

Ludolf Wienbarg, *Aesthetic Campaigns*. Dedicated to Young Germany (1834)

Abstract

Ludolf Wienbarg (1802–1872) was a German writer and journalist. Wienbarg's *Aesthetic Campaigns*, based on his contemporaneous lectures on aesthetics at the University of Kiel, represented a manifesto for the "Young Germany" movement in German literature. In dedicating the book to "Young Germany," Wienbarg helped define the movement and popularize its name. In *Aesthetic Campaigns*, Wienbarg aimed his attacks not just at German governments and aristocratic society but, above all, at German universities and academic culture for what he deemed their stultifying influence on German youth. In the featured selection, Wienbarg attempts to reckon with the influence of Graecophile German classicism and towering figures such as [Goethe](#) and [Schiller](#). He also takes on German philosophic Idealism, zeroing in on what he sees as the deleterious effects of Kantian and Hegelian aesthetic theory. Wienbarg ultimately celebrates life and youth over learning and tradition as sources of beauty in the arts and literature, as well as more generally. In a liberal and German nationalist spirit, Wienbarg suggests that freedom of political participation and national spirit were crucial prerequisites for the flourishing of art and culture in that they nurtured strength and character. The writings of Wienbarg and other authors associated with "Young Germany," such as Karl Gutzkow, Theodor Mundt, [Heinrich Heine](#), and Heinrich Laube, were banned by the German Federal Assembly [*Bundesversammlung*] in December 1835 on the grounds that they spread dangerous immorality and undermined Christian religion.

Source

Words of Dedication

I dedicate these addresses to thee, Young Germany, not to the old. Each writer should declare straight away for which Germany his book is intended and in whose hands he wishes to see it. Liberal and illiberal are descriptions that by no means denote a true distinction. Most writers who write nowadays for the old Germany, whether aristocratic or learned or philistine, the three components that compose it, as we know, are armed with the shield of liberality. Those who write for Young Germany, however, declare that they do not recognize that old German aristocracy, that they wish to see that dead Old German scholarship consigned to the tombs of the Egyptian pyramids, and that they declare war upon all Old German philistinism and are prepared to pursue it relentlessly down to the tip of its famous night cap.

I dedicate these addresses to thee, Young Germany, the fleeting outpourings of alternating agitation, but all of them drawn from the soul's yearning for a better and finer life for our people. I presented them as lectures at a North German academy but hope that they do not carry the odor of the four faculties, which we know is not the freshest. I had not yet been touched by the outside air, and the summer of 1833 was my first and last as a lecturer. University air, court air and other bad and corrupted forms of air that set themselves apart from the free and sunny new dawn of peoples must either be avoided altogether or inhaled but briefly. Smelling salts with satirical vinegar such as those distilled by Börne in Paris are not to be disdained in this instance. Also laudable is the caution one observes when visiting the Cave of Dogs—especially when exposing oneself to court air—one must not bow too often or too deeply. The example of ministers and courtiers who are robbed thereby of the light of their eyes and minds and find themselves gasping deeply and fearfully for air serve as warning.

I dedicate these addresses to thee, Young Germany, the brown-haired and the blond, the latter of which surrounded me and was my muse, who inspired me twice a week. Yes, the sight of striving youths is inspiring, but anger and discontent are mixed with this inspiration when one regards them as the inmates of learned workhouses. Their studies are slavery, not freedom. They must braid the ropes and bonds for their own arms and feet; the state has condemned them to do so. How the unfortunates sought me out and loved me when I showed them liberty, at least in a picture.

Prussia is considering a plan to recast the old universities. That is something, at least, even if learned Germany may sweat blood over this outrage. To be sure, I do not trust the new casting because I cannot see where Prussia intends to find the proper metal, unless from Prussian-Lutheran cannon and church bells. But even this I consider preferable to the old toneless blend, which would not produce a sound even if struck with Thor's hammer.

In Reformation times the universities were the fulcrum of the lever of innovation and change. At present they move nothing; indeed, they resist movement and as such must be pushed out of the way.

Young men of energy and talent must be warned, however, not to succumb to the noble deception that they can nevertheless attain a suitable and national sphere of action at our universities. Believe me, you do not remove the curse that time has uttered over those ancient walls, but you risk the same curse being imposed upon your own intellectual vibrations. Tremble before the elderly alma mater, who as the ancestress of our universities drags her wrinkled, moth-eaten robes along the auditorium floors, and seeks to replace her old pedant-lovers with fresh young recruits. Tremble before her scrawny embrace, the kiss of her ghostly gray lips, for she will slowly suck the blood from your veins and shrink the exalted feelings in your breast to that minimum that an old, dried-out Wilhelm Traugott Krug or Christian Daniel Beck barely uses to breathe his last for Heaven. Remember that all great Germans of modern times became German university instructors only to their misfortune, that a Fichte, Schelling, Niebuhr or Schleiermacher, born tribunes of the people, were lost to the people and to their own higher glory. Fichte's Addresses to the German Nation did not fade away on the wind because the nation was deaf but because a wall had been erected between it and him that even Fichte's iron voice could not penetrate.

