

**NATIONAL UNITY IN
THE GERMAN NOVEL
BEFORE 1870, NO. 14**

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National Unity in the German Novel Before 1870, No. 14 by Roy H. Perring

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ROY H. PERRING, PH.D.
Professor of German at Grinnell College

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National Unity in the German Novel Before 1870.

Since the days of Tacitus the German people have shown a traditional incapacity for united action. Political unity was for them a "blue flower" which for centuries deceived them with its "delusive presence" and its "intoxicating fragrance." The humiliation brought upon the nation by the destruction of the last remnants of the Holy Roman Empire through Napoleon at the beginning of the nineteenth century was the inevitable result of centuries of disunion. The outburst of patriotic feeling which came with the War for Liberation aroused anew the desire for unity. Yet for almost seven decades the nation dreamed and fought and bled for it, until under the skilled hand of the Iron Chancellor the dream of centuries was realized, and to-day the Germans, a united nation, hail a German Emperor.

The slow process by which this unity was finally evolved has already received adequate treatment in our historical literature. The documentary evidences have received their best treatment in Sybel's *The Founding of the German Empire*, in Treitschke's *Deutsche Geschichte im 19. Jahrhundert*, in Jastrow's *Geschichte des deutschen Einheitsstraumes und seine Erfüllung*, and partial treatment in the uncompleted work of Grotte *Geschichte der deutschen Einheitsbewegung im 19. Jahrhundert*. These books touch in a very superficial way only the growth of the idea of German unity among the people at large, in their literature and philosophy. Of especial value in this respect is *L'Allemagne depuis Leibnitz. Essai sur le développement de la conscience nationale en Allemagne*, by L. Levy-Bruhl. The treatment is of a general character but the author has outlined in a clear and scholarly manner the elements in the life, philosophy and literature of the German people that prepared the way for German patriotism and eventually German unity in 1871. ✓

The following paper is an attempt to notice in a somewhat more detailed way the treatment given German unity in the novel of the century up to 1870, after which date the question

ceased to interest the poet's imagination. The treatment is not intended to be exhaustive as only those novels are treated which were within the writer's reach. A vast amount of valuable material is contained in those novels of the century which have long since been forgotten, are not on the book market, and are not in our American libraries. Such material can be available only after a careful search among the larger and older circulating libraries of Germany. The task of collecting such material will be a long and tiresome one, but the results ought to form an interesting chapter in the history of the German people during the nineteenth century.

To the lack of national political unity is due in large measure the absence for centuries of the patriotic element in German literature. Not until Frederick the Great began his struggle against the Austrian paternal government, thus taking the first step against the old order of things, does the literature begin to reflect an interest in the affairs of state. This newly aroused interest revealed itself in a certain enthusiasm for a vague idea of native country, in dreams rather than concrete pictures, in indistinct desires rather than definitely planned actions. This so-called "Deutschtümelei" found literary expression in the Göttingen circle and in the works of Klopstock and his followers.

This patriotic literature however lacked an adequate foundation. The nation had lost touch with its past, and it was but natural that the awakened feeling should assume a crude and fantastic form, or else grow into a vague cosmopolitanism which caused the Germans to lose sight of the rightful position of their nation in the future history of Europe. This condition of affairs lasted, with a few exceptions, until the later Romanticists had delved deep into the German past, had caught a glimpse of the ancient glory of the nation, an appreciation of the sublime greatness of the national heroes and so laid the foundation for all patriotic literature. The disgrace of 1806 put an end in great measure to cosmopolitanism and caused the people to centre their thoughts upon their own national life and duties, while the ancient splendor and apparent unity of the race became an ideal for which they could strive.

But before this rude awakening there were a few poets who, with a vision more keen than the others, had seen the drift of affairs, had lifted their warning voices and pleaded for political unity. Herder, for example, who had not hesitated to ridicule Klopstock's vague sentimental ideas of native country, sounded a warning note and a plea for unity in his odes "To the Emperor," "To Ambition," and "To Germania." The early experiences of Schiller had not been such as to engender in him a deep love of country, yet he too gradually freed himself from his cosmopolitan tendencies, so that to-day the Germans, with a few exceptions, accept his later works as coming from a truly patriotic heart. His ardent plea for unity through the dying Attinghausen,

"Seid einig—einig—einig"

stamped him in the popular mind of the nineteenth century as a patriot who saw the need of political unity.

