

Alienation, Irony, and German Romanticism

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At the end of the eighteenth century, there was a powerful outburst of original intellectual creativity in German-speaking areas of Europe that led to the Age of Romanticism throughout Western civilization. Since the Romantic movement is multifarious, encompassing sometimes even contradictory aims and characteristics, literary historians have a difficult time categorizing and defining it precisely. However, the Romantics definitely turned against the pure rationality of the Enlightenment and the precise norms of Neoclassicism. The theoretical foundation for the early German Romantics can be found in their publication Athenaeum (1798-1800), where the brothers Schlegel especially emphasized the “universality” of the new intellectual, artistic, and literary movement. This essay will concentrate on two very interesting features of the German Romantic movement: Alienation and Irony. Although there are numerous publications discussing “Romantic Irony,” they rarely connect it to the concept of alienation. One can argue that the Romantic or Artistic irony is definitely a literary device that emphasizes the alienated disposition of several Romantic protagonists.

Before looking at the concept of alienation in the context of German Romanticism, one should briefly consider its historical roots. Alienation is a multifarious phenomenon that is associated with many areas of human existence. The term “alienation” can be traced back through Middle English and Old French to classical Latin. The German equivalent “Entfremdung” appears first in Middle High German literature. The term “alienation,” originating in the Latin “alienatio,” has been used through the ages with various meanings such as “transfer of ownership,” “paralysis or loss of one’s mental powers or sense,” “cooling of a warm relationship, with another,” “renouncing,” “robbing,” etc.¹

It was Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) who in 1793 for the first time delineated the concept of alienation and dehumanization in the twenty-seven letters in his Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen.² Yet it was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s Phänomenologie des Geistes³ that in 1807 presented the first exhaustive and systematic treatment of this universal predicament of man and prepared the ground for both Karl Marx and twentieth-century Existentialism. Both Friedrich Schiller and the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), who earlier used the term “Entäusserung,” meaning “surrender” or “divestiture,” exerted a considerable influence upon Hegel (1770-1831).⁴

Erich Fromm popularized the term “alienation” in the United States. He studied Marxist manuscripts and Marx’s dream of an un-alienated society, and it is probably due to this fact that most people in the U.S.A. today see the concept of “alienation” in a rather negative light. The term “alienation,” however, does not have to have a negative connotation. Schiller in his 25th letter on “aesthetic education” claims that alienation (“Entfremdung”) is necessary in order for a man to become an individual. The Romantics generally recognized the fragmentation of society and saw alienation in opposition to harmony or unity. Fichte, in his The Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre, 1794/95), spoke of a self-understanding through self-reflection, i.e., of a negation and affirmation on “the next highest level,” Hegel uses the same concept

later, especially in his Elements of the Philosophy of Right (Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, 1821). The greatest barrier in this process is the “ego” (das “ich”) or the “non-ego,” according to Fichte, and this may cause the alienated self. However, not everyone agreed with Fichte. Several Romantic poets, such as Clemens Brentano (1778-1842) in his “Philister-Rede”⁵ or Jean Paul in the witty satire “Clavis Fichtiana seu Leibgeberiana” (1799-1800)⁶, criticized Fichte, accusing him of advocating nihilism and “philosophical egoism” on “the highest level.”

In order to demonstrate its connection to alienation, the concept of “irony” should also be defined. “Irony” in the English-speaking world refers usually to a double-edge-speaking. However, in German the term “Ironie” could also refer to something metaphysical, transcending, or rising above oneself (see Grimm, Jakob, and Wilhelm. Deutsches Wörterbuch, various editions). Historically, one points to Socrates, not as to first but as the most influential model for the ironic attitude. Socrates pretended ignorance in seeking information and at the same time showed admiration for others. Plato, who described Socratic actions but did not call them “ironic,” brought about the change in the connotation of the “ironic attitude” from vulgar to respected. It was Aristotle who later, in his discussion of Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus, called it “irony.” Since irony was used by their Greek models, the Roman schools incorporated it in their teachings of rhetoric.

