

Stefan Höppner (Münster)

Steffens, Literature, and Revolution

Abstract

To date, Henrik Steffens' final novella cycle *Die Revolution* (1837) has found little critical attention. This is unfortunate, as this text is Steffens' most committed literary attempt to discuss political and artistic developments in pre-1848 Germany. While the events in this novella revolve around intrigues and assassination attempts in a fictitious small territory, the politically conservative Steffens attributes a central role to contemporary German literature in preparing the stage for dangerous political tendencies: a) by supporting democratic, even revolutionary values, b) by giving in to the corrupting influence of foreign (particularly French) literature, and c) by allowing too much space to Women writers, particularly Bettina von Arnim (1785–1859) and Rahel Varnhagen (1771–1833), whose Berlin salons Steffens frequented in real life. The result is a paradoxical text: a piece of political literature that vehemently opposes the right for political literature to exist.

Henrik Steffens' final novella *Die Revolution*, published in 1837, may be his most personal literary text. In a letter to his publisher Josef Max, he confessed:

I have never been more engrossed by a work than by this one and I can promise that the novella will be published this year[.] [...] There is something appealing about standing up against the threatening dissolution of our time and the attacks of the "Mosquito swarm" against me. [...] I confess that I have destroyed many of my earlier writing attempts – but now that the subject has seized me with all its might, I am thrown into

a kind of crisis that makes that which I undertake appear to me as an important, even a sacred business.¹

Apart from the undated novella *Die schlafende Braut* (*The Sleeping Bride*), *Die Revolution* is also the only one of Steffens' major literary texts without a Norwegian setting. This is remarkable, as his portrayal of Norway did not only put this location on the map of German literature;² it also contributed greatly to Steffens' success as a literary writer. Instead, *Die Revolution* is set in a fictional German territory, a *Duodezfürstentum*, or miniature state, and deals with the political activities there. These include the political machinations of Adrian, an evil scientist, who attempts to assassinate the ruler of that small territory. As it turns out in the course of the plot, writers and contemporary literature play a major role in destabilizing the political and societal order. In the first part of this article, I am going to introduce the plot of *Die Revolution*, as this novella is a little-known text. In the second section, I will then reflect on Steffens' use of the term *revolution*. Then, I intend to discuss the role of literature within Steffens' diagnosis of politics and society in the 1830s. Finally, I will briefly try to situate Steffens' position in the context of 1830's German literature, and unearth an interesting paradox – namely, that *Die Revolution* as an example of political literature directed against political literature.

1 „Nie war ich mehr von einem Werke durchdrungen, als von diesem und daß die Novelle noch in diesem Jahr erscheinen soll, darf ich versprechen[.] [...] Es liegt etwas Lockendes darin, gegen die drohende Dissolution der Zeit aufzutreten und die Angriffe der „Mücken-Schwärmer“ auf mich zu lenken. [...] Ich gestehe, ich habe viele Anfänge wieder vernichtet – aber jetzt hat mich der Gegenstand mit seiner ganzen Gewalt ergriffen, ich bin in eine Art von Krise versetzt, die, was ich vornehme, mir als wichtiges, ja heiliges Geschäft erscheinen läßt“ (Letter to Josef Max, 29 April 1835, qtd. in Tietzen 1871, 31–32). All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted. – Max Tietzen, the editor of Steffens' letters to Max, believes that this letter refers to the novella cycle *Malkolm*. However, this is unlikely, as that text had already been published in 1831. It is much more likely that Steffens refers to *Die Revolution*, which must have been written about that time. The paratext is another case in point. *Die Revolution* is called a “Novelle” while *Malkolm* was called “Ein Cyklus von Novellen”.

2 Steffens was not alone in this. There was a whole host of travelogues that painted a positive picture of Norway, from Johann Christian Fabricius in the 1770s to Steffens' younger contemporaries Willibald Alexis (1798–1871) and Heinrich Laube (1806–1884); see Sagmo 1999. However, it was Steffens who introduced the topos into the novelistic (German) literature of the time.

