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Edited by Nicholas Saul

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I

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What is Romanticism,
and where did it come from?

Since the significance and history of German Romanticism is embedded in an exceptionally complex configuration of sociopolitical, religious and aesthetic phenomena, this chapter comprises three sections. The first focuses on the larger historical and political context of the Romantic movement in Germany, the second on the philosophical, cultural and aesthetic coordinates of German Romanticism, and the final section investigates the critical aesthetics of the Jena or early German Romantics, as articulated in the fragments and aphorisms of the journals *Lyceum der schönen Künste* (1797) and *Athenaeum* (1798–1800). The term ‘Romanticism’, as defined in this chapter, refers predominantly to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concept of an era informed by the profound experience of momentous political, social and intellectual revolutions. The term also has its own history, which calls for a short introduction.

The etymology of the word ‘Romantic’ can be traced to the old French *romanz*, which referred to the vernacular ‘romance’ languages, Italian, French, Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese and Provençal, which were developed from Latin. Subsequently, tales of chivalry, written in one of these romance languages, came to be known as medieval *romance* or *romant*. These were often composed in verse and narrated a quest. Later, the authors of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, such as Dante, Ariosto, Torquato Tasso, Cervantes and Shakespeare, who abandoned classical forms, were seen as inventors of a romantic, fantastical style. In the eighteenth century, the semantic field of the word ‘romantic’ in common English usage had expanded to include the picturesque, the fanciful and the fantastic with not altogether positive connotations. Romantic imagination was seen as impeding the purity of the art form and pushing it beyond the limits of proper subject matter. At the end of the eighteenth century, the concept of the ‘romantic’ came to inhabit permanently the vocabularies of European languages and referred simultaneously and variously to landscape, feeling (predominantly love), or eccentric character. It was in the work of the late eighteenth-century German literary and cultural critics that ‘romantische

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Poesie' (Romantic poesy) was transformed into a critical mode of thought and came to be seen as a contemporary and autonomous literary tradition. In 1798, Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), the leading critic of the early German Romantic movement, defined *romantische Poesie* as 'a progressive universal poesy'. This kind of poesy both emphasised its links to classical and medieval literatures and its future-orientated mission and focused on foregrounding its critical capabilities, which had been disregarded or missed by traditional literary criticism. How was it that in less than half a century, the negative connotations of the concept 'romantic' were transformed into notions that denoted revolutionary, innovative, modern, critical and universal? The trajectory of the term needs to be understood in the context of several revolutions – the American, the French, the industrial revolution and Immanuel Kant's 'Copernican Revolution' – that inaugurated the Age of Enlightenment in Europe. This seismic transformation of European culture required new modes of understanding the world, and Romanticism came to symbolise the consciousness of the new age.

Although a tremendous amount of scholarship on the critical legacy of early German Romanticism (*Frühromantik*) has emerged in the last decades, many works on the subject are dedicated to specific or specialised topics. A more differentiated view of the emergence of Romanticism in Germany calls for a broader historico-philosophical approach. As Friedrich Schlegel had famously remarked, the French Revolution, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794; *Theory of Knowledge*) and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795–6; *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*) constituted the three major culture-changing trends at the close of the eighteenth century. In Schlegel's view, whoever rejected the logic of this juxtaposition or the idea of a revolution that was not loud and physical had failed to achieve a broad perspective on the history of humanity. In the final analysis, political and philosophical revolution and literary innovation participated equally in the genesis of Romanticism. The coincidence of the rise of Romanticism with the rapid expansion of the European reading public, the efflorescence of German culture at the close of the eighteenth century and the French occupation of all of Germany west of the Rhine by 1794 calls for a multiple-field approach to a critical understanding of the Romantic movement. In this spirit, the present chapter provides a condensed reading map of the complex historical and critical directions that led to the *Frühromantik* and beyond.

