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Pericles S. Vallianos

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ROMANTICISM AND POLITICS:
FROM HEINRICH HEINE TO CARL SCHMITT – AND BACK AGAIN

Pericles S. Vallianos

ABSTRACT: After a reference to the debate concerning the concept of Romanticism (Lovejoy vs Wellek), the article briefly evokes certain key stances of English and French literary Romanticism. It then points to the distinguishing features of German Romanticism, namely the enlargement of the doctrine into an integral metaphysics with the concept of the “organic state” at its core (A. Müller). The critique of political Romanticism by two revolutionary democrats (H. Heine and A. Ruge) is then presented. The article closes with a critique of C. Schmitt’s interpretation of political Romanticism.

I. Romanticisms

Romanticism was a cultural movement which put European civilization on new tracks. It is, however, notoriously difficult to define – so ramified are its particular forms and branches. The term “Romantic” as a marker of a new age of “progressive universal poetry” superseding the anti-poetic Classicism of the Enlightenment was invented by Friedrich Schlegel¹ and elaborated further by his brother, August Wilhelm. In France it emerged after the Bourbon restoration and established itself towards the end of the 1820s and especially in the wake of the notorious “*Hernani* battle” of 1830.²

Capitalizing on this continuing difficulty a whole century and more after Romanticism’s first stirrings, Arthur O. Lovejoy argued, in a landmark article published in 1924, that we must give up striving for a general definition. In his view, there is no *one* internally cohering Romanticism. The concept must not be “hypostatized” as if it referred to a single real entity “existing in nature”.³ What we have instead is a variety of local and specific cultural and literary phenomena to which, for the purposes of brevity and broad-stroke classification, a common name is appended. Lovejoy’s “Romanticisms” (in the

¹ In the celebrated *Athenäum*, fragment 116 (1798).

² Concerning the origin of the term, see R. Wellek, “The Concept of ‘Romanticism’ in Literary History, I. The Term ‘Romantic’ and its Derivatives”, *Comparative Literature* 1, 1 (Winter 1949), pp. 1-23.

³ A. O. Lovejoy, “On the Discrimination of Romanticisms”, *PMLA* 39, 2 (June 1924), pp. 229-253; see especially p. 236.

plural, as the pre-eminent historian of ideas insisted) may have occasionally shared certain attitudes and intentions, but they must be “distinguished” from one another; for it is not the case that there is a common core of assumptions and method informing them all. It would seem, then, that Romanticism is a paradigm case of Wittgenstein’s “open concepts”.⁴

This aporetic nominalism was rebutted a quarter of a century later by the great historian of literature, René Wellek.⁵ He notes that our understanding of the transition from Classicism to Romanticism is plagued by similar perplexities as those we face in any other crucial change of historical epochs (e.g. from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance). The categories we use are ideal types that do not mirror all the empirical facts involved. They distill general trends, thus giving rise to working hypotheses in interpretation. Periodization is, hence, methodologically inescapable, and without it history would remain a collation of raw facts. For the rest, Wellek asserts, Romanticism is a radical reorientation of cultural interests from the end of the eighteenth century onwards in Europe as a whole. It is structured around newfound goals and methods propagated wherever the new movement takes hold, although these are obviously refracted through local conditions. It can be usefully summed up as the rejection of the exhausted French Neoclassicism of “rules” to enable recourse to the reignited imagination as the sole means for unlocking the mystery of nature. Myths, symbols, intuitions, visions are the instruments of the Romantic consciousness in order to open up the supra-logical depth of human existence. This victory of elementary feeling over the frigid mechanics of ratiocination can be detected in the proto-Romanticism of Rousseau, in the youthful poetics of Goethe and Schiller (during the *Sturm und Drang* period), as well as in the delicate meditation of Chateaubriand.

We are not concerned here with Romanticism as a literary movement, but rather as a vehicle for political attitudes and ideals. Yet, there is a common element in the literary and the political versions, namely the affirmation of passion as the moving force for reforming praxis, whether in the spiritual or in the social arena. The Romantic may choose to serve the most disparate

⁴Writing on the same topic much later, Lovejoy reaffirms his claim that there is no unified Romanticism, but in a “spirit of compromise” he does now concede that that last two decades of the eighteenth century did represent a watershed in European civilization marked by the emergence of a loose nebula of new ideas conventionally labeled “Romantic”. See A. O. Lovejoy, “The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2, 3 (June 1941), pp. 257-278.

⁵R. Wellek, “The Concept of ‘Romanticism’ in Literary History, II. The Unity of European Romanticism”, *Comparative Literature* 1, 2 (Spring 1949), pp. 147-172.

political causes, and yet his/her commitment is fueled by the emotion unleashed by the political vision, whatever that might be. At the end of the eighteenth century the great historical landmark for all thought and feeling is the French Revolution. Romantic fervor may indeed be mobilized either in defending (Fichte) or in combating it (Chateaubriand). In both cases, it is sentiment welling up from the dark recesses of the soul that energizes the active subject.

After a brief youthful fascination with revolutionary republicanism (Wordsworth: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, // But to be young was very heaven"),⁶ the first generation of Romantics in Great Britain gravitated towards a quietist traditionalism,⁷ a change evoked in Book IX of *The Prelude* with exquisite delicacy.⁸ The theoretician of this conservatism was Edmund Burke. His Romanticism is exhibited through the elevation of the sublime in his aesthetics, but also in his political philosophy through the assertion that time-honored "prejudices" are the cement of the social order. These may appear intolerable from the point of view of cold reason; yet they mold the community as an organic whole around emotionally charged symbols, rituals and memories (institutionalized as the monarchy and the church). They activate instincts of togetherness, and if stripped away only callous self-interest remains as a dubious interpersonal bond. There is, however, a change of heart during the following poetic generation. Especially in the hands of Byron, Romanticism becomes existential revolt. The ruling order is seen as a tangle of ossified conventions. It was this crude power that forced him into exile in 1816. The point is not so much a reform of institutions (although Byron's brief political career also contained elements of radical social critique),⁹ but the emancipation of the self from deadening conformism. Byron's Greek adventure was the most tangible expression of this protest.

⁶W. Wordsworth, "The French Revolution as it Appeared to Enthusiasts at its Commencement", lines 4-5.

⁷This is the standard, and more plausible, view. For a revisionist account which claims to detect a persistence of Jacobinism underneath the contemplative withdrawal of the later years, see G. Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁸W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book IX: "Residence in France". Describing his visit to the square where the Bastille used to stand, the poet confesses that he "affected" more emotion than he actually felt and that in fact the "potency" in his soul of that site was much less than that of a beautiful painting he had seen shortly before (Charles Le Brun's *Magdalene*).

⁹Byron's maiden speech before the House of Lords in February 1812 was a daring defense of the Luddites: "The perseverance of these miserable men (viz. the machine

In France Romanticism appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a reaction against the axiological and institutional changes wrought by the Revolution. Given the descent into blind terror and a new absolutism which pulverized society, Romanticism put forward the demand for the rehabilitation of the precious ideals, mores and sensibilities of the pre-revolutionary era, whose bearers were seen as the slandered and martyred aristocracy and church. The Revolution, from this perspective, was a violent interruption of the historical continuity of the nation. The standard-bearer in this campaign was the Vicomte de Chateaubriand, whose emblematic *Génie du christianisme* came out in 1802. In his early career he was more of a Rousseauist: his travels in North America brought him into contact with the indigenous tribes representing the whole man of spontaneous sentiment, as well as with unspoiled primordial nature. The murder of his family during the Terror and the eventual death of his mother caused a radical inner transformation. He converted back to the emotional verities of his childhood, including his religious faith: "I cried and I believed." The Rousseauist vision was not abandoned, but was now transfigured by the supernatural light of a mystic grace suffusing it from above. The methodological originality of *Génie du christianisme* lies in that it considers useless and outmoded a theological defense of the Christian religion. Its eternal value, according to Chateaubriand, is that it unleashes the deepest and most exalting human feelings: tenderness, brotherhood, purity and pity. It is within this emotional universe, violently transgressed by recent politics, that blooms the primordial harmony of the soul.¹⁰ Christianity is the faith of ideal humanity *par excellence*. It is also the most poetic of religions: it is a blatant lie that Christianity is the enemy of the arts. Quite to the contrary, it teaches us to become attuned to the goodness of the Creator by contemplating the forms of nature and it whets our sensibility for the sufferings of humanity. Through innermost insight it unseals the mystery of life that naked reason cannot reach. Its influence upon poetry has been pervasive for 2000 years, because its otherworldliness privileges

breaking workers) in their proceedings tends to prove that nothing but absolute want could have driven a large and once honest and industrious body of the people into the commission of excesses so hazardous to themselves, their families, and the community." The true cause of these actions, Byron continued, was "the bitter policy, the destructive warfare of the last eighteen years", which has "become a curse on the living unto the third and the fourth generation!" The full text of the speech is preserved in R. C. Dallas, *Recollections of the Life of Lord Byron*, London 1823, Ch. VIII, pp. 205-218.