The novel had not responded to any sort of patriotic sentiment. The "Staatsroman" had found writers and readers ever since Opitz had set the fashion by translating Barclay's *Argenis* (1621). Political and social conditions were reflected to some extent in the works of Grimmelshausen, Christian Weise, the *Robinsonaden*, and the various Utopian novels, but a true German patriotic tendency was entirely lacking. During the second half of the eighteenth century the writers of romance chose as a rule themes in which patriotism and political questions had no place. The novels of Goethe, Jean Paul, and the radical Romanticists, with the exception of Tieck in his later works, treated with fullness of detail the inner life of the individual and occasionally the relation of the individual to the social body, but they did not trouble themselves about the life of the individual in its relation to the state or public affairs. And so it was that the novel at the beginning of the century was of such a nature that it was not and could not be the bearer of any serious patriotic message.

The character of the novel changed but little during the first fifteen years of the new century. During this time there was not produced a single patriotic novel worthy of the name, and very few that in any way touched on political questions. The new

questions of civic duty which had been forced upon the attention of the people by the victories of Napoleon were too new for any such treatment as would be required in the novel. It was rather a period devoted to the agitators, who, like Fichte, Arndt, Jahn and others sought to put new ideals and new hopes into the downcast German spirit, or to the dramaticists, who, like Kleist, put their ideal patriot on the stage, or finally to the singers who like Arndt, Körner, Schenkendorf and others tried to express their vague ideas of patriotism and political unity in lyric verse in an effort to fire the sluggish spirits into some semblance of life.

The second decade saw German arms triumph over French tyranny and part of the German soil freed from the hated enemy. The call to arms against the common enemy had filled the people with a renewed sense of their unity and, after the glorious conclusion of the war, everyone looked forward to a speedy realization of the dream. As early as 1812 Stein had sketched a plan for the reunion of the scattered parts of the former German empire, and both Arndt and Görres had given public expression to the same idea. But all remained without result. Then followed at once the period of gloomy reaction, replete with deceived hopes for the patriots who had risked their lifeblood on the battle field, and marked by almost unexampled political procrastination on the part of the leaders. In the hands of great and unselfish statesmen it seems that the dream of national unity might have been realized in fact. However the Congress of Vienna left only a federation of states as disjointed and weak as the old empire, bound together by no firm tie and regarded with contempt by their more powerful neighbors. Royal promises were forgotten and the few bold spirits who ventured to demand their fulfillment were suppressed.

Deceived in their hopes and excluded from participation in the life of the state, a large part of the people dropped back into indifference or squandered their thoughts on a fanciful cosmopolitanism. Others inspired by an interest in political liberty rather than in German unity, an interest caused by the growing hatred of the two absolutist powers, Austria and Prussia, trans-

ferred their enthusiasm and sympathy to the nations that were defending their liberty, such as Greece, Poland or even France. The truly patriotic German spirit however found a refuge and expression in the affiliated student unions or "Burschenschaften" which were made up for the most part of the young men who had fought in the war for independence. In their enthusiasm they were prone to excesses, and in their ideal dreams they were fanciful, but to them Germany owes a debt of gratitude for preserving in those gloomy decades the spirit which in the end was to aid so much in the achievement of unity. Their public life was short. Organized June 12, 1815, the innocent Wartburg festival and the insane act of Sand brought the order to disband and prepared persecution and imprisonment for the members in the years to come.

The popularity of the martial lyrics also served to keep alive the patriotic sentiment. The poets and singers during the years of the war were filled with an ardent patriotism which not only gave expression to a righteous anger against the oppressors but also deplored the destroyed majesty of the German realm, and looked hopefully forward to a united kingdom. They urged all who spoke the German tongue to offer their lifeblood for the freedom and independence of the fatherland. Arndt, Körner, Schenkendorf, Rückert and Uhland sang of liberty and unity, cheered the soldiers on to victory, and encouraged the downcast spirits during the gloomy days of reaction. They themselves perhaps did not realize the significance of their song, their plans for the proposed unity were vague and often impossible, yet for sincerity of purpose and patriotic enthusiasm their lyrics stand unsurpassed in German patriotic literature.

These two decades show little progress in the building up of a healthy patriotic novel, but they were decades of vast significance for the future patriotic literature. The historical novel as we now know it was up to 1815 almost unknown. There was no foundation for it either in content or form. The first three decades of the century produced these two important elements and so prepared the way for the patriotic novel of the remainder of the century.