Historical and political background

At the onset of the German Romantic movement, the political map of Germany represented an unusual configuration of multiple federations

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under the nominal suzerainty of the Holy Roman Empire. German territories constituted a diverse assemblage of states with different political and cultural institutions and practices, economies and religious professions. Writing in *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (*On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*) as late as 1835, Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) remarks that the only unity a politically and religiously fragmented Germany possesses consists in its literary language, as created in Martin Luther's masterly Bible translation. The titular political protection and the juridical framework of the Empire made it possible for a diverse group of principalities to coexist without being taken over by more powerful neighbouring or rival states. This pattern of territorial power and the decentralisation of political rule encouraged a practice of absolutist rule by individual princes who were not accountable to a parliament or an estate. The political landscape was a mosaic of medieval remnants reminiscent of feudal administrative machinery. Seen in the historical continuum, the ascendancy of territorial power was set in motion by the cumulative socioeconomic consequences of the Thirty Years War (1618–48) and the succession wars that followed it. The way that led to the Thirty Years War was, in turn, paved by the political destabilisation that accompanied the Protestant revolution. The Catholic emperor was unable to stop the conversion of many powerful princes to Protestantism. Furthermore, Luther's revolutionary zeal not only broke the undisputed power of the Catholic Church but also heralded the possibility of a critical sensibility that questioned any form of absolutist rule. The Peace of Westphalia that had marked the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648 was followed by a multitude of wars that were increasingly disengaged from the Empire, as individual principalities engaged in conflicts or otherwise signed treaties with states outside the Empire.

The German states after 1648 varied greatly in size and constitution. Habsburg Austria with its court in Vienna included a sizeable number of non-German dynasties along with its territories within the Empire. Other major courts were Protestant Saxony, with its magnificent capital city of Dresden, and Catholic Bavaria, with its capital Munich. Important ecclesiastical territories included the prince bishoprics of Mainz and Würzburg. Toward the end of the seventeenth century, as the centres of European trade moved westwards to the Atlantic seaboard, urban life began to decline. This recession enabled rulers to curtail the autonomy of German towns. The downtrend of burgher life and the increasing dependence of the aristocracy, already impoverished by successive wars, on the patronage of rulers, advanced the realisation of the absolutist state in the form of Brandenburg-Prussia. The Hohenzollerns of Brandenburg, who were

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given the title of 'Elector' of the Holy Roman Empire, ruled over an amalgamated state with culturally and socio-economically diverse territories. Eighteenth-century German states, courts and rulers featured a great diversity of sociopolitical and cultural practices, ways of post-war economic rehabilitation and inter-state relations. In some areas agricultural production could not sustain peasants, whereas in others farms prospered. Aristocracy ranged from powerful nobles to impoverished knights. The League of Princes formed by Frederick II in 1780 included the Archbishop of Mainz, the Elector of Saxony and Britain's George III in the latter's capacity as Elector of Hanover. *Hansestadt* Hamburg (a member of the Hanseatic League) represented an oligarchic tradition of urban government, and, in one exceptional case, in the Duchy of Württemberg, a parliamentary form of government representing rural, urban and church interests endured until the rise of the modern German nation state in the nineteenth century. From this disunity of state and territory, Austria and Prussia emerged as the two competing powers of the German political landscape toward the end of the eighteenth century. When the French Revolution broke out, Germany was a very long way from being a unified nation state. Among German intellectuals, the ideal of a unified Germany amounted to a revolutionary vision. Although Brandenburg-Prussia rose to great power from the fragmented ground of German territories and undertook ambitious administrative, economic and military reforms, it was the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars that spelled the end of the Holy Roman Empire, buried the last remnants of feudal social practices and forced an overhaul of administrative, judicial, economic and military systems.

If the legacy of a revolution were to be measured by the seismic upheavals it triggers, then the French Revolution, as a major quake that sent tremors through the European terrain, could be seen as an agent of momentous political, economic and social reconfigurations that took place within and beyond the borders of France. Although there had been signs of political discontent among German intellectuals at the onset of the French Revolution, most Germans seemed happy to observe the developments in France with a sense of curiosity, sometimes coupled with a sigh of relief that Germany had been able to ward off a revolution by measured reforms. All but the most conservative thinkers saw the French Revolution in a positive light and were happy that the French were finally setting their house in order. The German aristocracy and intelligentsia had long regarded France as the epitome of civilisation, and German thinkers lauded the achievements of the French Enlightenment. Nevertheless, they also realised that the French state apparatus and society were in dire need of reform. However,

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even those Germans most sympathetic to the French cause were in no way inclined to import the Revolution to Germany. Many German writers saw the French Revolution as a great and inspiring world drama performed on the stage of history, but they were not enthusiastic about joining it. Writer and critic Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813) regarded his generation as fortunate to have witnessed so momentous an event as a bystander. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), one of the leading language historians of German pre-Romanticism, maintained that Germans would not expose themselves to such clear and imminent danger but rather watch the ‘shipwreck’ on the open sea from a safe haven. Other writers, such as the revolutionary-minded popular essayist Georg Forster (1754–94), opposed the spread of revolution to Germany for fear that the people were not enlightened enough to prevent its disastrous consequences.¹ Thus, if there was any lesson to be learned from the French Revolution, it had to be reflected on and theorised, but not put into practice.

