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**Rüdiger Safranski**  
**Romanticism**  
**A German Affair**

**Translated by Michael Ritterson**

## *Contents*

Preface

11

Book One

### *Romanticism*

Chapter One

*Romantic beginnings: Herder puts out to sea. The reinvention of culture.  
Individualism and the voices of nations. Things set rocking  
on the river of time.*

17

Chapter Two

*From the political to the aesthetic revolution. Political impotency  
and poetic boldness. Schiller's invitation to the grand game.  
The Romantics prepare for their entrance.*

29

Chapter Three

*The age of scribblers. Farewell to enlightened sobriety.  
From the strange to the marvelous. Friedrich Schlegel and  
irony's career. Lovely chaos. The hour of the critical  
dictators. Making the world a work of art.*

48

Chapter Four

*Fichte and the Romantic desire for selfhood. Excess of  
the heart. Creations ex nihilo. Romantic conviviality.  
The legendary Jena commune. Soaring high and fear  
of crashing.*

70

## Chapter Five

*Ludwig Tieck. In the literature factory. The ego excesses of William Lovell. Literary satires. The virtuoso of the pen meets Wackenroder, devotee of the arts. Two friends in search of the reality of their dreams. Moonlit, fair, enchanted night, and the Age of Dürer. Venusberg in twilight. Franz Sternbald's Journeys.*

89

## Chapter Six

*Novalis. Friendship with Schlegel. At Schiller's bedside. Sophie von Kühn. Love and death. On the ecstasy of transcending. Hymns to the Night. Above ground, below ground. The mystery of the mountain. Christianity or Europe. Where no gods are, ghosts hold sway.*

109

## Chapter Seven

*Romantic religion. Inventing God. Schlegel's experiments. Enter Friedrich Schleiermacher: Religion is a sense and a taste for the infinite. Religion beyond good and evil. Eternity in the present. Redemption through earthly beauty. Scenes from the life of a religious virtuoso.*

133

## Chapter Eight

*Mythology and the beautiful. The Oldest System-Program of German Idealism. The mythology of reason. From the reason of the future to the truth of origin. Görres, Creuzer, Schlegel, and the discovery of the East. The other antiquity. Hölderlin's gods. Their present and their transience. Vanishing in the image.*

150

## Chapter Nine

*Poetic politics. From revolution to Catholic order.*

*Romantic idea of empire. Schiller and Novalis on the Kulturnation.  
Fichte's nation. From "I" to "we". Society, the womb. Adam Müller  
and Edmund Burke. Volkstümlichkeit. Heidelberg Romanticism.  
War of Liberation. Romanticism under arms. Hatred of Napoleon.  
Kleist as the genius of hatred.*

172

#### Chapter Ten

*Romantic malaise over normality. Enlightened disenchantment.  
Reason and expediency. Pride and suffering of artists. Kreisler.  
Critique of philistinism. The loss of diversity. The spirit of geometry. Boredom.  
The god of Romanticism versus the great yawn. The lyric "As if."*

193

#### Chapter Eleven

*Romantic departures and ruptures. Eichendorff: Up and Away.  
Siren songs. Trust in God. At the window. Poets and their Compatriots.  
The poetry of life. Pious irony. The Good-for-Nothing – the fool in Christ.  
E. T. A. Hoffmann: With a light touch. Not firmly rooted. Homo ludens.  
The aesthetics of fright. Paradise is just next door, but so is Hell.  
Princess Brambilla and the great laughter. Skeptical dreamer.*

210

#### Book Two

#### *The Romantic*

#### Chapter Twelve

*The chaos of ideas in retrospect. Hegel as critic of Romanticism.  
Commands of the Weltgeist and arrogant subjects. Biedermeier  
and Young Germany. On the path to real reality. Unmasking contests.  
Critique of heaven, discovery of earth and the body. Romantic future,  
prosaic present. Strauss. Feuerbach. Marx. Heine between two fronts.  
Concluding verses to the Romantic School and defense of nightingales.  
Soldier in humanity's War of Liberation and no more than a poet.*

## Chapter Thirteen

*Wagner the Young German. Rienzi in Paris. A Romantic revolutionary in Dresden. The early-Romantic dreams come true: The new mythology. The Ring of the Nibelung. How the free man brings about the Twilight of the Gods. Anti-capitalism and anti-Semitism. The mythic experience. Tristan and Romantic night. The symbolist intoxication. Major attack on the senses.*