Die Revolution is a 900-plus page text. From today's point of view, this is a rather excessive length for a novella.³ But then, at the time, 'novella' (*Novelle* in German) could apply to virtually any kind of literary prose text. In fact, many German writers, especially in the 1820s and 30s, used the term 'novella' to distance themselves from the older 'novel' (or *Roman*), which they regarded as a spent force.⁴ This period witnessed a veritable "Novellenwut", or "novella rage". In his autobiography, Steffens writes about his first novella cycle *Die Familien Walseth und Leith*:

The term novella was chosen, as one puts on a dress according to the current fashion; had I called the work a novel, it would have looked as if I had attended a party in an old-fashioned suit [...] I have, I confess, chosen the term because otherwise I would have had to invent one and didn't know any.⁵

This indicates that Steffens did not reflect much on the terminology he used. In fact, Steffens wrote in another letter to Max that he wished his close friend, Romantic writer Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853), would give his own clear definition of what a novella is – most likely so that Steffens could adapt it as a guideline for his own writings. Unfortunately, Tieck only delivered fragmentary and contradictory reflections on that topic.⁶ However, Steffens' ultimate motivation for writing his monumental novella cycles was rather personal. In his autobiography, he states:

One thought in particular went through my whole life, which gave everything its highest truth. All concepts received their highest confirmation through religion, as morally religious deeds. Hence the almost morbid tendency, with which I myself had to struggle a great deal, to reveal my inner being, even to make a confession, where it was neither suitable nor proper. Literature seemed to me a way out. I lived with my publisher [Josef Max, S.H.] in a familiar, friendly relationship, and when he suggested that I work out a novella, it suddenly became clear to me

3 See Hultberg 1981, 98.

4 See Höppner 2017, 643.

5 „Die Bezeichnung Novelle ward gewählt, wie man ein Kleid nach dem herrschenden Schnitt anzieht; hätte ich das Werk Roman genannt, so hätte es ausgesehen, als wäre ich in die Gesellschaft mit einem altmodischen Rock eingetreten. [...] Ich habe, ich gestehe es, die Benennung gewählt, weil ich sonst eine hätte erfinden müssen, und keine wußte“ (Steffens 1840–1844, Vol. 9, 210).

6 See Höppner 2017, 645–649.

that this was a form that gave me the freedom to depict many things, reveal some things in a way that no other form would permit.⁷

Moreover, Steffens intended to use his novellas for the creation of a better world, “des Johannischen Reichs, [...] dessen Lebensprinzip und Mittelpunkt die ewige Liebe ist”.⁸ Finally, writing novellas was also a way out of Steffens’ debts,⁹ which he incurred during his extended one-year trip to Denmark, Norway and Sweden in 1824. The first major cycle, which Steffens published in 1827, was *Die Familien Walseth und Leith* (*The Walseth and Leith Families*), followed by *Die vier Norweger* (*The Four Norwegians*) (1828), *Malkolm* (1831), and finally, *Die Revolution* in 1837. While these texts offer a huge variety of plotlines and characters, they also serve as a vehicle to express their author’s views on politics, religion, and society. This often comes with a sharp and somewhat schematic distinction between sympathetic characters whose views the author endorses and their unlikable, often evil opponents whose attitudes he opposes; characters often reveal their nature in lengthy monologues and dialogues, even if what they talk about would usually remain hidden.¹⁰ Consequently, Steffens’ characters are often schematic and bear few truly individual traits.¹¹

Die Revolution is no exception, and as the title suggests, it is Steffens’ most openly political literary text, dealing with what he regarded as the most pressing problems in 1830s Germany. In fact,

7 „Besonders ging ein Gedanke [...] durch mein ganzes Leben, der Allen seine höchste Wahrheit verlieh. Durch die Religion erhielten alle Begriffe ihre höchste Bestätigung, als sittlich religiöse Thaten. Daher die fast krankhafte Neigung, mit der ich selbst viel zu kämpfen hatte, mein Inneres da zu enthüllen, ja eine Beichte abzulegen, wo es weder passend noch schicklich war. Ein Ausweg schien mir die Dichtung. Ich lebte mit meinem Verleger [Josef Max, S.H.] in einem vertrauten freundlichen Verhältnisse, und als er mir vorschlug, eine Novelle auszuarbeiten, ward es mir auf einmal klar, daß hier eine Form vorlag, die mir eine Freiheit gab, durch welche ich Vieles darstellen, Manches enthüllen konnte auf eine Weise, die keine andere Form erlaubte“ (Steffens 1840–1844, Vol. 9, 209–210).