¹⁰ François-René, Vicomte de Chateaubriand, *Génie du christianisme*, Paris: Pourrat, 1834, Part Two: "Poétique du christianisme".

the creative imagination. Its symbols and its narratives have erected the emotional frame of civilization, which would be much poorer without it.¹¹

Napoleon, First Consul of the Republic, welcomed the appearance of this work, because it favored his effort to mend fences with the Vatican, begun with the Concordat of 1801. However, Chateaubriand was not lured into his political camp, remaining Bonaparte's implacable enemy, especially after the abduction and assassination of the Duc d'Angien in 1804. After the Restoration he served the Bourbons, although he opposed the extremist legitimists and favored a constitutional monarchy. After 1806, when he was posted to Rome as diplomatic legate of France, he traveled extensively in the Near East in order to discover the historical roots of Christianity. He stayed in Ottoman Greece for an extended period, describing later with deep emotion this ancient land and the sufferings of its people under Ottoman tyranny:

Notre siècle verra-t-il des hordes des sauvages étouffer la civilisation
renaissante dans le tombeau d'un peuple qui a civilisé la terre?
La chrétienté laissera-t-elle tranquillement les Turcs égorger des
chrétiens? Et la légitimité européenne souffrira-t-elle, sans en être
indigne, que l'on donne son nom sacré à une tyrannie qui auroit
fait rougir Tibère?¹²

His exhortations were instrumental in stoking pro-Greek sentiment in Europe. Thus, his conservatism did not trump his philhellenism. As the French representative to the Congress of Verona in 1822, he did not hesitate to stand up to Metternich in support of the insurrection of the Greeks against Turkish rule.

Another eminent exponent of aristocratic Romanticism in France was Germaine de Staël, daughter of Baron Necker, last minister of finance under the *ancien régime*. In her work entitled *De l'Allemagne* she aimed to reveal to the French public, accustomed to derogatory comments (not least by Voltaire himself) concerning the alleged uncouthness of the Germans, what in fact was the philosophical profundity, as well as the poetic exuberance, of the world beyond the Rhine. Germany, according to Madame de Staël, is nothing less than *la patrie de la pensée*. The character of German culture is that it refers everything to the "inner existence" of man.¹³ This wondrous land the Germans have appropriated for themselves: "Les Allemands, dans les richesses de l'esprit humain, sont des véritables propriétaires: ceux qui

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Part Three: "Beaux-arts et littérature".

¹² *Id.*, *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*, Paris: Garnier, 1859, p. 45.

¹³ Madame de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, Paris: F. Didot, 1845, p. 363.

s'en tiennent à leurs lumières naturelles, ne sont que des prolétaires en comparaison d'eux."¹⁴

In literature the expression of this return to the soul is Romanticism. This new poetry is nourished by the riches of national historical experience. Its content consists of native traditions and feelings, thus enjoying wide popular appeal. The living source of tragedy is "the life of nations".¹⁵ French Classicism, on the contrary, lacks "national character".¹⁶ It is the importation of a foreign model of beauty, and this explains both its frigidness as well as its élitism. French tragedies are not understood and are not enjoyed by the mass of the people.¹⁷ In Germany there is an exuberant overflow of the imagination which cannot be fitted into ready-made molds. The German poets improvise as they write.¹⁸ In France the intellectual world has petrified into rigid stereotypes of "good taste", but taste is not enough for living poetic effect.¹⁹ De Staël proposes a cultural "peace treaty"²⁰ between the two rival cultures, in which the French will agree to ease formalistic restrictions on the imagination, whereas the Germans will refrain from extravagant poetic visions that offend against sound sense. Nations should profit from one another's achievements, rather than erecting walls of hostility: "Les nations doivent se servir de guide les unes aux autres, et toutes auraient tort de se priver des lumières qu'elles peuvent mutuellement se prêter."²¹

The leaders of the poetic revolution in Germany were the brothers Schlegel. De Staël praises August Wilhelm Schlegel for his philosophical profundity and the magnificent erudition of his literary criticism.²² In his lectures on dramatic poetry, which she personally attended, the spirit of each national literature is captured with the imagination of a true poet.²³ This results in a universal point of view which celebrates works of art as true wonders of nature.²⁴ Friedrich Schlegel is also lauded for his originality.²⁵ She

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 366.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

acknowledges that there are those who fault the Schlegels for their partiality towards the Middle Ages, but she retorts that, since the heart of poetry is national character and history, this move was necessary. This does not mean that the brothers wanted to turn art backwards. They simply aimed to synthesize the positive qualities of different cultural epochs. Nor is it true that they despise French art: they in fact admired the French poets and especially the troubadours. The point is that since the seventeenth century a lifeless mannerism (*genre manière*) choked poetic feeling in Europe.²⁶ Similar contrasts are to be perceived between French and German philosophy. After an initial phase of “idealism” exemplified by Descartes and Malebranche, French thought took the barren path to sensationalism in metaphysics and crude hedonism in morality.²⁷ Political interests trumped all other spiritual concerns. Eventually, this led to shallowness and “frivolous talk” (*persiflage*).²⁸ German philosophy reacted against this decline and elevated European thought to newfound peaks of insight, validating again the spirituality of the soul and the value of pure contemplation.²⁹ The great figure in this uplift was Kant. He rose against the English and French mode of ratiocination, which reduces everything to bodily feeling and material interest. His philosophy re-establishes the most precious features of human existence: spontaneity in the activity of the mind, the sovereignty of moral conscience against the dictates of crude sensation, and finally “ideality in art” through the momentous separation between the beautiful and the useful.³⁰ Kant’s notion of “disinterestedness” and his emphasis on beauty in itself and pure form are the preconditions for the “intensification of the spirit” in art.³¹ The point is no longer the tired and trite “imitation” of nature that blighted Classicism.³² With respect to morality, this resurgent spirituality is also highly beneficent. The “good” is no longer identified either with egotistic interest or with the *raison d’état* of an oppressive government, but is the exercise of pure will.³³

The political purpose of this encomium is clearly to discredit the philosophy that had underpinned the revolutionary explosion in France, leading, in de Staël’s mind, to the uprooting of culture there. Its positive side

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 369-370.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 397 ff.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 407 ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 451.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 481.

was the call to her compatriots to desist from prejudice against neighbors whose culture they have not deigned to delve into. This earned the praise of a giant like Goethe.³⁴ Imperial censorship in France prohibited her book on the pretext that the French people had no reason to seek intellectual models beyond their own borders. De Staël's campaign to bridge this cultural divide is a signal contribution to a common European identity.

The pioneers of French Romanticism, fighting for the liberation of the poetic consciousness from the deadening constraints of Classicism, were monarchists in politics, whereas their opponents – the leaders of the Académie fighting to preserve Classicist norms – were political liberals. This can be explained by the fact that Hellenic and Roman antiquity was a cultural ideal in the seventeenth century and a political one in the era of the Revolution and the Empire. The notion of tradition (and Christian tradition in particular) was synonymous with feudalism, antiquity with republican liberty. Yet, this paradoxical situation was to change. Beginning with the Revolution of 1830, French Romanticism would slowly but surely reposition itself.³⁵ This about-face is epitomized by the titanic personality and œuvre of Victor Hugo. Although he was initially a monarchist, the flowering of his talent thrust him into new political directions. As a poet he became straightaway the target of the nonentities in control of official literature. In his early work entitled *Les Orientales* (1829), we already perceive a striving to breach limits and borders, a tendency towards universality which is a constitutive trait of all Romanticism. This work was inspired by the Levant then in the throes of the turbulence unleashed by the Greek revolt. In it we find the famous 'L'enfant', a moving tribute to the victims of the massacre on Chios.³⁶ Ottoman sensuality and popular wisdom (a rather stereotypical "Orientalism", as it came to be called later) are also here juxtaposed with the Greek longing for freedom. In his 1827 preface to his (unplayable) drama *Cromwell*, Hugo laid out the program for the reform of literature. In it he declares the death of the artifices of mimetic Classicism and the emergence of a new dramatic art true to the realities of contemporary life. These include its high and its low forms, the beauty as well as the ugliness of social existence. This necessarily implies the

³⁴ M. R. Higonnet, "Madame de Staël and Schelling", *Comparative Literature* 38, 2 (Spring 1986), pp. 159-180.