In 1797 the German Romantic poet and thinker Friedrich Schlegel described the mood that permeated certain works by Cervantes, Goethe, and others as irony. Schlegel thereby refers to the complete work as understood originally by the Greeks who were “viewing the whole” and not to the “little instances” that were used in Roman tradition. In Schlegel’s “poetic reflection,” one can find an infinite series of mirrors that create a rhythm of “self-creation” and “self-destruction” (“Selbstschöpfung” und “Selbstvernichtung”). In his essay “On Incomprehensibility,” written in 1800, he sets up a hierarchy of ironies: common, subtle, super-subtle, straightforward, dramatic, double, and “irony of irony.”⁷

However, whereas in traditional irony the interaction is between the narrator and the reader who is able to reconstruct the intended covert meaning, in Romantic irony the interaction is primarily between the narrator and his narrative. “The discreet, assured chronicler of traditional irony is replaced in romantic irony by a self-conscious, searching narrator who openly stands beside his story, arranging it, intruding into it to reflect on his tale and on himself as a writer.”⁸ Of course, Romantic writers themselves referred to the new type of irony as “artistic irony”; only later, by the middle of the nineteenth century, was the concept popularized as “Romantic irony.”

The “dialectical pattern” of Schlegel was continued by Hegel’s dialectics that Hegel tried to synthesize, although the mature Hegel refused to see irony as an acceptable form. Karl Marx, very much aware of irony and influenced primarily by Hegel but also by Fichte, saw the initial optimism of man yield to despair, melancholy, sadness, infinite longing, that “Weltschmerz” (“grief of the world”) that one is trying to mask through laughter as best as one can.⁹

The ideas mentioned above are the major part of the intellectual struggle facing the 19th-century writers starting with the Romantics, and these issues are still not agreed upon, as one can see in the works of twentieth-century writers such as Kafka, Camus, Sartre, and Brecht.

In the history of world literature, the German Romantics were the first group of writers and poets in whose works one is able to find the concept of alienation used on a regular basis. In the prose of most early Romantics, such as Jean Paul (Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, 1763-1825), Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg, 1772-1801), Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), and the Schlegel brothers, August Wilhelm (1767-1845) and Friedrich (1772-1829), but also in the works of late Romantics such as Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), one can find themes of alienation. Of course, the great master of the fantastic and grotesque narration, E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822) should also be mentioned.

Most scholars and thinkers agree that alienation has inward and outward sources and agents and expresses itself in various ways. It emerges from man's awareness of being different and terminates in conscious separation from someone or something with whom or with which one should be united.¹⁰ If one looks for the sources of alienation in German Romantic literature, one would find as the most conspicuous source of estrangement the inconsistent character of the period in which the literature has been written. Following the French Revolution and during the Napoleonic wars, many concepts and values held by society had disintegrated and everything had become unreliable, irrelevant, a play of rival ideas. In German Romantic prose one can find references to a "frivolous period," a "heartless time," and a "vacillating era" that have no absolute or autonomous values. The great Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) lamented: "You have lost all faith in anything great; you are doomed, then, doomed to perish unless that faith returns, like a comet from unknown skies" (1797; Hyperion, 3:42).

Since there is no absoluteness of values, and there are questions about existence and creation, individuals may be caught up in intellectual hubris. They may even go so far as to mock the existence of God. Jean Paul expressed the mood of alienation and anarchy well when he stated "The whole spiritual universe is exploded and shattered by the hand of atheism into countless quicksilver points of I's, ...".¹¹ The same author also creates one of the best examples of alienation in literature with the "Speech of the Dead Christ" in his early novel Siebenkäs. In this context, some critics point to Johann Christian Reil (1759-1813), who wrote scholarly inquiries on the nature of mental illness as the source of inspiration for rebellion that is exhibited by alienated Romantic characters who at the same time may also exhibit characteristics of madness.¹²

Probably the best example of alienation in German Romantic literature, however, is the novel Nachtwachen ("Night Watches").¹³ The novel was written in 1804 by an anonymous writer who wrote under the pseudonym Bonaventura. The protagonist of the novel, Kreuzgang, is aware that intellect is responsible for his overly critical attitude and his failure to communicate with others. A physician diagnoses Kreuzgang's condition as "exaggerated intellectual debauchery" and prescribes "little or no thinking at all." In the same novel, one finds "the town's poet" who does not submit himself to any kind of aesthetic or social restrictions. In his lonely tower, starving and freezing, he dreams about absolute values and immortality, and his suicide is the last assertion of his individuality against the restraining and hostile institutions of the world.