So now, Young Germany, go with God! We shall live yet another day together, and who knows whether our refuge and leader will have us wander through the desert as long as Moses did the Israelites.

If there is a gray head among thee, an old man with a youthful heart, I'll kiss his eye and forehead and wish myself, too, a warm spring under the icy blanket of coming years.

First Lecture.

Gentlemen. You wish to do me the honor of attending my lectures on aesthetics. I am gratified by your numbers and note with pleasure, but not without a sense of my own insufficient powers and remedies, the sympathy and attentiveness with which you await the beginning of these lectures which are precarious in more than one respect. To be sure, that which constitutes the soul, the principle of aesthetics, namely, the beautiful, the form, the shape, was already treated in antiquity by the most profound philosophers; but how disparate from this treatment is the present form of an academic discipline, in which aesthetics has appeared in Germany since the time of Baumgarten. Even the name derives from that era; it was Baumgarten's invention and in this meaning was completely unknown to the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Baumgarten entitled the two volumes that saw the light of day in 1750 and 1758 *Aesthetica*. I shall not criticize the barbarism of the word but only the barbarism of writing such a work in Latin. The origins of aesthetics, or of the vague discipline that people soon began to call more generally by that name, were barbarian and pedantic. Riedel and Sulzer turned it into a theory of the fine arts, and the latter even wrote such a "universal theory of the fine arts" in alphabetic order, two quarto volumes of sterile

theories that could be of use neither to the philosopher nor the artist. Aesthetics was accepted into higher regions when Kant turned his eminent acuity to this side, as well, and in the *Critique of Judgment* presented a critique of taste after his own perspective and principles. Following him, aesthetics was treated by several professors of philosophy, most thoroughly by Fr. Bouterwek, whose work (in two volumes) is the best known and went through three editions. Heinrich Luden wrote the *Outlines for Aesthetic Lectures* in 1808, which are as ingenious and sound as we expect of him. More brilliant and richer in true aesthetic content is Jean Paul's *Introduction to Aesthetics*, which went through a new edition in 1813.

I will summarize my view of these academic writings (Jean Paul's does not belong among them) and simply remark in advance that aesthetics has not always appeared in Germany with claims to scientific form and completeness, but rather that some very interesting aesthetic treatises express their ideas far more unrestrainedly and freely. They include Schiller's works on aesthetics, which I assume you all know, for instance, his essay *On the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*, *On the Necessary Limitations in the Use of Beautiful Forms* (!), *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, *On the Sublime*, his "Thoughts on the Use of the Common and Base in Art," etc. Many essays by Goethe in the *Propyläen* and *Kunst und Alterthum* can be regarded as very significant contributions to aesthetics in the age of Goethe. As to Schiller, he treated the theory of the beautiful more in relation to poetic form and sociability, while Goethe concentrated more on the visual arts, chiefly in antiquity. Goethe's comments were far more formative of taste to the degree that they emerge more from the uniform source of Goethe's life and his unclouded perceptions of the world and its beauties in nature, art and life, like all of Goethe's works, whether poetry or prose. While the needle of Goethe's mental compass unflinchingly tended towards the pole of the fine arts, Schiller's striving nature moved in the opposite direction and sought in vain to find the center of gravity suitable to his mental nature. Reinhold had introduced him to Kantian philosophy in Jena when Schiller was lecturing in history at the academy there. Now he found himself between two fires, the Greek of art and poetry that burned in Weimar, and the Nordic of philosophy that had erupted at that time with critical consuming fire from the Baltic Sea, in Königsberg. It is certain that his finer nature ultimately won the day, which is especially noticeable from the time when the preconceptions between him and Goethe fell away, and the two great natures strode towards full fruition through their competitive exchange of ideas and personal contact in Weimar. Only his aforementioned views on aesthetics still bear the clear marks of the intellectual discord that resulted from his studies of Kantian philosophy. He was unsure of himself and thus leaves a very uncertain impression upon the reader. The admiration for Kant's dictatorial and morally sublime genius, which Reinhold's lectures and study of the Kantian critiques had instilled in him, led him to adopt Kantian principles, which, however one understands, interprets, approves or rejects them, cannot easily be regarded by anyone as conducive to art or even compatible with the demands of the aesthetic sense. There is perhaps currently no consistent Kantian in the world, but everyone was a Kantian in those days. An epidemic of Kantian expression swept through Germany, and in 1801 Dietrich in Göttingen even published a Kantian postal doctrine entitled "Preliminary Presentation of the Justification for a General Post Office."