³⁵ For an informative overview of the debates between Classicists and Romantics during this troubled period emphasizing the mediating but also path-breaking interventions of Hugo, see G. Lanyi, "Debates on the Definition of Romanticism in Literary France (1820-1830)", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41, 1 (January-March 1980), pp. 141-150.

³⁶ V. Hugo, *Les Orientales*, XVIII.

mixture of genres, because life itself is composed of oppositions.³⁷ This poetic program was praised by none other than Chateaubriand himself. The turn to the social announced here presaged the political concerns of later decades: the fight against literary censorship is bound eventually to turn into a fight against the political structures that enforce it. In the preface to *Hernani*, Hugo's declaration is as emphatic as can be:

Jeunes gens, ayons bon courage! si rude qu'on nous veuille faire le présent, l'avenir sera beau. Le romantisme, tant de fois mal défini, n'est, à tout prendre, et c'est la sa définition réelle si l'on ne l'envisage que sous son cote militant, que le libéralisme en littérature...le libéralisme littéraire ne sera pas moins populaire que le libéralisme politique. La liberté dans l'art, la liberté dans la société, voila le double but auquel doivent tendre d'un même pas tous les esprits conséquents et logiques...la liberté littéraire est fille de la liberté politique. Ce principe est celui du siècle, et prévaudra.³⁸

Indeed, it was the same *Hernani* which put Romantic literary revolt on the stage. This drama drew the ire of the Classicists, but was finally accepted with minor revisions for the official Théâtre-Français. Its première in February 1830 was the occasion for the aforementioned "battle", namely riots opposing the "army of the Romantics", dressed in outrageous fashion, and the properly attired Classicist public both inside the theater and in the streets around it. This theatrical tumult was the opening act as it were of the July Revolution that overthrew the Bourbons. From now on the Romantic "cenacle", the tight-knit fraternities pursuing the new literary ideals, converged with the liberal movement and turned into a "Romanticism of the barricades", such as depicted in the famous paintings of Eugène Delacroix. The broadly social humanism of the revolted people impinges upon the intellectual avant-garde. Hugo himself eventually joined the popular camp. He turned into the chief opponent of Bonapartist absolutism, the scourge from exile of "Napoleon the Little", as he mockingly dubbed the usurping nephew.³⁹ After the latter's fall he became the iconic exponent of republicanism and social reformism.

³⁷ *Id.*, *Œuvres*, Paris: Furne, 1840, Vol. VII, pp. 3-53.

³⁸ *Id.*, *Hernani*, Paris: Renduel, 1836, pp. 2-3.

³⁹ The poetic compendium of Hugo's opposition to Bonapartist absolutism is the collection entitled *Les Châtiments* (1853). Its battle cry is condensed in a short preface culminating with the following words: "La toute-puissance du mal n'a jamais abouti qu'à des efforts inutiles. La pensée échappe toujours à qui tente de l'étouffer. [...] Rien ne dompte la conscience de l'homme, car la conscience de l'homme, c'est la pensée de Dieu."

II. *The German Turn: Adam Müller and the Organic State*

In the British and French cases, the political problematic was largely an accommodation of literary Romanticism to political stances and demands flowing in from the social environment. The philosophical establishment of a new politics, expressly opposed to the doctrine of natural rights on which revolutionary ideology was premised, was the achievement of German Romanticism.⁴⁰ As Rudolf Haym notes in his seminal study, the uniqueness of German Romanticism lies in its ability to synthesize reflectively philological criticism, metaphysical speculation and theological mysticism, thus constructing a network of concepts portraying reality as an organic complex.⁴¹ The philosophical tutors of Romanticism in Germany were Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling: the former through his theory of the transcendental ego whose absolute will to self-determination shapes the external world, and the latter through his “philosophy of nature” which conceives the material sphere as a unity of forms and powers that only art can penetrate and evoke.⁴²

With respect to political theory in a narrow sense,⁴³ the criticism of the liberal state as a “machine” catering to private needs and rights also has Romantic roots. Schiller’s “aesthetic state”, which capitalized on the proto-Romantic theory of artistic creation in Kant’s third *Kritik*, was an influence here.⁴⁴ Schiller seeks a rational community whose overriding telos is the harmonious unfolding of all the indwelling capacities of the subject (in the form of “creative play”) without subjecting it to the compulsion of a

⁴⁰ For a useful summation of the basic theoretic assumptions of German Romanticism, including an extensive review of the relevant bibliography, see J. C. Blankenagel, “The Dominant Characteristics of German Romanticism”, *PMLA* 55, 1 (March 1940), pp. 1-10. For a recent extensive account, see M. Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2004.

⁴¹ R. Haym, *Die romantische Schule*, Berlin: Gärtner, 1870, pp. 1-16.

⁴² For the influence of Fichte, see D. Breazeale and T. Rockmore (eds), *Fichte, German Idealism and Early Romanticism*, Amsterdam and New York: Fichte Studien Supplementa, 2010.

⁴³ Two landmark works on the political thought of German Romanticism combining original texts and commentary are: J. Droz, *Le romantisme politique en Allemagne*, Paris: Colin, 1963, and H. S. Reiss, *The Political Thought of the German Romantics, 1793-1815*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955.

⁴⁴ On the influence of Schiller, see A. O. Lovejoy, “Schiller and the Genesis of Romanticism”, *Modern Language Notes* 35, 1 (January 1920), pp. 1-10, and *id.*, “Schiller and the Genesis of Romanticism, Part II”, *Modern Language Notes* 35, 3 (March 1920), pp. 136-146. Lovejoy examines the influence of Schiller in Friedrich Schlegel’s conversion from an “objectivistic” Classicism to the “modern” idiom of poetic subjectivism, and for this reason he stresses the importance of Schiller’s *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*.

centralized government with purposes alien to him/her. This is the conceptual opposite of the Prussian bureaucratic and militaristic system, which idealist intellectuals perceived as the realization on German soil of Enlightenment political notions. Wilhelm von Humboldt's early work on the "limits of state power" is fully consonant with this aesthetic overcoming of the mechanistic subjugation of the poetic self. Still, Schiller's utopia is an alternative vision "written on the heavens" in the Platonic manner. Furthermore, it looks forward to a renovated future and is not mining an idealized past. The thinker who first proposed an organic theory of the state derived from cultural and psychological realities with deep historical roots was Adam Müller. In his hands anti-Enlightenment acquires a tangible and functional reality.

Müller was a Prussian publicist and politician who had opposed the Stein and Hardenberg "revolution from above", aiming partially to empower the Prussian middle classes and thus motivate them in the struggle against Napoleon. He eventually converted to Roman Catholicism, becoming a supporter of the counter-revolutionary legitimacy of Prince Metternich. The latter was contemptuous of the nebulous dreaming of the Romantics. His system was the realization of an equilibrium of political forces. That is why, for instance, he was not keen on the "Holy Alliance" propounded by the mystical Tsar Alexander I. A metaphysical sanction of politics may serve to legitimize existing relations, but may also put up formidable obstacles in the execution of necessary practical measures. However, he considered Romanticism as a useful ideological façade. Müller's *Die Elemente der Staatskunst* was the first methodical exposition of the doctrine of the organic state.⁴⁵ The very title of the work reveals the intent of its author. Politics is not conceived as the rational management of the conflict of particular interests, but rather as an art of life that fashions a spiritual whole. Its chief instrument is natural feeling. This binds individuals together in irrevocable mutual identification, which cannot be reduced to the benefit each expects from the other. The prototype of the political community is the family, a spontaneous mode of collective existence with a hierarchical structure (this is the patriarchal model of political authority that Locke had refuted). The state is not a machine for the production of material goods guaranteeing earthly happiness. It is rather an "idea", a collective intuition of shared values and destinies that grow out of the historical experience of a human group. Thus, there is nothing artificial about it. It is an ontological necessity validating each and every individual existence. It exists prior to individuals, it is superior to them in existential worth and it alone supplies the meaning of their lives. The