## Chapter Fourteen

*Nietzsche on Wagner: Art's first circumnavigation of the earth. The un-Romantic spirit of the times: Materialism, realism, historicism. Work house. Romanticism of the Dionysian. Music, the world language. Nietzsche's turn away from Wagner. Redemption from the redeemer. Staying true to the earth. Heraclitus's and Schiller's worldling at play. The end of ironic resistance. Collapse.*

## Chapter Fifteen

*Life, nothing but life. Youth Movement. Life reformed. Landauer. Onset of a mysticism. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Rilke, and Stefan George. Staging Wilhelminian magic: Steely Romanticism in the building of a battle fleet. The ideas of 1914. Thomas Mann in the war. Ethical air, Faustian scent, cross, death, and grave.*

## Chapter Sixteen

*From the Magic Mountain to the plain. Langemarck. Wanderer between Two Worlds. Two Adventurous Hearts: Ernst Jünger and Franz Jung. Dance fever in Thuringia. Journey to the East. The strain of objectivity. Waiting for the great moment. Exploding antiquities at the end of the Republic. Heidegger's political Romanticism.*

## Chapter Seventeen

*Romanticism accused. How Romantic was National Socialism?*  
*The Romanticism debate in Nazi cultural policy. Nazi modernism:*  
*A Romanticism of steel. Reich Romanticism. Nuremberg.*  
*Romantic mentality as prehistory. Dionysian life or biologism.*  
*Worldly innocence, worldly piety, and world-shattering fury.*  
*The loftier interpretation of the vulgar events. Heidegger, for example.*  
*Hitler and the fevered dreams of Romanticism. Madness and truth.*

348

## Chapter Eighteen

*The catastrophe and its Romantic interpretation. Thomas Mann's*  
*Doctor Faustus. Loftier interpretations of the vulgar events.*  
*Sobering up. Alcoholics drying out. The skeptical generation.*  
*Once again, New Objectivity. Avant-garde, technique, and the*  
*masses. Adorno and Gehlen in the night studio. How Romantic*  
*was the '68 movement? Romanticism and politics.*

370

## Sources and References

395

## Index of Names

411

## *Foreword*

What was known, circa 1800, as the “Romantic School”; those who gathered around the Schlegel brothers; those whose self-confident, sometimes doctrinaire voices were heard in the Schlegels’ short-lived but impassioned journal, “Athenaeum”; the untrammelled speculative spirit of philosophical beginnings on the part of Fichte and Schelling; what enchanted the readers of Tieck’s and Wackenroder’s early tales as a longing for the past and a newly awakened sense of the magical; the gravitation toward night and the poetic mysticism of Novalis; the personal sense of a new beginning; the soaring spirit of a young generation that appeared, at once pensive and exuberant, to bear the revolutionary impulse into the world of the intellect and poetry – this whole movement has a pre-history, of course, a beginning before the beginning.

These young people, not lacking in self-confidence, meant to make a fresh start, but they also continued the enterprise begun a generation earlier by the “Storm and Stress” movement. Johann Gottfried Herder, the German Rousseau, had set things in motion; we can mark the beginning of the history of Romanticism at the moment when Herder set out, in 1769, on a sea voyage to France – hastily, as if fleeing, weary of the stifling conditions of his life in Riga, where the young preacher had to contend with orthodoxy and was entangled in unpleasant literary feuds. On his way, he conceived ideas which would lend wings not only to him.

So Herder puts out to sea. And here begins our voyage tracing the course of Romanticism and the Romantic in German culture. It leads to Berlin, Jena, and Dresden, where the Romantics set up their headquarters and set off the pyrotechnic display of their ideas; where they dreamed, critiqued, and imagined. The Romantic epoch in the narrower sense ends with Eichendorff and E. T. A. Hoffmann, Romantic escape artists who were at the same time constrained. The one a good Catholic and “Regierungsrat”, the other a liberal “Kammergerichtsrat”. Both leading double lives not limited to their Romanticism. An intelligent, a liveable form of Romanticism.

This book is about Romanticism and the Romantic. Romanticism is an epoch. The Romantic is a state of mind not limited to one period. It found its fullest expression in the Romantic epoch, but it does not end with that age; the Romantic exists to the present day. It is not just a German phenomenon, but it was given a particular stamp in Germany, one so distinctive that, in other countries, German culture is sometimes equated with Romanticism and the Romantic.