8 Letter to Josef Max, 4 August 1828, qtd. In Tietzen 1871, 18. Also see Hultberg 1981, 88–89.

9 See Hultberg 1981, 88.

10 See Karsen 1908, 95.

11 See Karsen 1908, 138–139; Hultberg 1981, 89.

his intention was to “personally fixate the demon of our time”.¹² The reception was quite controversial; in his autobiography, Steffens calls the prevailing reaction “eine wahre Wuth” (a veritable fury).¹³ Even in the 20th century, Helge Hultberg regarded *Die Revolution* as the weakest among Steffens’ literary texts.¹⁴ As *Die Revolution* was a highly political text, the reviews often followed the party lines of the public sphere. While conservative reviewers, such as theologian Johann Peter Lange, were full of praise,¹⁵ liberal and democratic authors pulled it to pieces.

Steffens’ hero is Edward, a young scientist under the tutelage of his teacher Adrian and an older man, Louvet, who later turns out to be Edward’s grandfather. Raised in a remote village without any knowledge of his ancestry, Edward moves to the capital of a small German territory to pursue his studies in the natural sciences, which are partly supervised by Adrian, the arch-villain in Steffens’ novella.¹⁶ His conspiracy pervades the entire society of that territory; among other things, Adrian and his co-conspirators frequent the literary salon of Edward’s foster sister Amalie, of which she eventually grows tired. Journalist Wolf, also in the service of Adrian, promotes progressive ideas such as the emancipation of Jews and women to undermine the ruling order.

Unwittingly, Edward is caught up in the network of his mentor’s conspiracy. He becomes Adrian’s target exactly because he is Louvet’s grandson. At the beginning of the text, Edward is swallowed up in a riot incited by Adrian’s followers. He falls off a collapsing bridge and almost dies, but is brought to Louvet’s house, who nurses him back to health. This first riot fails, but Adrian starts a new attempt. He tries to assassinate the territory’s young duke with a pistol, but Edward throws himself between Adrian’s bullets and the duke’s body, thereby saving the sovereign’s life. As a reaction, Adrian kills himself; his co-conspirators flee or are captured. Law and order prevail, and Adrian’s wife, whom he held in captivity, turns out to be

12 Steffens 1840–1844, Vol. 9, 218.

13 Steffens 1840–1844, Vol. 9, 218.

14 See Hultberg 1981, 98.

15 See Lange 1843.

16 Fritz Karsen regards him as the personification of the “demon of our time” in the quote above (Karsen 1908, 137).

Edward's long-lost mother. *Die Revolution* concludes with "Louvet and Adrian", a lengthy report on the conflict between Adrian's and Edward's and Louvet's family, which goes back several generations; ultimately, the source of the entire conflict is that Adrian's father was overlooked for a promotion in the French Royal court, and the position was given to Louvet's father. This lengthy epilogue underlines the claim that Adrian's intrigues spring from a personal rather than from a genuinely political motivation.¹⁷

As stated earlier, Steffens regarded *Die Revolution* as a confessional text, a vehicle to express his political opinions. The positive characters, including Louvet, Edward, and his friend Theodor, are devout Christians and adherents of an absolute monarchy. They believe in a God-given, corporate order of society, with each man and woman in their rightful place and little or no opportunity for social mobility. The evil characters, such as Adrian, do not really believe in anything, let alone a republic; in fact, they do not have any vision of how the political and societal order ought to be. Rather, they wish to destabilize and undermine the existing order by all means necessary. These include a superficial literature with no higher moral or artistic values as well as the emancipation of women and Jews. In fact, *Die Revolution* could be regarded as an anti-Semitic text, even though there are no Jewish characters.