⁴⁵ A. Müller, *Die Elemente der Staatskunst*, Berlin: Gander, 1809.

state is, consequently, a metaphysical reality deriving from the very Divine Will which created the universe. It is a primary component of the plan of divine providence for the human race, the obligatory framework for its moral advancement. The highest expression of the moral significance of political life is war. In war the private material interest of individuals and groups is sacrificed on the altar of the eternal values that define the historical identity of the collective (this is an idea that Carl Schmitt, for all his anti-Romanticism, would later appropriate). Organized in the form of a political state, a human community best resists the blind natural necessity which aims to wipe out spirituality. Because the Enlightenment was supposedly the fragmentation of communal life ordaining each separate self to the pursuit of mere biological satisfaction, it was seen by Müller as the validation of dumb nature against consciousness and conscience, whose highest mode of expression is religious faith. Freedom, property and life (the natural rights of the Enlighteners) do not exist prior to the state, but are a grant of the state to its subjects according to each one's inherent worth. A person is free when acting in accordance with the duties pertaining to the social station to which he/she immutably belongs. Equality is an abstract concept (*Begriff*) which does not convey the dynamic movement of life. Life is, on the contrary, an idea (*Idee*), a unity of opposites realizing itself in ever-changing forms.⁴⁶

The paradigmatic form of the true state was, according to Müller, the Christian medieval commonwealth.⁴⁷ This claim is surely historically baseless. The Middle Ages did not know of the state as even Müller himself imagined it. The state which unifies society, moulds a collective consciousness and dominates its disparate social components is the achievement of modernity *par excellence*. The praise of the Middle Ages here throws a veil of metaphysical mystique over the "legitimacy" of 1815-1848. The idealization of medieval Christianity was the stock-in-trade of German Romanticism. In this connection, the landmark text was *Hymnen an die Nacht. Die Christenheit oder Europa* (1800) by the gifted poet Novalis.⁴⁸ Here the feudal past under the aegis of unified Christianity (that is before the Protestant revolt) is extolled for its pervasive poetic and spiritual character rather than for its political structure.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Book One: "Von der Idee des Staates, und vom Begriffe des Staates".

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Book Three: "Vom Geiste der Gesetzgebungen im Altherthum und im Mittelalter".

⁴⁸ Novalis, *Hymnen an die Nacht. Die Christenheit oder Europa*, Leipzig: Insel, 1910, p. 31: "Es waren schöne, glänzende Zeiten, wo Europa ein christliches Land war, wo *eine* Christenheit diesen menschlich gestalteten Weltteil bewohnte; *ein* grosses gemeinschaftliches Interesse verband die entlegensten Provinzen dieses weiten geistlichen Reichs."

In Müller's political speculations the paramount influence was that of Edmund Burke, a thinker he profusely praised. The philosopher, on the other hand, whose deleterious legacy he aimed to demolish was Montesquieu. Müller's opposition to the latter is militant and it furnishes from the beginning the theoretic and methodological foundation of *Die Elemente*.⁴⁹ To begin with, Müller declared his (possibly sincere) admiration for Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*. The universal look of the great French thinker had indeed managed to distill the most universal principles of political life. His method was empirical. He was able to inspect the multiplicity of political arrangements in time and space, and from this matter he extracted their general forms. Then, applying the method of cause and effect, he explained how the form of government (good or bad) determines the human reality which it controls. In Montesquieu's project we have, according to Müller, a static analysis or anatomy of political experience in general, a procedure that breaks down the political to its simple component parts. The most famous element of his theory, the separation of powers, is indicative of this analytical procedure. The mutual neutralization of the functions of the state that Montesquieu proposed destroys the notion of a unifying sovereign authority. Thus, the subjugation of the centrifugal strivings of the empirical actors to a collective purpose is obviated. This, Müller concluded, misunderstands the British constitution itself that *De l'esprit des lois* supposedly sets up as a model. What Montesquieu could not grasp, therefore, was the dynamic nature of law as the form of life of a distinct human group. Political regimes grow from the unique historical itinerary of a people – exactly in the way that Burke had explained. Every community works out, through a common creative endeavor, the kind of state that fits its value preferences through time. Montesquieu knew well how the legal regime determines the individuals under its jurisdiction, but was ignorant of how the individuals determine the laws. In his positivism of legality abstract notions are the primary consideration. What is absent is its vital pulse (the common sentiments, the memories, the perspectives): the motive force of political action. Müller ignored the historicist dimension of the argument in *De l'esprit des lois*. The enemy that he can slay easily is a Montesquieu of rational regularity with the experiential immediacy of existence slipping through his fingers; and he has the diagnosis for this failure: the *irreligious mind* of the great Enlightenment. In his understanding law is a material complex of things, the social equivalent of natural necessity, and he refused to link it with the transcendent will of the

⁴⁹Müller, "Vorrede", *Die Elemente der Staatskunst*.

Creator. According to Müller, it is divine law that unifies human experience and fills it with teleological significance in history. True political philosophy can only be a theology of communal life. It sets up absolute values before which the individual sheds his material concerns and is absorbed into a spiritual eternity, which *on earth* is manifested through the homogenizing activity of the state. Hegel's theory of the "organic constitution", as well as his claim that the state is the "march of God" in the world, is adumbrated here.

A remarkable characteristic of Müller's thought is the incorporation of the economic process into the normative totality of his organic state.⁵⁰ Property is not for him an abstract right, but the creative conjoining of two living entities, that is, of the subject of labor and the material object that it strives to conquer. The latter is also pervaded by the living force of nature and resists the creative will of the laborer, who in shaping the objective world gets to know and shape his/her own subjectivity. Thus, property is the material foundation of consciousness, an organic component of the active self, and not a set of dead things external to it. Property, furthermore, is not an individual endowment, but a collective status. It describes how social collectivities (social orders, *Stände*, in the medieval sense) fit themselves into the natural sphere and work upon it in their allotted place. The most natural, and hence eternal, form of work is agriculture. The agricultural class is the foundation of the community. This arrangement derives from the divine ordering of things and it functions in accordance with hierarchical relations enshrined through tradition. This is the theoretical background of Müller's opposition to the Stein–Hardenberg reforms which threatened big feudal property in Prussia. Müller recognized, of course, the modern forms of economic activity, such as commerce and industry. He thought, nevertheless, that they should not become predominant, suppressing traditional modes. The state must be in control of external trade. However, he adds, Fichte's "closed commercial state" is an extreme and unneeded kind of economic totalitarianism. A reasonable amount of imports of foreign industrial goods must be allowed, to the extent that this is unavoidable and does not damage internal production. The state must simultaneously protect and further domestic industry.⁵¹ Industry itself is also an expression of a nation's creative

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Book Four: "Von der Idee des Geldes und des National-Reichtums".

⁵¹ For a detailed comparison of Müller's and Fichte's economic notions with special reference to protectionism and a "national" currency segregated from the international trade in gold and silver that we come across in both, see R. T. Gray, "Economic Romanticism: Monetary Nationalism in Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Adam Müller", *Eighteenth-century Studies* 36, 4 (Summer 2003), pp. 535-557. See also G. A. Briefs, "The Economic Philosophy

genius. If international trade becomes completely free, then the countries of advanced economic individualism, for example England, will not simply conquer foreign markets. Foreign products are the bearers of foreign mores and mentalities. The concomitant of commercial penetration is the imposition of a foreign culture. It thus corrodes the national character of nations that do not shield themselves with adequate measures of economic exclusion. Already in Germany, Müller claimed, an “Anglomania” was rife. This possesses a strong material basis, namely English products (such as textiles) that were widely desired. In contradistinction, the “Francomania” of revolutionary times was easier to combat because it was a superficial ideological inflammation. Together with its products, England exported the values of calculating egoism. These are incompatible with the idea of “national totality” which is the German cultural preference. Given the above, we need a new economic theory in opposition to Adam Smith’s liberal assumptions that destroy social wholeness. As Müller read Smith, the “wealth of the nation” is the sum total of the wealth of particular individuals. However, wealth must be seen as the material expression of cultural values and the work that produces it as the creative endeavor that integrates individuals into a historical totality. Work serves the nation and is not primarily the way to fill individual material needs.