The French Revolution itself was in no small way indebted to the legacy of the American Revolution in theory and practice. Humanistic secular ideals had informed the moral and intellectual character of both the American and French Revolutions. The American Revolution represented the most concrete expression of emancipation and subject sovereignty for a Europe suffering in the oppressive climate of absolutist regimes. Rulers and those who occupied the highest levels of society who should have provided moral leadership for their nations were hopelessly corrupt and resistant to reform. The founding fathers of the American rebellion were bourgeois or patrician dissidents who sought parity with their British peers. Like the French Revolution, the American one had embraced the secular humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment. The Declaration of Independence signed by the founding fathers in 1776 further incorporated the empirical signature of Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and David Hume’s (1711–76) reception of Enlightenment ideas. On the eve of the French Revolution, one of the major sources of public discontent in France was the disastrous state of government finances, since the French, as allies of the uprising American colonies, borrowed heavily to support the American revolutionaries against Great Britain. Since Germany was not a unified state at this time, its financial backing of the American Revolution could not be a sustained effort. An exception was the Hessian mercenary state, which provided the revolutionaries with paid soldiers. Although the intellectual and moral spirit of the American Revolution generated a strong spark in the German Romantic movement, its political implications for Germany were more indirect or perhaps less immediate, as they first travelled through the momentous upheavals in France on their way to Germany.

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The intellectuals of the French Enlightenment were aware that, in contrast to America's situation, the poor and disaffected masses in France could be a potentially destructive force in any radical political transformation. Their insight proved true, when in the second phase of the French Revolution in 1792–3, the Jacobins, a democratic republican group affiliated with the revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre (1758–94), had to give in to the demands of hardline *sans culottes*. 1793–4 ushered in the reign of Terror, when mass executions, including that of King Louis XVI, turned the promise of liberty into a bloodbath. When the Revolution changed from a declaration of freedom and equality to bloodshed and anarchy, it became increasingly difficult for German intellectuals to remain sympathetic observers. With the subsequent invasion and exploitation of German territories by the French revolutionary army and the occupation of all of Germany west of Rhine by 1794, any remaining sympathy for the Gallic spirit turned into fear and hate. Friedrich Schlegel saw the French Revolution as both an 'outstanding allegory of the system of transcendental idealism'² and 'the most frightful grotesque of the age where the most deep-seated prejudices and their most brutal punishments are joined in a gruesome chaos' (*KFSA* II, p. 248, No. 424). The various indigenous socio-political developments in Germany from the end of the Thirty Years War and the Peace of Westphalia to the Congress of Vienna (1814–15) were deflected by the French Revolution and the subsequent French invasion. This sea change resulted in major cultural and administrative transformations in the German territories.

Although the French Revolution, which Friedrich Schlegel regarded 'an almost universal earthquake' in the political order, was initially met with enthusiasm by German thinkers who yearned for a consolidation of Germany's discontinuous and fragmented political landscape, by 1794 it had come to represent the loss of a once whole world. German Romanticism's real and symbolic links to the French Revolution inhere both in the passion generated by ideals of equality, fraternity and freedom that resounded beyond French borders in 1789 and in mourning an irretrievably lost world of unity and harmony. Thus, the French Revolution also came to represent a shift in the understanding of movement in history. The Judaeo-Christian tradition had represented time as the agent of sacred history, whereas the Revolution became in the Romantic mind an allegory of disruption in time, the eclipse of teleology and the rise of chaos. Neither the Enlightenment ideal of progress nor a millennarian belief could make sense of the explosive and destructive course of history. Romanticism can thus be seen as originating in our human anxiety about the interlinked crises of the political turmoil that engulfed Europe and the limits of understanding introduced

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by Immanuel Kant's critiques. Thus, Romanticism came to view expressive freedom in life, writing and art as an end toward which humanity had to strive in order to rise above mere physical and natural existence.