What is a revolution?

Initially, 'revolution' was an astronomical term, denoting the revolving motion of celestial bodies. In this understanding, revolutions are circular, as an object's pattern of movement eventually returns it to its initial state. This was likely the meaning when the term was first applied to a political event, the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' in 1680s' Britain. The replacement of Catholic king James II (1633–1701) by Protestant ruler William III (1650–1702) was seen as exactly that: the restitution of an old (and God-given) order. At the same time, the relatively bloodless 'Glorious Revolution' was also the opposite of that – an overthrow of the existing British monarchy.¹⁸

17 For more on the structure of Steffens' novellas, and *Die Revolution* in particular, see Karsen 1908, 43–44.

18 Of course, there were terms to describe similar political events before that, including 'seditio', 'tumultus', 'rebellio' in Latin, or 'Aufruhr' and 'Bürgerkrieg/bürgerlicher Krieg' in German. However, over time the political term

In the course of the 18th century, the common understanding of revolutions slowly evolved into what it is today: A fundamental, often violent change of things, first and foremost on the political level, resulting in a different political and social order – often, but not always, in the name of progress and a better society; often, but not always, violent. As a rule, this political and societal change, often connected with concrete goals, is usually regarded as the ultimate motivation behind revolutions. In this understanding, the focus is on disruption, not restitution, even though things do not always play out as intended by the revolutionaries. In any case, the old order is not restored, but destroyed. In Germany, the astronomical term “*revolutio*” was in use very early, around 1500. During the 1700s, the term was slowly transferred to the political sphere, not always in a condemning tone. Some German dictionaries defined political revolutions in a rather descriptive, neutral sense. In 1742, Johann Heinrich Zedler’s *Universal-Lexicon* stated: “Revolution is said about a country when it has suffered an extraordinary change in its government and policies”, and in 1798, Johann Christoph Adelung, who wrote an influential dictionary of the German language, defined revolution as a “complete change in the constitution of a state”. However, Adelung accentuated the circular aspect, giving as an example “the transformation of a monarchy into a republic, and the latter into a monarchy, or the violent change of a line of succession”.¹⁹

What happens in Steffens’ novella is somewhat difficult to categorize. Adrian intends to murder the duke of that nameless German territory. He wants to create upheaval and chaos, first, because he relishes them, and second, to take revenge on Louvet, although it remains unclear how such an act of murder could inflict harm on his archenemy. What Adrian aims at for personal motives is hardly

“revolution” accumulated its own set of associations not covered by the previous terms. For an (extremely) detailed history of the term, see Bulst et al. 1984.

19 All definitions quoted in Bulst et al. 1984, 714; 716. Johann Heinrich Campe, who composed a German dictionary of foreign words (1794) translated the term as „Staatsumwälzung“; Adelung refuted this suggestion, as he regarded it as a literal and therefore pointless translation of the Latin term; See *ibid.*, 716. The American, the French, and the Russian Revolutions may be the most prominent examples in Western History, but Steffens likely also had the July Revolution of 1830 in mind, even if that merely resulted in the replacement of one French monarch, Charles X, by another, Louis Philippe of Orléans.

a revolution in the modern sense. Liberal critic Karl Gutzkow (1811–1878), who published a scathing review of *Die Revolution* in the periodical *Peurmann's Telegraph*, has a point when he states: Steffens “summarizes everything that he dislikes about the *zeitgeist* under the name revolution and traces this nightmare from the National Convention [in revolutionary France] down to [the literary movement of] Young Germany”.²⁰ Gutzkow goes on to say that

Mr. Steffens' revolution is a caricature that has neither aesthetic nor historical truth. The revolution exists, it exists as a crime; but it could be developed deeper, more exhaustively, and as more of a warning. For those who are not involved in Mr. Steffens' revolution, it is not a tragedy, but an amusing comedy; for those whom it is supposed to deal with, it amounts to slander and an evil prank.²¹