These ideas found their way into the doctrine of “national economy” associated with Friedrich List, whose central plank was also the protection of the domestic economies of “rising” countries against England. They also shaped economic policy in Germany after unification in 1871. Müller’s economics flirt openly with the idea and rhetoric of the “nation”. The national ideal was one of the excrescences of Romantic historicism. It is, however, incompatible with the medievalist notions of universality that dominate in Müller’s political theory. Having played a significant role in the “wars of liberation” against Napoleon, nationalism was appropriated after 1815 by the anti-feudalist liberals in Germany. This was anathema for Metternich, for it threatened to explode the imperial and feudal system he defended. That Romanticism incubates a demand for national self-determination was an additional reason why the Austrian chancellor was circumspect towards it.

of Romanticism”, *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 2, 3 (June 1941), pp. 279-300, in which there is a detailed discussion of the interrelation between Müller’s “metaphysic of the state” and his economics.

III. *The Democratic Critique: Heinrich Heine and Arnold Ruge*

The alliance of German Romanticism with established absolutism was a threat to freedom, and progressive thinkers joined battle against it. The most brilliant personality to emerge in this was Heinrich Heine, the clearest voice of the post-Goethe poetic generation. Heine was himself influenced by the Romantic call to shake off the stilted schemata of Neoclassicism. The return to living nature and a free-flowing lyricism was the most attractive feature of his verse. On realizing, however, the political implications, he became Romanticism's enemy.⁵² He stood out as the most prominent member of the loose poetic association called *Junges Deutschland*, a movement giving vent to the democratic aspirations of the generation growing up in the spiritual suffocation of the pre-1848 era (*Vormärz*). Heine was Marx's friend, but he did not share the latter's materialism and scientism. His socialist convictions derived rather from a humanist and idealist commitment and in his maturity they became stamped by the ideas of Saint-Simon. His militant opposition to the absolutist regimes of the various German states led to the censorship and prohibition of his works at home and finally to his exile in France, where he remained until the end of his life. In the homeland of democratic revolution he renewed his ties to its ideology, and he took up the task of interpreting the German cultural situation for the benefit of French progressive thought. He wanted to show that the democratic idea had roots on the other side of the Rhine as well. This was his contribution to the "mutual comprehension" of French and German culture, which Madame de Staël had also served but from the opposite side of the ideological divide. Heine was convinced that the eloquent accounts of the Baroness were dangerous. She had brought to France a distorted image of intellectual Germany refracted through reactionary Romanticism. De Staël had idealized the Schlegel brothers, discovering a fake Teutonic "depth" in their hazy musings as a foil to the "shallowness" of the Enlightenment. In order to refute this misinterpretation, Heine set about composing his own *De l'Allemagne*, a monumental achievement in the history of ideas. Its methodological assumption is that ideas are an independent variable in historical becoming. Often they prefigure social change. They are not delayed reflexes caused by material conditions. The crucial expression of sociopolitical struggles could at critical junctures very well be the confrontation of world views. As Matthew

⁵² Concerning Heine's roots in literary Romanticism and his hard intellectual struggle to detach himself from it on account of the deleterious side effects of its concept of tradition, see L. Hofrichter, "Heines Kampf gegen die Tradition", *Modern Language Notes* 75, 6 (June 1960), pp. 507-514.

Arnold noted,⁵³ in his fight for a society of freedom and equality Heine chose poetic imagination and ideological criticism as his weapons. It was as a pioneer in thought that his previsions of social developments in Germany were borne out. The revolution that finally broke out there was not the one of the working-class brotherhood envisioned by Marx, but rather one of pitiless violence and cultural destruction, as Heine foresaw.

Heine's work on Germany is divided into two parts, each of which is published separately nowadays. Each one is a masterpiece of witty and incisive analysis of trends in the intellectual sphere, and they show the interconnection between the overthrow of philosophical systems and the political changes that follow. The first part is entitled *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*⁵⁴ and is an account of the cultural consequences flowing from the Protestant Reformation. This religious renovation was, according to Heine, the beginning of a process of overthrow of corporatist feudalism lasting many centuries, a task still unfinished. Fully in agreement with Hegel, Heine considered Protestantism as the opening shot in an epic struggle for the freedom of consciousness. The autonomy of the subject thus established bore fruit intellectually through Kant's "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy, as well as politically through the development of the liberal opposition to authoritarian governments.⁵⁵ Heine hailed from a Jewish family, but he was a convert to Protestantism, not out of social opportunism in a society where Jews were denied political rights, but rather out of philosophical conviction, for he saw here the root of individual liberties. The Lutheran revolt signaled for him the suppression of medieval sickness with its denial nature and human self-understanding. This implicit re-establishment of rationality opened the way for the earth-shaking philosophical flourishing in Germany whose leader was indeed Kant – but a Kant very different from the one painted by de Staël. Romanticism was no more than the desperate rearguard action of medievalism against philosophical progress. Kantianism is the philosophical transcription of the Protestant notion that the road to the "absolute" begins within the human self. It is simultaneously the theoretical foundation of the moral autonomy of the subject trumpeted by Rousseau and institutionalized by the French Revolution and its constitutions. In a remarkable comparison Heine called Kant the "Robespierre of philosophy". One would not ordinarily associate the peaceful sage of Königsberg with that blood-smeared pontifex

⁵³ M. Arnold, *Heinrich Heine*, Philadelphia: Leypoldt, 1863, pp. 6 ff.

⁵⁴ H. Heine, *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (1835), English transl. as *Religion and Philosophy in Germany: A Fragment*, London: Trübner, 1882.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Part Second: "From Luther to Kant", pp. 59 ff.

of so-called virtue. Yet, under the guillotine of Kantian analytics, there roll the heads of every self-satisfied theology and metaphysics. Kant showed that their promise of final truths guaranteed by authority and demanding unthinking obedience is a sham. In the role of the “Bonaparte of philosophy” Heine placed Fichte, in whose theory the Kantian reflective consciousness is promoted to creator and conqueror of the empirical world.⁵⁶ Fichte, as mentioned above, had been claimed by the Romantics, who understood his absolute ego as a stand-in for the poetic imagination. This appropriation was facilitated by Fichte’s own conversion to nationalism at the time of Napoleon’s occupation of Prussia as expressed in the anti-French *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, as well as by the theosophic turn of his late philosophy. Heine rightly located the path-breaking contribution of Fichte in the early *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794) and in the *Grundlage des Naturrechts* (1796), texts in which Kantian transcendentalism is still active in tandem with a Rousseauist understanding of law.

A fruitful innovation in Heine’s account of the development of philosophy in Germany is the crucial role it assigned to Spinoza. The conventional labeling of the great Jewish dissident had been as an exponent of rationalist dogmatism, of the kind overthrown by Kant. Heine declared this as a misinterpretation due to the “geometrical way” in which Spinoza’s ideas are laid out. In truth, the heart of his argument is the identity between ideas and material things, the claim that nature is the essence and the presence of God. This thoroughgoing naturalism, which cost Spinoza his expulsion from the synagogue, is the ingenious insight shunting thought to new paths. It is this pantheism that fed Schelling’s “philosophy of nature”, as well as Goethe’s “universal” poetics. Through Spinoza, philosophy finds its way back to natural existence, as through Kant it had rediscovered self-conscious selfhood. The fusion of these two perspectives engenders a philosophy of rational action, whose political dimension is the establishment of a society of equality and freedom. Having denied possession of Fichte by the Romantics, Heine now did the same with regard to Schelling. The latter was generally understood as the official philosopher of Romanticism: he had elevated art and “intuition” as the highest grade of spirituality and in his later years he had served Habsburg reaction. For Heine, the living Schelling was the preacher of “identity” between idea and nature, the Kantian reformer of Kant’s transcendentalism, that is, the heir of Spinoza and not the reactionary old man of his anti-Hegelian period.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Part Third: “From Kant to Hegel”, pp. 105 ff.

