young Germany,” an anti-establishment literary movement, advocated a political definition of literature, as opposed to the Romantic emphasis on aesthetics. Writers such as Ludwig Börne, Karl Gutzkow, and Heinrich Laube belonged to the group, which fought for freedom of speech, emancipation of the individual, and democracy during the period of the conservative restoration after 1815.

Source

[...]

Political conditions in Germany were especially favorable for the Romantic School, which sought to introduce a national-religious literature similar to that which had prevailed in Germany during the Middle Ages. “Need teaches us to pray,” so goes the proverb; and truly was there never a greater need in Germany. Hence the masses were more inclined than ever toward prayer, toward religion, toward Christianity. No people is more devoted to its rulers than the Germans, and it was the mournful spectacle of their vanquished princes, groveling at the feet of Napoleon, that aggrieved the Germans even more than the pitiful condition to which the country had been reduced through war and foreign rule. The whole nation resembled those faithful old servants in once great but now diminished families who feel more keenly than their masters all the humiliations to which the latter are exposed, and who secretly weep most bitterly when the family silver is to be sold, and who clandestinely contribute their pitiful savings, so that patrician wax candles shall grace the family table instead of plebeian tallow dips; — just as we see this so touchingly depicted in old plays. The universal sadness found consolation in religion, and there ensued a pious resignation to the will of God, from whom alone all help could come. And, in fact, against Napoleon none could help but God himself. No reliance could be placed on the earthly legions; hence all eyes were religiously turned toward heaven.

We would have submitted to Napoleon quietly enough, but our princes, while they hoped for deliverance through Heaven, at the same time warmed to the thought that the united strength of their subjects might be very useful in effecting their purpose. Hence they sought to awaken in the German people a sense of homogeneity, and even the most exalted personages now spoke of a German nationality, of a common German fatherland, of a union of the Christian-Germanic races, of the unity of Germany. We were commanded to be patriotic, and straightway we became patriots, — for we always obey when our princes command. But it must not be supposed that the word “patriotism” means the same thing in Germany as in France. The patriotism of the French consists in this: the heart warms; through this warmth it expands; it enlarges so as to encompass with its all-embracing love, not only the nearest and dearest, but all of France, all of civilization. The patriotism of the Germans, on the other hand, consists in narrowing and contracting the heart, just as leather contracts in the cold; in hating foreigners; in ceasing to be European and cosmopolitan, and in adopting a narrow-minded and exclusive Germanism. We beheld this ideal empire of churlishness organized into a system by Herr Jahn; with it began the crusade of the vulgar, the coarse, the great unwashed — against the grandest and holiest idea ever brought forth in Germany, the idea of humanitarianism; the idea of the universal brotherhood of mankind, of cosmopolitanism, — an idea to which our great minds, Lessing, Herder, Schiller, Goethe, Jean Paul, and all people of culture in Germany, have always adhered.

What happened in Germany soon thereafter is only too familiar to you. After God, the snow, and the Cossacks had destroyed the best portion of Napoleon's forces, we Germans received the command from those highest in authority to free ourselves from the foreign yoke, and straightway we flared up with manly wrath at the bondage too long endured ; and we let ourselves be roused to enthusiasm by the fine melodies, but bad verses, of Koerner's ballads, and we fought until we won our freedom, for we always do what our princes command.

In a period when the crusade against Napoleon was forming, a school that was inimical to everything French, and that exalted everything in art and life that was Teutonic, could not help but achieve great popularity. The Romantic School at that time went hand in hand with the machinations of the government and the secret societies, and A. W. Schlegel conspired against Racine with the same goal that Minister Stein plotted against Napoleon. This school of literature swam in the current of the times; that is to say, with the current that flowed backwards to its source. When German patriotism and nationality were finally victorious, the popular Teutonic-Christian-Romantic school, "the new-German-religious-patriotic art-school" triumphed as well. Napoleon, the great classicist, who was as classic as Alexander or Caesar, was overthrown, and August Wilhlem and Friedrich Schlegel, the petty Romanticists, who were about as Romantic as Tom Thumb and Puss in Boots, strutted about as victors.

[...]