The Romantic appears in Heine, even though he struggles against it, just as it appears in his friend Karl Marx. The pre-1848 era planted it in the political realm, in its dreams of nation and society. Then, Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche, who did not want to be Romantics but were, as disciples of Dionysius. Uninhibitedly Romantic was the Youth Movement around 1900. With the beginning of the war in 1914, Thomas Mann and others believed it necessary to defend Germany's Romantic culture against Western civilization. The restless 1920s were fertile ground for Romantic stirrings – among the religious charlatans, the leagues and sects, the journeyers to the East; people waited for the great moment, for political deliverance. Heidegger's vision of politics true to existence flowed into an unfortunate political Romanticism that caused him to take sides with the National Socialist revolution. How Romantic was National Socialism? Was it not perhaps more a perverted rationalism than Romanticism run wild? Is Thomas Mann's "Doctor Faustus" not really a too *lofty interpretation of the vulgar events* (Mann) – thus, a Romantic book passing judgment on Romanticism? Then, the sobering process of the postwar years, the "skeptical generation," with its reservations about Romanticism. This journey through the bizarre German intellectual landscape ends with the last Romantic awakening of any magnitude: the student movement of 1968 and its legacy.

The best definition of the Romantic is still Novalis's definition: *When I give to the ordinary a lofty sense, to the commonplace a mysterious semblance, to what is known the dignity of the unknown, to the finite an infinite appearance, then I romanticize it.*

In this formulation, we note that Romanticism maintains an underground connection to religion. It is one in an unbroken 200-year history of movements in search of something to set over against the demystified world of secularization. Romanticism is also, among many other things, a continuation of religion by aesthetic means. This gave it the power of an unprecedented exaltation of the imagination. Romanticism triumphs over the reality principle. Good for poetry, bad for politics, should Romanticism ever stray into the political realm. There begin the problems we have with the Romantic.

The Romantic spirit takes many forms; it is musical, attempting and tempting; it loves the remoteness of the future and of the past, the surprises in everyday life, the extreme, the unconscious, the dream, madness, the labyrinths of reflection. The Romantic spirit is never the same, is metamorphic and contradictory, yearning and cynical, in love with the incomprehensible yet down-to-earth, ironic and fanciful, narcissistic and congenial, attentive to form and destructive of form. Goethe, in old age, said that the Romantic was the diseased.

But he, too, did not wish to do without it.

Book Two

*The Romantic*

...

that we are not very reliably at home  
in our interpreted world.        *Rilke*

The great epoch of Romanticism was past by the second decade of the nineteenth century. This did not change the fact that Romantic works continued to appear. Achim von Arnim and Joseph von Eichendorff were still producing. Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué did not stop writing his stories of knights, damsels, and hobgoblins or adapting the Nordic sagas. He was very well received by the mass audience, was much read, as was E. T. A. Hoffmann, who haunted the Berlin of that time. The magical, the medieval, the ghostly, and even the sanctimonious continued to sell briskly. Themes of this type had by now settled into the bottomlands of lending libraries and inexpensive editions for ladies. Among the more pretentious, they elicited only a smile. And the revolutionary, innovative, and self-assured impetus had by now expended itself.

In the other arts, Romantic impulses were just then having their full effect. In the music of Schumann and Schubert and in the paintings of the “Nazarenes,” for example, much to the displeasure of Goethe, who took the opportunity, in 1818, to settle accounts with the whole movement, even though he had once held the Schlegel brothers in high regard and had patronized them. Together with his adviser in the visual arts, Johann Heinrich Meyer, he wrote an article titled “Neo-German, Religious-Patriotic Art.” The piece delivers a harsh and derisive rejection of both religious and patriotic ambitions in the arts. It is simply not true, the article says, that *pious enthusiasm* and *religious feeling ... are indispensable conditions for artistic ability*. Rather, craftsman-like talent, a sense of form and of nature, and an unspoiled *temperament* are sufficient conditions for art. Religion can certainly contribute its share if, as in antiquity, it sensuously consecrates earthly things and does not revel in the super-sensuous, where there is little left for the artist to do. And as for the patriotic, art is acknowledged to have been locally determined in its origin but distinguished precisely by the fact that it depicts the universal in the individual.