This is the background for Heine's treatment of Romanticism contained in the second part of his history of German culture and entitled *Die romantische Schule*.⁵⁷ Romanticism for him is not just a literary movement deserving attention for the freshness of his poetic resources. Heine never denied the attractiveness of Romantic expression, of which he himself was an eminent representative. His literary criticism is full of praise, and even admiration, for the accomplishment of Romantic innovators. His description of his own personal encounter with the work of Novalis, through a dying tubercular girl who always carried with her *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, the novel of the mystical "blue flower", is in itself a minor Romantic masterpiece that brings tears to the eyes.⁵⁸ Romanticism, however, propagates political attitudes, which if victorious will condemn the country to perennial bondage. Behind the "national" and "popular" façade, extolling the indigenous ways of the illiterate peasant and preaching against alien French ideas, there lurks hatred of equality and political freedom and the defense of the privileges of feudalism. This capitulation before the decadent powers of the present is camouflaged through the poetic exaltation of the Catholic Middle Ages initiated by Novalis and taken up by the Schlegels. Conversion to Catholicism was a marked trend among German intellectuals at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Romantic tenderness seemed to involve abstention from worldly action, but this was a cover for the active support of the counter-revolution, as the case of Friedrich Schlegel showed. Heine took particular care to demolish the exalted image of the brothers Schlegel as crafted by de Staël. His satire reaches its peak here. He praised August Wilhelm for his translation of Shakespeare, but denied the originality of his thought. Friedrich was superior in terms of inspiration, but he failed to discipline it. The much-praised *Lucinde* is a shallow concoction of scatter-brained sentimentalism. The attack acquired a shrill personal tone: August Wilhelm is compared to the reassembled Osiris, from whose body, however, the most vital member is missing!⁵⁹

The Romantics initially tried to legitimize their work, taking cover under the immense achievement of Goethe. The very term Romantic, as Haym noted, is a variation on *romanhaft* [like a novel], whereby Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* and *Werther* were deemed the paradigmatic cases. The latter in particular made neurasthenia fashionable, igniting a European-wide trend of existential

⁵⁷ H. Heine, *Die romantische Schule* (1835), English transl. as *The Romantic School*, New York: H. Holt, 1882.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 130 ff.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 77 ff.

despair which often ended in suicide in imitation of the hero. The novel was considered by the Romantics as the literary genre of the present because it was a fragment of life without beginning and end. It is the simulacrum of vital time. In it infinity and the ephemeral, the two essential concerns of the creative imagination, are blended. Goethe also inspired the Romantics through his rehabilitation of the poetic stature of Shakespeare and his appreciation of Gothic architecture. Together with Schiller he led the *Sturm und Drang* movement, in which the passion for freedom becomes the chief motive of action. Heine, however, through a magisterial analysis of Goethe's poetics, personality and era, showed that his work has no common points with that of the Romantics.⁶⁰ Goethe's imagination remained decisively pantheistic in the pre-Christian sense and never succumbed to sickly mysticism. It was his exuberant hedonism that eventually caused him to denounce Romanticism as "sickness in art", as opposed to the Classic, representing spiritual health. Heine's portraits of the Schlegels and Goethe are paradoxically exemplary applications of that Romantic technique called "characteristic", the attempt to link the work with the personality and the social circumstances of the artist. The same technique would later be employed by Haym in interpreting the leading personalities of the Romantic movement itself.

The political universe is overdetermined by world-historical ideas. Ideas, even Romantic ones, are not vain fancy, but preparation for social action. This is the insight pervading Heine's history of culture, and the conclusion of his work is the apposite validation of this guiding principle. If, he stated, based on the ideological dynamic, we attempted to preview the trends in German historical life, then the expectation of a looming revolution is reasonable. What form this revolution would take is hard to predict, but that it would be radical and absolute cannot be in doubt. This is guaranteed by the violence of the philosophical struggles that have paved the way for it. If a particular form of materialism triumphs, then we will witness the destruction of civilized values. In any event Kantians, Fichteans and "philosophers of nature" would in the future descend to the arena of social life armed with real weapons, and their clash would shake the world: "A drama will be performed in Germany before which the French Revolution will appear a mere idyll."⁶¹ We know in what horrific way this prophesy came true.

Along the same lines runs the critique of Romanticism by Arnold Ruge, who was a close friend and collaborator of Marx. A convinced Enlightener,

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, First Book: "German Literature to the Death of Goethe", pp. 3 ff.

⁶¹ *Id.*, *Religion and Philosophy*, p. 160.

he never abandoned the ideal of democratic humanism and he devoted his considerable expository talent to the interpretation of Germany's intellectual life. Romanticism, in Ruge's preliminary assessment, feigns abstention from politics, whereas in fact it actively supports reactionary tyranny.⁶² He emphasized its close ideological affinity to medieval Christianity, which is the cause of its retrograde political stances. Classicism in art affirms human nature and its powers, but medieval mysticism devalues and discredits it, understanding humanity as the plaything of inscrutable forces. Humans are clueless and passive: this is the belief that justifies oppressive power and social inequality. Ruge made particular reference to the tendency of the Romantics to found closed associations – circles of supposedly anointed spirits (*die Geistreichen*) with privileged access to absolute truth. These fraternities came together to worship the “saints” of art, such as Goethe according to the Romantic interpretation of his work, as well as Dante, Calderon and Hans Sachs. At the same time they calumniated others, such as Schiller, whose political persuasion was liberal. These secret gatherings were the prototypes of the ideal social order as their members imagined it. They were strict hierarchies in the service of holy beliefs, sitting slavishly at the feet of some “genius”. Spirituality for them was “blind faith in authority”. These were theological societies either glorifying or anathematizing persons and causes without critical investigation of the facts. Their Romantic “finesse” was hence the cover for practical inhumanity.

The key stratagem of the Romantics was the invocation of tradition. For Ruge, however, tradition is a social process which must be critically assessed. For the Romantics, tradition is an empty slogan, a way to excite emotion, “a ready-made recipe for becoming spiritual within 24 hours”. In education they rejected vehemently the French emphasis on scientific rationality and the ethics of common utility. They preferred to delve into “ancestral superstition”, into the fantastic and the mystical. In the visible universe they did not care to seek the “eternal order of natural laws”, but the “miracle” which short-circuits the empirical order of causes. Within the sphere of the sensible they intuited solely the power of the devil, which can be defeated only by means of theological irrationalism. Thus their so-called education ended up as abstention from thinking (*Gedankenlosigkeit*).⁶³

⁶² A. Ruge, *Geschichte der neuesten Poesie und Philosophie seit Lessing, oder unsere Klassiker und Romantiker*, Mannheim: Grohe, 1847, pp. 1-10.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 392 ff.

Ruge usefully codified this world view in the form of a “catechism” containing the chief articles of faith of the Romantic confession.⁶⁴ The Romantic, firstly, worshiped Goethe as the paradigmatic poet and hated Schiller as the “non-poet” (*Nichtdichter*). This distinction remains mysterious, because it invites us to a silent veneration and not to a critical exchange of arguments. The Romantic also believed in the Middle Ages, in Catholicism, in Christian “Pre-Raphaelite” art. He believed in the “poetry of superstition”, which is the spontaneous voice of the people. He believed in Herr Schlegel’s style and in Herr Tieck’s humor. He loved Italy and hated anyone who did not share this penchant of his. He educated his children with fairy tales and popular prejudices. Every third word of his was “depth” or “mystery”. He hated the Enlightenment and the French and detested the words “common utility” and “taste”. He despised geometric garden landscaping and admired wild, irregular growth and the loneliness of the forests. Finally, he believed in the end of the world, because the end of literature had already occurred with the death of Shakespeare. This ironic summary stresses not only the political inadequacies of Romanticism, but also its failure as an aesthetic doctrine.

Ruge recognized in the person of the prominent politician and diplomat Friedrich von Gentz, a close friend of Adam Müller and collaborator of Metternich, a remarkable embodiment of the Romantic spirit.⁶⁵ This is an identification that we come across again in Carl Schmitt. Philosophically, of course, von Gentz had nothing to do with the ideology of irrationalist medievalism. He was originally a Kantian liberal and proponent of British constitutionalism. Later, on account of his revulsion for the French Revolution and Bonaparte, he was converted to the balance of power doctrine espoused by Metternich. In his personal life he was an epicurean hedonist. Yet, for Ruge he remained an archetypical Romantic, because all these ideological transformations are an exercise of aristocratic egoism, experiments upon the external world by the narcissistic self. Von Gentz was the political actualization of Romantic irony. As he himself declared, at the end he did not believe in any of these grandiose ideals which convulsed the world: “Every great thing dies in a ridiculous manner.” The sediment remaining in the soul is indifference for the real, fatigue with the ways of the world, an ennui that does not lead to religiosity but to nihilism. A practical mutation of Romanticism is such a detachment of the consciousness from the social substratum, upon which, though, it continues – cynically and indifferently – to act. No moral

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 430-432.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 432-450.

commitment fuels this type of political activity, which, however, out of sheer social inertia sides with the powers-that-be and is hence as deleterious to democratic progress as the dreamy medievalism of the poets.