At first glance, Gutzkow has a point here: The so-called revolution spearheaded by Adrian is indeed incoherent and anarchic, Steffens' description of the events vague and superficial at best. In this light, Adrian's conspiracy hardly qualifies as a revolution. This is only true, however, if we understand revolutions as progressive movements that aim for a better future, as it became commonplace after 1789, regardless of the fact whether these revolutions were to be democratic, socialist, communist, or aimed for a constitutional monarchy.²² In this understanding, revolutionaries follow a set agenda for the society they wish to erect, even if their plans eventually fail. However, if we take the more neutral definitions of “revolution” in German I gave earlier, then Steffens' title may give a correct definition of the plot after all. In short, Gutzkow and Steffens possibly operate with diverging notions of what constitutes a revolution.

20 Steffens “fasst alles das, was ihm am Zeitgeiste zuwider ist, unter dem Namen Revolution zusammen und verfolgt dies Schreckbild vom Convent bis auf das Junge Deutschland herab“ (Gutzkow 1837, 321).

21 „Die Revolution des Herrn Steffens ist ein Zerrbild, das weder ästhetische noch historische Wahrheit hat. Die Revolution ist da, sie ist als ein Verbrechen da; aber sie konnte tiefer, erschöpfender und warnender entwickelt werden. Für diejenigen, welche nicht an der Revolution des Herrn Steffens beteiligt sind, ist sie kein Trauerspiel, sondern eine belustigende Komödie, für die, welche sie angehen soll, ist sie eine Verläumdung und ein schlechter Streich“ (Gutzkow 1837, 356).

22 See Bulst et al. 1984, 655.

Among other things, and like many other literary texts, *Die Revolution* is a text about literature. However, what kind of literature? Steffens generally distinguishes between two types of literature. One could call them “poetic” literature, that is, timeless and autonomous works of art created by a male genius, often with religious overtones, and “prosaic” literature, its lesser counterpart, which is of little artistic value and often serves to advance a political or social agenda. These types are not necessarily bound to Steffens’ immediate present. To demonstrate that, I would like to briefly go back to an older text, *Introduction to the Philosophical Lectures*, a series of lectures that Steffens delivered in Copenhagen and published in book form in 1803. Although more than thirty years passed between these lectures and *Die Revolution*, some of Steffens’ later aesthetic convictions are already present here. As Fritz Karsen, the author of the only monograph on Steffens’ novellas, states, “Steffens, the friend of the Romantics, always remained true to the ideas of his time in Jena.”²³

Like many others in his time, in his lectures Steffens praises antiquity as a time of “the poetic, philosophical and historical masterpieces (in the proper sense of the word) [...] The modern artist is the servant and priest of ancient art, employed by the divine entity of history itself to conserve the eternal altar flame in its temple”.²⁴ The medieval Provençal epics are at the root of all modern art, which Steffens also calls “Romantic poetry”; and Italian literature reached its highest flower with Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.²⁵ Throughout his writings, Steffens also describes a golden age of German literature and philosophy around 1800. He repeatedly refers to four names: Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Ludwig Tieck, Friedrich Schelling, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. The latter three were his friends, and Goethe was someone Steffens deeply admired. In fact, Steffens dedicated his *Beyträge zur Inneren Naturgeschichte der Erde* (1801) to Goethe. In his Copenhagen lectures, Steffens describes the current state of affairs as a “prosaic” age:

23 Karsen 1908, 34.

24 Steffens 1802/03, 114–115.

25 Steffens 1802/03, 118–119. In this respect, Steffens follows the terminology of Early Romantic literary criticism, namely that of Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel.