With this rebuff, prefigured in a similarly telling, rationalistic critique of Romanticism by Johann Heinrich Voss, the poetic image of a sanctimonious, medieval-fixated, Catholicizing, Germanomaniacal Romanticism gained currency in one part of the public

mind. The fact that Friedrich Schlegel and Adam Müller in the meantime were active in support of the “Holy Alliance” under Metternich corresponded with this image of a Romanticism that had forgotten its experimental, fantastic, introspective, even revolutionary character. Friedrich Schlegel himself was at pains either to refurbish or to denounce it. Back then, writes Schlegel in “The Signature of the Age” (1820), *it was as it always is when the blood and all the life forces go too much to one’s head: The individual takes himself, his thoughts and ideas too seriously. A good thing that it produced only a chaos of ideas and nothing worse. Fortunate that there were the forces of order and traditions more powerful than subjective free choice. Consequently, only the concepts are turned upside down, not the nations. It is good if they prefer to obey not their heads but the trustworthy authorities.*

Of these there were plenty in Germany in the years following 1815. In Berlin, Hegel was the one who refashioned his Romantic beginnings into an impressive philosophy of order, he, too, unsparing in his critique of free choice and Romantic subjectivism.

The Prussian minister of education, Altenstein, a comparatively liberal politician, was among the philosopher’s admirers and supported Berlin University’s invitation to Hegel, which he accepted in 1818. What Altenstein admired in Hegel and what captured the attention of and fascinated an audience seeking respite from the turmoil of the years preceding, was his characteristic way of assimilating the modernizing impulses that had followed the French Revolution, while connecting them to a conservative, pro-régime approach. When Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right” appeared in 1820, with its famous prefatory statement: *What is rational, is real; and what is real, is rational*, Altenstein congratulated the author with the words: *You have given ... to philosophy ... the only correct position regarding reality, and so you will most surely succeed in sparing your students the destructive presumption which discards tradition without having understood it and contents itself with the arbitrary creation of empty ideals, especially with regard to the state.*

The Romantics had once called for *progressive, universal poetry*, and now Hegel was at work developing his progressive, universal philosophy, but always with an emphatic critique of the *capriciousness of arrogant subjects*, which he equated with the spirit of Romanticism. Thus, for example, Hegel referred to the philosopher and Fichte-pupil Jakob Friedrich Fries, persecuted by the state authorities, as a *commander-in-chief of that shallowness that calls itself philosophy* and which presumed to drag the state, that structure erected by the resolute *work of reason*, into the *porridge of heart, friendship, and enthusiasm*.

For Hegel, such officially sanctioned polemics against subjective Romanticism were entirely compatible with a conviction which, until his dying day, caused him to raise a glass

of claret every July fourteenth in observance of the French Revolution. Back then, together with Schelling and Hölderlin, he had planted a liberty tree on the Neckar Meadow in Tübingen and had begun drafting a philosophy of associative relationship through love. The Revolution remained for him a *magnificent sunrise of the senses*, the *immense discovery of the very heart of freedom*. Even in 1822, at the same time that he called upon the Prussian authorities to take action against a literary magazine in which his philosophy had been criticized, he says, concerning the French Revolution: *For as long as the sun has stood in the firmament and the planets revolved in their courses around it, we had not seen mankind stand on its head – that is, on its thoughts – and construct reality according to them.*

Revolutionary activity and Romantic dreaming by *arrogant subjects* are rejected by Hegel, yet he takes the revolutionary and imaginative impulse into the beating heart of the “Weltgeist,” which does its work without the philosopher having to be involved. He must, and can, only disclose in concepts what will occur anyway. This is the necessarily progressive process, a history of the spirit’s awakening in the material reality of the life of a society. The whole is the true because the whole is becoming the true, and when this has come to pass, philosophy can recognize itself therein. *The owl of Minerva only begins its flight when twilight falls.* For Hegel, history truly is the Last Judgment. History puts on trial all that is antiquated, everything that resists the spirit’s urge for self-realization. For this, no rebels, Romantics, and demagogues are needed. They only destroy themselves. Hence Hegel’s professions of loyalty to a state which is in the process of removing “demagogues” from service. *I adhere to the idea*, he writes to Friedrich Niethammer, *that the Weltgeist of our time has given the command to advance; such a command is obeyed; this being (“Wesen”) moves forward like an armored phalanx in close formation, irresistibly and as imperceptibly as the sun moves across the sky, through thick and thin; countless light troops opposing or supporting it flank on all sides, most of them having no idea what is at stake, and receive only blows to the head, as from an invisible hand.* We must surely include the Romantics among these *light troops* that sustain the blows to the head.