For that reason, one finds most of the manuals of aesthetics from that period more or less confined to the abstract formulas of Kantian philosophy, for example, by Ben David or Krug, who as such and in the heart of his philosophy is already death incarnate for aesthetics.

Gentlemen, as such, the element of aesthetics, the beautiful, doubtless belongs to the circle of the most sublime philosophy. The effects of beauty, and beauty itself, are a mystery to us, a riddle the key to whose solution we seek in a discipline that is reputed, if not to possess, then at least to be intent upon forging the great golden key to the world's every secret. Nevertheless, gentlemen, even if the key were to be found, unlocking and looking are apparently two different matters altogether. Let us assume, for example, that the late Hegel, whose writings also include an Aesthetics, which has its specific place and name within the closed circle of his philosophy, that Hegel not merely examined the cause and nature of

all things more deeply than all his predecessors but also truly and genuinely arrived at this cause and from there was in a position to reconstruct our dear Lord's entire world and to demonstrate why everything was thus and could not be otherwise, could he do more than to express the why of beauty in abstract formulas, could he, with creative energy, implant some inkling of beauty itself in our very hearts? Must the beautiful not be referred to by the beautiful in order to be felt to be beautiful, can one teach about beauty using unpoetic theories of beauty, does an abstract definition not negate the beauty it seeks to define and itself with it, can one apply the dissecting knife to the spiritual flower of all creation, whether it springs from the immediate source of nature or the hands of art, and should we call that which sighs under such hands dead or alive?

Thus, not every philosophy, as such, has the power and the quality to represent the principle of beauty worthily, still less can we expect the writings of learned pedantry, an exemplary instance or counter-instance of aesthetics such as we find in Baumgarten's Latin works, whose alien form is naturally the least deserving of criticism. The name aesthetics already could not be less suitable, this name that has suffered the deserved fate of initially being known only to Latin German scholars, academic lecturers, but which once presented to the wider public, as in the present day, is almost despised by scholars, humiliated by cloying bel esprits and mocked by the mouths of most. It is in fact greatly to be wished that the name and the entire treatment of the matters summarized under it had never appeared in Germany. The sense of beauty is by no means so widespread, solidified and ennobled among the Germans that it is protected and safe enough from the chill that threatens it on the one side from the wooden scepter of scholasticism and on the other from the frivolous dandyism of Gallicism. As a discipline, aesthetics arrived far too early for Germany. A sense of the beautiful, if it is to be presented worthily in books and lecture halls and to become a truly integral part of philosophy, must above all be fertilized and shaped by life. The beautiful itself does not however float on the air anymore than a blossom or a rose leaf; it must be attached to a trunk; it must have character and at the time when Baumgarten was writing his aesthetics the German nation lacked nothing more than this. National sentiment must precede the sense of beauty; political education must come before aesthetic. There is no finesse without strength, no expression without character, no beauty without expression, neither in the sculptor's nor in the writer's style. The Greek people were more fortunate than us. They possessed no aesthetics, but they had Platonic dialogues, among them true sacrifices to the goddess of beauty, and did they not also treat, as they do, the *καλον κάγαδον*^[1] as their main subject and did its author not also identify the beautiful with the eternally One, with God Himself. Our modern aesthetics, lacking a fullness of life, thus also restricts itself completely to the beautiful or the beauties in poetry and art, and these are, just as many bear the name, mere theories of the so-called fine arts and sciences, which at first set up a few preliminary definitions of the beautiful, the sublime, the graceful, the witty, etc., and then follow them with a potpourri from the history and technology of the fine arts and sciences. There is but one work on ordinary aesthetics that is brilliant and aesthetic, and that is by Jean Paul, just as there is but one work that grasps aesthetics in the higher, Greek-Platonic sense, and that is by Erwin von Solger. The general ignorance regarding this work alone must make two things clear: that it was either not written in a form conducive to the times or that its contents do not appeal to the times. I believe both to be true. The form is dialectical and the content an apotheosis of the beautiful with an appearance of enthusiasm that not merely approaches the Platonic but seems even to surpass it while lacking the warmth and virtuosity of the Greek master. In order to get some idea of it, if one compares Jean Paul's at once true and brilliant depiction of the Greeks with the life that we Germans lead in Germany, one realizes that the enthusiasm of a Platonic dialogue like the Symposium is a natural one, while Solger's was manufactured, like more or less every enthusiasm that stands isolated and does not draw its source from its own time.

NOTES

[1] *Kalos kagathos* or the beautiful and the good.

Source: Ludolf Wienbarg, *Aesthetische Feldzüge. Dem jungen Deutschland gewidmet*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1834, pp. V–10. Available online at:
https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/wienbarg_feldzuege_1834

Translation: Pamela Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Ludolf Wienbarg, Aesthetic Campaigns. Dedicated to Young Germany (1834), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormarx-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-5011>> [August 07, 2024].