IV. A Fake Anti-Romanticism: Carl Schmitt

In the heyday of the “*Blut und Eisen*” politics that brought about German unification under Protestant Prussia, Romanticism faded. North German liberalism capitulated to Bismarck. Catholicism was now a pendant of defeated Austria and under persecution in the Reich. Now that it had become an intriguing cultural memory, the time had come, Rudolf Haym wrote in 1870, to assess it dispassionately; but the defeat of German militarism in 1918 seemed to resuscitate the specter. Liberalism, humanism, pacifism and social equality as regulative ideals once again surged to the fore. It is no accident that the chief opponent of idealism in politics, Carl Schmitt, decided in 1919 to devote an extensive study to the forgotten problem of Romantic politics.⁶⁶ His enterprise was not theoretical. His is not an impartial history of ideas, but the opening salvo in his attempt to reinstitute the politics of raw power in the changed environment of the Weimar Republic.

Schmitt was the theoretician of “political exception” (*Ausnahmezustand*: the state of emergency that suspends legality in order to preserve state power *per se*). The declaration and enforcement of exceptional measures proves *in extremis* in whose hands are the exclusive exercise of sovereignty. Sovereignty has a hard, material foundation: the use of force. Thus, the assertion of values that transcend in ethical significance the raw fact of power (such as the “idea of right” espoused by Schmitt’s great opponent, Hans Kelsen) is equivalent to the negation of the concept of the political itself. This is based on a particular reading of Hobbes, understood not as a theoretician of the social contract (and hence of liberalism) but solely as the defender of absolute sovereignty. Belonging to a homogeneous community whose members have the same friends and enemies and whose cohesion is guaranteed by the absolute state is, for Schmitt, the only existential condition that fills with meaning the life of individuals. Liberal constitutionalism is a misleading façade that hides this ontological root of the political. When normality is shattered under conditions of war, internal or external, then political truth emerges naked. Sovereign authority asserts its prerogative to claim the life of individuals for the sake of the maintenance of the totality. War is thus the constitutive condition of political life. Commenting on

⁶⁶ C. Schmitt, *Politische Romantik*, Berlin 1919, English transl. as *Political Romanticism*, Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1986.

Hitler's assumption of power, Schmitt would declare that 30 January 1933 was the day Hegel died. Up until then German politics, even under the Reich, had been permeated by constitutionalist illusions that eventually led to the state's disintegration. Germany had been saved from a repetition of that outcome when Hindenburg exercised the extraordinary powers to contravene the constitution granted to him by the very same constitution under the notorious Article 48.⁶⁷ Viewed in this context, we can say that for Schmitt "Romanticism" is whatever conception of politics erects normative requirements other than the self-preservation of the total state.

Schmitt's leading insight is the (correct) claim that a Romantic is not necessarily committed to one political ideal. He can be a defender or an opponent of the French Revolution, for instance.⁶⁸ Thus, Romanticism cannot be defined through objective, but entirely through subjective criteria. It is an attitude, not a mode of action. It is a way of *looking at* the reality of life and not a way of living it. The paradigm of this sort of being in the world is the "effeminate passivity" of Adam Müller and his friend von Gentz.⁶⁹ Already the choice of language here speaks volumes about Schmitt's obsession with the conquering "manliness" of his Leviathan. In the political choices of the above-mentioned figures, what is paramount is the ephemeral satisfaction of their introverted temperament. This introversion is detached from any essential moral purpose and ends up devouring itself. In politics Romanticism does not leave behind it any material by-product, in the same way that Romanticism is an art "without works of art".⁷⁰ The art and the politics of the Romantic is the exercise of anchoritic denial, loneliness for its own sake. This reading brushes aside von Gentz's involvement in the realization of Metternich's policies (for instance, in the formulation and enforcement of the Carlsbad Decrees in 1819).

⁶⁷ For a detailed summation of interpretative controversies around Schmitt's philosophy, with emphasis on the alleged theoretical break between the Weimar period in which he appears to defend the constitution and his post-1933 identification with the Nazi regime, see P. C. Caldwell, "Controversies over Carl Schmitt: A Review of Recent Literature", *The Journal of Modern History* 77, 2 (June 2005), pp. 357-387. The link between the two phases is that until 1933 Schmitt was not defending the constitution *per se*, but strictly Article 48, the article of "exception", whose application led to the Hitler government.

⁶⁸ Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, p. 162: "German Romanticism first romanticized the Revolution, and then the dominant Restoration. After 1830, it again became revolutionary."

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 128. Further down, on p. 137, he repeats this affirmation: "Müller's arguments can be judged only as an oratorical performance."

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Romanticism is for Schmitt a modern form of “occasionalism”.⁷¹ The Romantic is looking everywhere in the external world for an “occasion” in order to experience himself. Self-feeling is his be-all and end-all. This attitude does away with the notion of causality, that is, of the necessary concatenation of objective events. Thus, all lawfulness in life and every moral rule are swept away. In the place of God, who was the *occasio* for the material order of things in the philosophy of Malebranche, the Romantic inserts himself. The Romantic ego, thus, maintains an entirely accidental relation to the world. With every turn of events he posits a different world, but each one of these is equally without substance. Through every arbitrary and empty world he constructs, the Romantic returns to his flimsy being.⁷² Romanticism is a denial of Cartesian rationalism, but there are many ways to effect such a denial: the philosophical way (Schelling and Hegel), the religious and mystical one (pietism), the historical way (Vico) and finally the aesthetic one. Romanticism chooses aesthetics.⁷³ From life it distills a poetic thrill which is valid only *in foro interno*. Poetic fancy is understood as infinite “possibility” in collision with hard reality. The Romantic bets on infinity without matter.⁷⁴ This is Romantic irony. The creator in his absolute subjectivity retains the ability to negate any objective entity – even that deriving from his own artistic fancy. The ironic ego is not interested in establishing something lasting. It flirts with various simulacra of the real, “playing one against the other”. Its final purpose is to disestablish material reality itself.⁷⁵ There is one thing, however, that the Romantic ego avoids: the ironic treatment of its own self, the negation of its own interiority.⁷⁶ Romanticism is hermetic self-referentiality, inner experience as the absolute:

The Romantic, who really has no interest in changing the world, regards it as good if it does not disturb him in his illusion. Irony and intrigue provide him with enough weapons to secure his subjectivistic autarchy and to hold out in the domain of the occasional. For the rest, he leaves external things to their own nomological order.⁷⁷

This psychological incarceration implies that Romanticism does not deal in legal or ethical valuations. Every political idea (from the revolutionary people to sacred historical tradition) can be utilized as a starting point for a

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 78 ff.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 16-19.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 53 ff.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 71-73.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

poem or a novel. Every event and situation can be romantically interpreted as aesthetic oppositions. Every political issue is used as the occasion for an interesting exchange of opinions. For the Romantic, Schmitt concluded, "The universe is a conversation."⁷⁸

The disengagement of the Romantic from reality painted by Schmitt is so absolute as to render incomprehensible any impact of Romanticism upon political life. This is an implausible conclusion. To escape it Schmitt resorted to what can only be called sophistry: he introduced a distinction between "political Romanticism" (disconnected from reality, as explained above) and "Romantic politics" which is now admitted to impinge upon the external world. The chief example of the latter, he informed us, is the murder in 1819 of the conservative writer August von Kotzebue by the nationalist student Karl Ludwig Sand.⁷⁹ There is surely no more tangible material consequence of an ideology than murderous violence, a usual enough complement of political stances founded on irrational zeal. Yet Schmitt believed he could segregate his theory of Romanticism from this fact simply by a change in word order: Sand was not a Romantic, but a Romantic *politician* (in the manner of Don Quixote). Having defined Romanticism from the beginning in a radically anti-historical manner, he now concluded that the historical effects of this concept simply do not count. Does this *petitio principii* help historical understanding? The chief contribution of Romanticism was surely the activation of a historical sense. How can a theory of it abstract from this crucial connection? Nationalism was an essential by-product of Romanticism. It had conquered university youth, whose unions (*Burschenschaften*) were its shock troops as it were. The Carlsbad Decrees imposing censorship were the hard and tangible response of Metternich to a present political danger (as exemplified by the Wartburg Festival of 1817), and the "effeminate" von Gentz was the inspiration behind them. He was indeed a subjectivist (see above), but his existential perplexities did not prevent a long and effective engagement which stamped political reality in Europe. Schmitt was not daunted: "Where political action begins, there ends Romanticism." Political activity is by definition opposed to the aesthetic concerns of the Romantic, who wants to be creative without being active.⁸⁰ All he cares about is the "lyrical paraphrase of experience";⁸¹ but this was not what Sand or von Gentz were doing.⁸²

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 146-148.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 158-160.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁸² F. von Gentz, *Fragmente aus der neuesten Geschichte des politischen Gleichgewichts*

Schmitt rounded off his account with the claim that Romanticism is the characteristic ideology of bourgeois society.⁸³ That dreamy passivity and the escape from reality is the typical stance of the individual in the era of scientific and possessive modernity requires a rather convoluted mental procedure to grasp. If we consult the German Romantics themselves, we are rather likely to be apprised of the fact that they considered themselves enemies of individualist utilitarianism. Their medievalism was a rejection of the bourgeois present and a paean to feudalism. Schmitt capitalized on a superficial similarity: Romanticism is the return to the ego; but the self-enclosed ego of poetic contemplation is not the ego of the *homo economicus* realizing itself in the material sphere.