Hegel thinks in terms of the “Weltgeist” and need not concern himself with everyday affairs. Once, when Napoleon marched into Jena and Hegel was penning the final lines of his “Phenomenology of the Spirit,” he fled the burning town headlong to save himself. The “Weltgeist” had dealt roughly with him, but even then he would not be deterred from admiring it: *It is indeed a marvelous sensation so see such an individual, seated ... on a horse, reaching across the world and dominating it.*

It is equally true of the “Weltgeist” that where wood is chopped chips will fall. In Jena, Hegel was still one of the chips. Later, in Berlin, he has moved significantly closer to the woodcutters.

The political and social atmosphere in which Hegel celebrated his successes was one of calm winds and an appetite for work, without flights of enthusiasm. Hegel’s philosophy, which presents the “Weltgeist” as a working spirit, too, is well suited to this climate. After work comes recreation. Art which aspires to be anything more than recreation is badly off. Bad times, in other words, for the lofty, and for dizzying Romantic flights. Good times for the theater and the opera, as long as they are made easy for the audience, with grand, sweeping stage effects. While Napoleon held the world breathless, the fate tragedy appeared in the German theater. And when Napoleon fell, and the grand deeds and the grand fate ended, the playing with such deeds and fate stopped as well. Light fare became even lighter. Actors celebrated their triumphs in farcical roles; but stage sets became more and more elaborate. One beneficiary of this trend was E. T. A. Hoffmann’s opera “Undine”, whose magnificence was then surpassed by the staging of Carl Maria von Weber’s “Der Freischütz”. But the most overwhelming effects were achieved by Gaspare Spontini; here even elephants were brought onstage and cannons fired.

People wanted to recover from the stresses of the last three decades. As in the theater lobby during intermission, there was a buzzing of voices as the most recent excitement ebbed away. Hegel’s grand philosophy had the same effect here as a leisurely review of events that had once commanded everyone’s attention and were now past. Time of harvest – people could take stock and store away their provisions. Time of Biedermeier.

But the spirit of the times was more sophisticated than it seemed at first. The policies of the restoration after 1815 were intended to funnel life into an eighteenth-century order, as if nothing had changed since that time. But too much had changed. Trust in the stability and reliability of received forms had something forced and premeditated about it. People accepted what was offered them, but with a cautious fear of trickery. Convictions began to blink, morality squinted. People flinched, pulled their heads in, settled in comfortably, and were glad to peer out *from a cozy little room* (Eichendorff) into the world outside, where things were going abysmally, where *twilight* held sway. No wonder that Hoffmann’s tales were in such favor. Hegel also numbered him among the *light troops*; he too deserved a blow to the head: *But most recently, it is mainly the unstable inner confusion, sounding all the most repulsive, dissonant chords, that has become the fashion and brought about the humor of horror and the grotesque face of irony in which Theodor Hoffmann, for example, took delight.*

Hegel detected another kind of subjectivist Romantic capriciousness in Heinrich von Kleist, whose works did not gain a measure of recognition until the 1820s. *Kleist suffers from the common, unfortunate inability to invest his primary interest in nature and truth, and from his compulsion to seek it in deformity.* Thus, in his case, too, *capricious mystification* resulting only from an individual's setting himself apart from substantive purposes and objective moral content and imputing to himself a second, deeper inner self, *an inward, unfamiliar life beyond*, from which *higher glories of the soul* are said to shine forth. But in this way, says Hegel, *poetry is played off into the nebulous, the vain, and the desolate.* What this leads to can be seen in the Prince of Homburg, who loses himself in daydreams instead of listening to the plan of battle. This, says Hegel, is *in bad taste* and unsuitable as a motive for tragedy.

For Hegel in his time, truth clearly resides in sound authenticity. The thrilling and quixotic, for him, belongs to the past. The past, not the present, is characterized by the statement: *The true is the bacchic delirium in which not one member is not drunk.* He directs his energy to designing a system of historical reason which shows the present to be the successful result of a lengthy process and secures it against disillusionment for the future. The essential thing is to grow into readiness for partnership with objective reason. In this way, too, one can achieve intellectual equilibrium.