But we must also take into account the lack of political freedom in Germany. Our would-be wits are not allowed to indulge in even the slightest criticism of our real princes, and for this reason they take their revenge on the kings and princes of theater and stage. We Germans, who possessed scarcely a single political journal that dared censure the powers that be, were doubly blessed with a multitude of aesthetic journals that contained nothing but frivolous tales and theater criticism, so that anyone who perused our newspapers was almost forced to believe that the whole German people consisted only of gossipy nursemaids and drama critics. But such a belief would have done us an injustice. How unsatisfying such miserable scribbling was to us became clear after the July Revolution of 1830, when it seemed probable that free speech would be permitted in our dear fatherland, as well. Then there suddenly sprang into being public journals that criticized the good or poor performances of real kings, and some who did not play their parts well were booed out of their own capitals. Our literary Scheherezades, who were used to lulling the public, that coarse sultan, to sleep with their novellas and romances, were silenced; and the stage actors saw with dismay that the orchestra was empty, no matter how divinely they performed; and that even the private box of the formidable critic was often unoccupied. Formerly our good heroes of the stage were always complaining that they, and they alone, were the sole topics of public discussion, and that even their domestic affairs were exposed in the newspapers. But how frightened were they when it be to look as though, henceforth, they were no longer to be spoken of at all.

And, in fact, whenever revolution broke out in Germany, there was an end to the theater and to theater criticism; and the frightened romance writers, stage actors, and drama critics feared, with good reason, "that art was in danger of destruction." But that terrible calamity was fortunately warded off from our fatherland by the wisdom and energy of the Diet that met in Frankfurt. No revolution, it is to be hoped, will again break out in Germany; we are safe from the guillotine and the other terrors that result from freedom of the press. Even the Chambers of Deputies, whose meetings were such a powerful counter attraction to the subsidized theaters, are abrogated, and art is saved. Everything possible is now done for art, particularly in Prussia. The places of amusement are radiant with sensuous pleasures, the strains of the orchestra are heard, the ballet dancers execute their most enchanting pirouettes, the public is regaled with a thousand and one romances, and theater criticism is once again in full bloom.

[...]

PART IV.

During the Middle Ages the belief was prevalent among the people that when a building was to be erected, some living creature had to be slaughtered, and the cornerstone had to be laid where some of the blood had been sprinkled; by this means the security and stability of the building would be assured. Whether it was the old heathen superstition that the favor of the gods was only to be propitiated through sacrificial blood, or a misconception of the Christian doctrine of vicarious atonement that produced this belief in the wondrous efficacy of blood, this reliance on the consecration through blood, this faith in blood,— suffice it to say, that this belief existed and that ballads and legends abound with horrible tales of the slaughter of children and animals so that their blood might be used to strengthen great edifices. Today mankind is more sensible; we no longer believe in the magical power of blood, neither the blood of a nobleman, nor of a God; the great multitude believes in money only. Does the religion of the present consist in the metamorphosis of God into money, or of money into a God? Suffice it to say, they believe only in money, in coined metal; holy wafers of silver and gold are the only ones to which miraculous powers are now ascribed. Money is the beginning and end of all, and when now a building is erected, great care is taken that a casket, containing all sorts of coins, shall be placed under the cornerstone.

Just as in the Middle Ages, private buildings as well as state and church structures, rested on the faith in blood; so at the present time all our institutions are founded on the faith in money; —actual, tangible money. The former was superstition; the latter is undisguised egoism. The former destroyed reason; the latter deadens the emotions. The foundation of human society will at some time be a better one, and all the great hearts of Europe are anxiously striving to discover this new and better basis.

[...]

Source of English translation: Heinrich Heine, *The Romantic School*. Translated by S. L. Fleishman. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1882, pp. 31–34, 102–04, 177–79. Translation edited slightly by GHDI staff. Unaltered translation available online at: <https://archive.org/details/romanticschoolby00hein>

Source of original German text: Heinrich Heine, *Die romantische Schule* (1836), edited by Helga Weidmann. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976, pp. 28–31, 77–78, 130

Recommended Citation: Heinrich Heine: Excerpts from *The Romantic School* (1836), published in: *German History in Documents and Images*, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-369>> [July 12, 2025].