Kreuzgang has no family ties, which is presented as an important source of alienation. He never marries and has no children, and the brothel becomes the substitute for missing human contact and love. He is an orphan, and disagreeable foster parents

contribute little to shape the child's personality. It is therefore not surprising that some Romantic heroes, like Kreuzgang, experience their love predominantly in reflections about love rather than in real human feelings.

A major source of alienation for Kreuzgang and Romantic protagonists is their acute intellect and heightened consciousness. Already in grade school they read books far beyond the understanding of their schoolmates and they are familiar with subjects that were not included in the curricula and that their classmates never heard of. Even the universities, that some attended, did not satisfy their craving for an answer "to questions which lie beyond knowledge and proof" (Nachtwachen, pp. 27-28).

Another common source of alienation is the dwelling in large cities. Not only does the city disrupt man's contact with nature, it also corrupts his morale, creates social discrepancies, and turns old values upside down. But most of all, it makes man indifferent and destroys true human feelings. Alienated protagonists are usually aware that intellect is responsible for their overly critical attitudes, and they fail to communicate with others. Kreuzgang, during his night watch in the city, concludes that mankind should be destroyed since "neither heaven nor hell will accept men: for hell they are too evil, for heaven they are too boring" (Nachtwachen, p. 53).

The alienation which emerges from the above-mentioned sources affects the protagonists' personalities as well as their relations to their fellow men and their societies. The most striking manifestation of alienation is the protagonists' self-alienation. Self-alienation is the result of the protagonists' awareness of the disparity between their precise nature and its realization under given circumstances. The protagonists often observe various contradictions in their character and a strong tendency to perceive everything from two different aspects. They consider themselves more rational than reason itself; yet, at the same time, they declare everything absurd that is viewed as rational. Their self-alienation sometimes reaches such a degree where they can no longer distinguish whether they or their fellow men are abnormal or "upside down" (Nachtwachen, p. 58).

The feeling of otherness shared by many Romantic protagonists brings another type of alienation, namely the separation from their fellow men. The protagonists gradually detect that they are surrounded by people who are stupid and vain, have no inventiveness, and resemble one another like a flock of sheep. These people reject everyone who differs from their model and do not hesitate to pronounce their fellow man insane if he attempts to express his own ideas. The average man's mind pivots upon clothing, positions, success, and material gains, but it disregards the human aspect of the man himself.

Man's most conspicuous traits, besides stupidity, are immorality and viciousness. Man does filthy things, wallows in mud and corrupts others, but he is not even ashamed of it. He has no compunction to humiliate, hurt, and bully his fellow man, and he always looks down upon others. Civilization has not improved mankind; it only created a greater variety of sensation and taught humans how to slaughter on a large scale. Human viciousness has almost no limitations and begins with the cruelty of parents to their children. However, a human being reveals an admirable versatility to camouflage his true character; he is a hypocrite. He pretends to be honest and just but is a rogue at the bottom of his heart. He displays a broad outlook and speaks about ideals, yet he would not lift even his little finger to achieve these ideals.

Usually the protagonists' negative experiences with people may be traced back to their childhood. They are not willing to identify themselves with the values, practices, and attitudes of the people with whom they live; rather, they anticipate that the environment will live up to their concepts and experiences. When these expectations do not materialize, the protagonists turn away with disdain, loathing, and hatred.

Alienation from man is accompanied by alienation from society. The alienated Romantic heroes observe many elements in their societies of which they disapprove. Society enslaves men; it does not tolerate bold actions and ideas, nor does it permit deviations from the established norms. If man dares to point at the cracks in the fabric of society, if he tries to manifest his own will, society will "throw mountains over him under which he can only shake himself in fury, without harming the social structure" (Nachtwachen, p. 77). Society prefers good machines to bold spirits; it values hands and feet more than the heads, for the state has need only of one single head but of a hundred arms (Nachtwachen, p. 112).