Schmitt's analysis is tendentious because it is a condemnation of his sundry political enemies: the humanists, the liberals, the socialists, in other words all those recognizing meanings and values morally superior to the compulsion of the total state. When he denounced the Romantic for lacking moral or political commitments,⁸⁴ he meant the Romantic who does not share his own idealization of the *raison d'état*. Still, a Romantic idealization of state power is possible, and Schmitt himself was an eminent exponent thereof. His a priori faith is that outside a state forming the political whole through its transcendent power individual existence is meaningless. This is almost verbatim the claim made by that Romantic "weakling" Adam Müller, albeit stripped of the latter's fanciful medievalism.⁸⁵ This faith is not justified through argument. It is just a vision born of the historical moment and held with the same emotional fervor as the vision of any Romantic of old. Schmitt's political philosophy is itself a late Romanticism. It is not without significance that he entitled it a "political theology" in which the place of God or the divine ego of the poet is taken by the absolute state – or rather the Executioner (to speak the more sincere language of de Maistre), who made his

in Europa, English transl. as *Fragments upon the Balance of Power in Europe*, London 1806. Even a cursory glance at this text, written in September and October 1805 with an introduction added in 1806, reveals the entirely political and reality-oriented thought of the author. Von Gentz began with an analysis of the war of the First Coalition against revolutionary France, which he described as thoroughly just. He then proceeded to excoriate the policies of Napoleon. Finally, he proposed his own version of the balance of power, which is not based on the equality, but on the *inequality* of political forces.

⁸³ Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, pp. 149 ff.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 124 ff.

⁸⁵ Lovejoy, "The Meaning of Romanticism", identifies three central Romantic notions that shaped the ideology of Nazism: the first is that of the "organic state", the second is that of the "infinite striving" of the human will, and finally that of the absolute value of the national "particularity" of a distinct human group.

presence so terribly felt under many ideological guises during the twentieth century. So, the political question is reduced to choosing a God. In this case there are more attractive options available than the one proposed by the most eminent, and unrepentant, defender of Nazism.⁸⁶ Finally, with respect to the “aesthetization” of politics of which he accused the Romantics, his own total state is just as prone to this – and much more effectively at that, given the massive mobilization of resources it is capable of. The experience of Nazism was filled with Romantic spectacle, if only we recall the terrible Nuremberg pageants as recorded by Leni Riefenstahl’s unfortunately virtuoso lens. As Count Ciano flew over Abyssinia raining death over the hapless natives, he commented “poetically” that the exploding bombs looked from above like “flowers in the desert”. As Walter Benjamin argued, the reduction of politics to aesthetics is the mark of fascism.⁸⁷

That there is no disconnection of Romantic sensibility and political action is exemplified by the thought of a neo-Romantic whom Schmitt himself esteemed, namely Georges Sorel. Rejecting Marx’s scientific pretensions, Sorel claimed that history was becoming indeterminate. It was pushed in this or that direction by the visions firing the collective imagination of its active subjects. Even science was not a rendition of reality, as it is in itself, but a system of symbols whose use procures vital satisfaction for humanity. If the working class is the engine of change towards good (i.e. honest and equal) society, then its motive for action is not some *knowledge* of the objective rhythm of history (which makes action redundant), but a moral vision, a compelling “myth” that will energize its collective will – and this myth is the “general strike”.⁸⁸ Historically effective myths are not sustained by rational

⁸⁶ With respect to the theological foundation of Schmitt’s thought, see R. Wolin, “Carl Schmitt, Political Existentialism and the Total State”, *Theory and Society* 19, 4 (August 1990), pp. 389-416. For a more extensive investigation of the same subject, see H. Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

⁸⁷ M. Jay, “The ‘Aesthetic Ideology’ as Ideology: Or, What Does it Mean to Aestheticize Politics?”, *Cultural Critique* 21 (Spring 1992), pp. 41-61. See also R. Wolin, “Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror”, *Political Theory* 20, 3 (August 1992), pp. 424-447. For a discussion of “political aestheticism” in Germany that proceeds beyond Benjamin’s landmark analyses, attempts to discover “critical” dimensions to aestheticism in politics and refers to the recent literature on this subject, see B. R. Wheeler, “Modernist Reenchantments, I: From Liberalism to Aestheticized Politics”, *The German Quarterly* 74, 3 (Summer 2001), pp. 223-236.

⁸⁸ G. Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence*, Paris 1908, English transl. as *Reflections on Violence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. See in particular the introductory epistle to Daniel Halévy, pp. 3-38, which is a trenchant summary of Sorel’s beliefs.

analysis, nor are they justified by reference to economic or social facts. No empirical finding is capable of falsifying them. Ideology is a nexus of non-falsifiable statements charged with collective emotion. It provides meaning to the existence of a social group. Politics is, hence, an explosion of pure will. Sorel's theory is also a theology of worldly action, and, together with his hatred of parliamentary politics, this is what Schmitt appreciated in it. For the overthrow of rotten liberal society, the proletariat has the right to use violence, which is for Sorel a ritual and a spectacle of purification. It aims to reinstitute collective life on the foundation of the eternal values of mutuality.⁸⁹ Thus, it is said to have nothing in common with *material force*, that murderous brutality used by other classes to found their rule. Sorel did not consider, like mainstream Marxists, Jacobin terror as an episode of social liberation. On the contrary, he loathed it as an exemplification of the very essence of the bourgeois system. Apart from this distinction, no positive account is given of what proletarian violence involves.⁹⁰ This concept, thus, retains a characteristic mystical quality. This metaphysical justification of violence, though, still points towards concrete behaviors. An idea is as good as its practical results: this is a notion borrowed from the pragmatism of William James. Sorel's hatred of intellectuals was caused partly by their penchant for empty talk, partly by the fact that they were in political control of the rotten parliamentary system. Hence, Sorel was desperately searching for concrete political situations that might serve as actualizations of his theory. The French working class did not oblige him by embracing his "myth" in the 1920s, but in the persons of Mussolini and Lenin he believed that he found instances of the politics of absolute action. Isaiah Berlin considered Sorel a prophet – but surely he was a prophet of doom. By the end of the twentieth century Marxism, or what was left of it, seemed to have ejected Marx's rationalist and scientific commitments in favor of a theology of politics. In the heart of this disturbing mutation we can detect the Romanticism of pure violence, together with a queer reverence for Schmitt's totalitarianism.

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Emotional spontaneity is of the essence in Romanticism. This is one of the easiest paths to immediate action, rather than a hindrance to it. It is rational deliberation, on the contrary, that seems like a more potent impediment

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Part VI: "The Ethics of Violence", pp. 175-214.

⁹⁰ For a thorough discussion of the metaphysics of violence in Sorel, see I. Berlin, *Against the Current*, ed. H. Hardy, London: Pimlico, 1997, pp. 296-332.

to activism. Studiously assessing facts and probabilities is likely to reveal a variety of other practical alternatives, none of which is self-evidently the best. To stoke passion, on the other hand, is the surest way to precipitate deeds. Passion certainly cannot be banned from politics. Nothing great is accomplished without passion, as Hegel asserted. One can be passionate about truth, moderation and rationality as well. Passion is a means and not an end – even in art, where emotion must be recollected in thought (as even a great Romantic like Wordsworth taught) and molded into form. The moral worth of passion does not derive from its intensity, but from the purpose it serves as evaluated by the organized intelligence of society. This is a perennial truth that Plato was the first to state.

University of Athens