Philosophical and cultural context

Considered by many intellectual historians to be a major turning point in the history of political and critical thought, Romanticism emerged at the end of the eighteenth century in Europe, principally in Germany (but also in Britain and France), as simultaneously a cultural, political and socio-economic movement of revolutionary vision and ambition. Various cultural discourses, both complementary and oppositional, including Pietism, the Enlightenment, Weimar Classicism and *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress), converged in early German Romanticism. Pietism, one of the several sociocultural threads that made up the complicated web of German Romanticism's larger historical context, was an earlier and relatively less-known influence on the genesis of Romantic thought. In the late seventeenth century, Pietism rose up against Lutheran orthodoxy and played an important role in the development of Enlightenment's world view. Founded by Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705), whose *Pia desideria* (1675; *Pious Longings*) endeavoured to free the Church from the weight of dogma, Pietism emphasised Bible study and spiritual experience. Its regard for Christian fellowship and community dictated that laity should share in the spiritual government of the Church. One of the six reform proposals of *Pia desideria* called for tolerance toward non-believers and their kindly treatment. Another pleaded for a new form of preaching that supplanted lofty rhetoric with the desire to instil Christianity in the inner person. The influence of Pietism lasted from the end of the seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth century and was felt most strongly in northern and central Germany. As Pietism placed the spirit of Christian life above the letter of doctrine and stressed the role of individual will in spiritual life, its more liberal concepts endured in European intellectual history through its influence on Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55).

An important influence on the early German Romantic critics' views on language and literary genealogies were the language theoreticians and philologists Johann Gottfried Herder and Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786–1859). However, unlike Herder and the Grimm brothers, the early Romantics were not interested in mining language for the riches of a specifically Germanic culture. Whereas in Herder and the Grimms the Romantic sensibility took a turn toward cultural origins or the *Volk*, for the Schlegel brothers Friedrich and August Wilhelm (1767–1845) and their circle

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the ‘Romantic’ ethos resided in a universal and unifying discourse. Herder, a student of Kant’s, challenged the universalist orientation of his teacher’s philosophy. Like Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88) before him, Herder felt that the fundamental cognitive and communicative function of language had been underrated by Kant and other Enlightenment philosophers. He endeavoured to show that language was inseparable from thought, and that each language constituted the unique expression of a particular culture. This linguistic turn in the study of culture advanced the study of philology, a field the Grimm brothers cultivated extensively. Both the Grimms and Herder collected folk tales (*Volksmärchen*) and folk songs (*Volkslieder*) as material evidence of indigenous culture. Herder traced the influence of ‘folk’ traditions in Shakespeare, Ossian, the fictitious Gaelic bard (James Macpherson), and the Bible. He maintained that Shakespeare’s tragedies presented an organic, unifying vision of a world buffeted by the storm of history.

In the tumultuous 1770s, this storm was to become the dominant symbol of the Storm and Stress movement that took its name from a play, *Wirrwarr, oder Sturm und Drang* (1776; *Confusion or Storm and Stress*) by Friedrich Klinger (1752–1831). The Storm and Stress, characterised by stirrings of idealism, nationalism, faith in nature and scorn for artistic convention, had its heyday long before the French Revolution. Nevertheless, it was a full dress rehearsal for the coming German Romanticism. Romanticism has often been viewed as a critique of Enlightenment modernity and a paradigm shift that problematised the entire conceptual framework of the age. However, in the German context, Romanticism cannot be seen as a movement that reacted to and replaced the German Enlightenment. Rather, the intellectual thrust of the Romantic movement in Germany arose from the critical practice instituted by the Enlightenment itself. The relationship of Weimar Classicism, as exemplified in the work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) and Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), to early German Romanticism has been variously interpreted in literary history as one of continuity, antagonism or reconciliation. More recent critical views agree that the last decade of the eighteenth century represented an enriching juxtaposition of Classical and Romantic views. It is important to remember that the authors of early German Romanticism did not refer to themselves as ‘Romantics’, but rather as members of a ‘new school’. Likewise, Goethe and Schiller did not consider themselves ‘Classicists’. They did, however, aspire to develop a dynamic concept of Classicism that did not exclude the idea of infinite perfectibility.³ Friedrich Schlegel, for his part, understood the truly Classical text to be one with infinite possibilities for interpretation, just as he considered the inexhaustibility of interpretation Romantic poesy’s most distinguishing feature. Recent German scholarship sees the last five years of

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the eighteenth century as a dynamic cultural encounter of the Classical and the Romantic. Textual historical evidence supports this view as reflecting the spirit of that period most accurately. Even Goethe viewed the last decade of the eighteenth century as an unusually fruitful age of German intellectual and cultural history, and considered the Romantics an integral part of that history.