Social stratification, strictly observed by the state, is another means of curtailing man's freedom. Within the hierarchy, man is not treated as a human being. It is the rank and the successful career that count. The higher rank always oppresses the lower one; yet as soon as the lower rank advances, it will do the same thing. It is extremely hard to advance in social status, for this requires good connections and strong support rather than knowledge, ability, and courage. Thus, instead of promoting morality, instead of helping mankind to develop character and adhere to ethical and moral principles, society stimulates egoism and transforms men into amorphous, spineless creatures, seeking higher position in order to impress others, and lying and fawning to please their superiors. The cruel attitudes and methods of society toward its members are objectionable. But the protagonists are not willing to submit themselves unquestioningly to the restrictions and norms of the social hierarchy. So what are the chances of an intelligent man in such corrupt surroundings?

Most German Romantics perceived elements of alienation as a central feature of human nature. At the root of all alienation there is uprootedness, intellectual curiosity, man's heightened consciousness, and the unrest of freedom.¹⁴ As long as man conceives his inner and outer worlds as a harmonious unity and identifies himself with his age and environment, alienation remains a dormant agent. Yet, as soon as this unity grows brittle and crumbles away, man suddenly becomes aware of a multitude of disparate experiences that act at the expense of the other or develop in diametrical opposition. In consequence of these perceptions, man, on the one hand, begins to rebel against his environment. On the other hand, he indulges in painful self-analysis, hence exaggerating his individualism and triggering the feeling of otherness, loneliness, frustration, and powerlessness, in other words, activating the inherent propensity to alienation.

The German Romantics certainly did not find a harmonious unity between their inner and outer worlds. It is therefore not surprising to find in their writing the reoccurring type of the alienated man who in reality often reflects the authors' own dilemmas. The Romantics wrote at a time of political turmoil that had failed to materialize man's longing for freedom. Thus man continued to degenerate into an anonymous part of the social and professional mechanism that did not grant full development of his human potentiality and leveled him with indifferent laws. This reality

was obviously incompatible with the heightened individualism of idealistic philosophy and Friedrich Schiller's vision of moral freedom and perfect harmony.

Notes

¹ For further linguistic background, see Richard Schacht. Alienation. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970, pp. 10-37.

² Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man. In a Series of Letters. Ed. and trans. by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.

³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe in zwanzig Bänden, Vol. II. Ed. Hermann Glockner. Stuttgart: F. Frommann, 1964.

⁴ Rado Pribic, Bonaventura's 'Nachtwachen' and Dostoyevsky's 'Notes from the Underground'. A Comparison in Nihilism. M_nchen: O. Sagner, 1974, pp. 19-21.

⁵ Brentanos Werke. Vol. III, Ed. Max Preiz. Bern, 1970, pp. 261-318.

⁶ Wolfgang Harich, Jean Pauls Kritik des philosophischen Egoismus. Frankfurt a. M., 1960, pp. 10-11.

⁷ “_ber die Unverständlichkeit,” Kritische Ausgabe. Vol. II, Ed. Hans Eichner. M_nchen: Sch_ningh, 1967, pp. 368-70.

⁸ Lilian R. Furst. Fictions of Romantic Irony. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 230.

⁹ For further discussion see also Bernadette Malinowski's essay “German Romantic Poetry in Theory and Practice: The Schlegel Brothers, Schelling, Tieck, Novalis, Eichendorf, Brentano, and Heine” in Dennis F. Mahoney, ed. The Literature of German Romanticism. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2004, pp. 147-169.

¹⁰ For further discussion see Schacht's Alienation.

¹¹ Werke. Vol. II, Ed. Gustav Lohmann, M_nchen, 1959, p. 266.

¹² For further discussion of psychiatry and madness in Romantic literature see Theodore Ziolkowski, German Romanticism and its Institutions. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 181-217).

¹³ Hermann Michel, ed., Deutsche Literaturdenkmale des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts, No. 133. Berlin, 1904, pp. 19-34. Quotes from the Nachtwachen are translated by the author.

¹⁴ See also Deric Regin, Sources of Cultural Estrangement. (Studies in the Social Sciences, No. 7.) The Hague: Mouton, 1969.

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