On shaky ground – though people act as if it were solid – there is great excitement. Never has there been such pleasant conviviality. In Berlin, the clubs, societies, round tables, and interest groups spring up everywhere. There is a “Society without Rules,” whose only agenda is *to dine at midday in the German tradition*; Hegel, too, is occasionally in attendance. The “Society of Cockchafers” devotes itself to *the inclinations of the human heart*; the “League of Philartes” means to *arouse the soul from its slumber*; and on Friedrichstrasse the “Debate Union for the Discussion of Unresolved Questions” holds its meetings. These are also, in some degree, politically oriented social groupings that wish to evade police surveillance. But more than that, they exist for the comfort and the mutual assurance that people are on firm ground. Those who feel like mere cogs in the machinery are still curious enough to want to know how the machinery works and what the whole thing is meant to do. But people do not take curiosity so far as to let what they learn unsettle them. A curiosity so fearful of risk can well be satisfied in Hegel's lecture hall. Thus the veterinarians, insurance agents, government bureaucrats, opera tenors, and clerks all flock to his lectures. They probably did not understand Hegel particularly well, but it was enough to understand that here was someone who understood everything and pronounced it good.

In October 1829 Hegel had been elected rector of the university in Berlin. The government's confidence in him was so great that he was also named as state's plenipotentiary for oversight of the university, an office created in connection with the "Prosecution of Demagogues." In this dual role, Hegel embodied a remarkable synthesis: representing both the autonomous spirit of the university and the suspension of its autonomy.

During Hegel's tenure as rector came the French revolution of July 1830, which also represented a break in Germany's intellectual and political culture. During his rectorate until the end of 1830, only one student was jailed for wearing a French cockade. The other violations of the code of discipline gave no serious cause for alarm: Twelve students were smoking where it was not permitted, three engaged in duels, fifteen were involved in fisticuffs, thirty had brawled in pubs – but all these infractions had been without political motivation. So it appeared for a time, on the surface; but the events of 1830, the second great revolution on the other side of the Rhine, had deeper effects. They would lead, from this point on, to an unbroken series of attempts to stand Hegel back from his head onto his feet. They would lead a new generation and a new, political Romanticism to invest the legacy of Hegelian metaphysics in an earthly existence rich with promise.

The signal comes in the form of the political debates of which Hegel complains in one of his last letters. *But at this present time*, he writes on December 13, 1830, *the enormous interest in politics has swallowed up all others – a crisis in which everything thought to be valid appears to be called into question*. So it was, but the method by which it was called into question, the famous dialectics, was borrowed from Hegel himself, who died of cholera in the autumn of 1831.

In the summer of 1830, Heine, at that time on the island of Helgoland, greets news of the events in France with these lines: *I am no longer able to sleep, and through my fevered mind race the most bizarre nocturnal apparitions. Waking dreams ... enough to drive one mad ... thus, last night I ran throughout the German lands, down to the smallest, rapping on the doors of my friends and rousing people out of their sleep ... I gave a jab in the ribs to many a fat philistine with his repulsive snoring; and yawning, they asked: 'What time is it?' In Paris, my friends, the cock's already crowed, that's all I know*. For the next decade and a half, the cock will not cease crowing – not in philosophy, either. In 1844 Karl Marx will conclude the introduction to his "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" with the fanfare blast: *Philosophy cannot be realized without the abolition of the proletariat; the proletariat cannot be abolished without the realization of philosophy. When all the essential conditions are met, the German day of resurrection will be heralded by the crowing of the Gallic cock*.

For Marx, as for others on the cultural scene after 1830, it is a question of “realization.” The new generation – Gutzkow, Wienbarg, Heine, Börne, Mundt – breaks free of the *ethereal world of dreams* (Heine). Romanticism has poeticized reality, they say, and now the need is to realize poetry. Accordingly, for the philosophers this means: Up to now, the world has been interpreted; now the need is to change it. Karl Gutzkow, a spokesman for that movement calling itself “Young Germany,” sets it to verse in his drama “Nero”: *At last, instead of hollow fantasy, / From treacherous phantom mist / Sophistic age, adrift in dreams, / Let there arise a true, a clear, / And better reality.*