The various echoes of these political and cultural movements crystallised in the project of early German Romanticism, which responded to an intellectual and moral crisis that marked the end of the rationalist and Classical world view. Romanticism's critical anxiety was prompted by the radical eruptions in the historical and intellectual landscape of the age. The social and political upheaval set off by the 'earthquake' and the aftershocks of the French Revolution ran parallel to a crisis of understanding the conditions and limits of human reason. The chaos that threatened to erase the pillars of reason necessitated new paradigms of understanding and counter-order. The uneasy confrontation with an uncertain future and the impossibility of accessing a truth hidden in the noumenal world, an occult code or a forgotten past characterised the many crises of an age that seemed to have lost its place in the order of history. Kant's institution of critical philosophy represented in his own words 'a Copernican Revolution', by placing the human mind, in an analogy to the place of the sun in the solar system, at the centre of all operations of knowledge. However, the cognitive powers of the mind famously cannot for Kant ascertain the reality of things in themselves. The 'Ding an sich' ('thing in itself') is not accessible by the faculties and so presents a limit to human understanding. Although Kant's transcendental idealism was both daunting and liberating, it offered no possibility for reflective praxis. It was, in the first instance, purely epistemological and could not transcend the historical reality of political and moral delinquency. Also known as formal or critical idealism, this position maintains that all theoretical knowledge is restricted to the world of experience via appearances and refutes claims to knowledge of anything beyond this realm. At the same time, although the form of experience is subjective, it corresponds to a reality independent of this form. Therefore, the laws of nature are universally applicable, as they are located in the subject. The moral law is also a priori given to the subject and legislated by the faculty of reason.

While Kant rescued science from epistemological scepticism and secured the status of idealism, he did not account for an understanding of the 'real' world, of an independent and totally unknowable thing-in-itself, and thus thwarted the natural desire for a unity of knowledge. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) set out to overcome the duality of Kantian philosophy by positing an absolute consciousness that would guarantee a systematic unity

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of conception from which a multiplicity of experience could be deduced. For Fichte, the major weakness of Kantian philosophy lay in its lack of self-representation. In other words, it failed to posit an absolute first principle from which self-consciousness could be deduced. This first principle in Fichte's transcendental system is the absolute *Ich* (I/self) that posits itself as an object of cognition. This act of positing is not directed at any object, as Fichte claims, but represents the self to itself by limiting the infinity of the self. Thus, reflection, which is a mode of cognition in Fichte, is rendered possible in the condition of a self-limiting self. This absolute *Ich* bridges the duality of theoretical and practical reason and becomes the ground where the subject is only one manifestation of the Absolute whose history subsumed all modes of human cognitive and moral activity. Because of the inherent self-representation (and thus self-critique) of the *Ich*, forms of cognition and moral consciousness are informed by an infinite progression. Picking up the thread of Kantian-Fichtean idealisms, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854) seeks further to erase all forms of discontinuity between the conscious mind and objective nature by setting up a dialectic wherein nature becomes the objectified self and the self the reflected nature. His *Identitätsphilosophie* (philosophy of identity) renders subject and object identical in the Absolute. As this Absolute manifests itself in human consciousness, the harmony of mind and nature gives rise to aesthetic contemplation. For Schelling the path of absolute idealism ultimately leads to art, where human consciousness finds expression in sensuous form.

One of the earliest sceptical responses to the possibility of a first or overarching principle of philosophy (even if this were to be understood as an all-encompassing experience of aesthetics à la Schelling) came from the Jena Romantics. The most uncompromising form of subjective idealism, as represented in the Fichtean model, does not admit of an independently postulated 'real' world. In Fichte, the reflecting self converts the 'pure form' (*reine Form*) of all objectifications of perception into the content of a new form, that of 'knowledge' (*Wissen*) or consciousness (*Bewußtsein*). In the Romantics' interpretation of Fichte's self-reflexive activity, the world emerges as a realm of infinite representations captured in form. By emphasising Idealist philosophy's inability to grasp the absolute securely within a method, the early Romantics credit art with the power of representing the unrepresentable, in other words, to intimate the absolute that eluded all reason. As Friedrich Schlegel famously remarked, 'Das Höchste kann man, eben weil es unaussprechlich ist, nur allegorisch sagen' ('the absolute, because it is inexpressible, can only be expressed allegorically'; *KFSa* II, p. 324). Nevertheless, the source of the early German Romantic inspiration for raising the cognitive and expressive potency of poetry to ever-higher