The distinctive marks of our time are irreligiousness and a predominance of prose such as history has never witnessed before – the French nation [is] the most prosaic of them all. I call prose what degrades even that which bears the unmistakable stamp of the eternal to something merely finite, poetry that which even in the finite finds the stamp of the eternal.²⁶

While the term “prose” mainly serves as a metaphor for politics and society here, I would like to argue that Steffens’ verdict refers to literature as well, as the criticism we just heard resurfaces in his criticism of the Young Germany movement of *Die Revolution*. That does not necessarily remain that Steffens’ *political* views remained unchanged from the early 1800s to the 1830s. In fact, Marit Bergner’s dissertation demonstrates that they did not.²⁷ However, Steffens’ beliefs *about literature* and its purposes remained rather constant, and contributed to his refutation of a younger generation of German authors.

While Edward and Louvet rarely talk about literature, other characters discuss it extensively, namely Adrian, Edward’s foster sister Amalie, and Theodor, a former co-conspirator of Adrian turned renegade, now siding with his old friend Edward and with Louvet. For Adrian, the poetic content of literary texts is negligible. In fact, he derides contemporary authors.²⁸ In Adrian’s eyes, literature has

26 Steffens 1802/03, 120: „Die besonderen Kennzeichen unserer Zeit sind eine Irreligiosität und eine überwiegende Prosa, wie sie die Geschichte nie gesehen hat – die französische Nation, die prosaischste unter allen. Prosa nenne ich, was selbst das, welches das unverkennbare Gepräge des Ewigen trägt, zu einem bloß Endlichen herabwürdigt, Poesie das, was selbst im Endlichen das Gepräge des Ewigen findet.“

27 See Bergner 2016.

28 „They are nightingales, I will not deny that, striking their first notes in April; but while we await the smashing songs that are to herald the jubilation of a new life, they have turned into screeching ravens. Their lyrical outpourings have turned sour in the storms of time, the children’s milk has gone stale and the cheese has turned into maggots. How foolish to regard this phenomenon as an isolated one. It is the signature of our time [...]. What used to bind us together was that illusion of faith that is now shattered. It tied us to the family, to the state, to God, it connected every single piece of knowledge. Now souls become emancipated from God, citizens from the state, women from marriage, and opinions from wisdom.“ / „Sie sind Nachtigallen, ich will es nicht läugnen, wie sie im April die ersten Töne anschlagen; aber, wenn wir nun die schmetternden Gesänge erwarten, die uns den Jubel eines neuen lebendigen Erzeugnisses verkündigen

lost much of its former status and is now populated by – quote – “mentally bankrupt Jews” and “failed university students”, who, “out of desperation[,] joined the guild of ingenious writers, as one used to become a marqueur or a croupier”.²⁹ Literature has evolved into an empty display of virtuosity, and even the quest for something higher, such as religious or philosophical truth, passes for nothing more than mere “virtuosities”. In spite of this, literature in its current state is highly useful to Adrian, as it furthers his political goals. In effect, literature has become a means to an end, to create chaos and corrupt the general morale of the population.

So-called literature has become a mockery, and anyone who associates with it must withdraw from good society lest he becomes the object of mockery or silent pity. Yet, all of them suffer from the ills of the literature they mock. [...] Thus, irony becomes the idol of the day, and is present even where its name is hardly known. Then the despairing sneer turns into a graceful smile, the cries of fear into dazzling poetry and again become a virtuosity that we admire and enjoy. [...] Is there seriousness in this disgusting game, a truth for this nothingness? Yes, he cried aloud in a booming voice [...]. There is one truth: the powerful will that takes hold of itself, free action.³⁰

sollen, haben sie sich in kreischende Raben verwandelt. Ihre lyrischen Ergüsse sind durch die Gewitter der Zeit sauer geworden, die Kindermilch ist abgestanden und der Käse in Maden zergangen. Wie thöricht, diese Erscheinung als eine einzelne zu betrachten. Sie ist die Signatur der Zeit [...]. Was uns früher verband, war jene Illusion des Glaubens, die jetzt zerstört ist. Sie knüpfte uns an die Familie, an den Staat, an Gott, sie verband jede vereinzelt Erkenntniß. Jetzt sind die Seelen von Gott, die Bürger von dem Staate, die Weiber von der Ehe und die Meinungen von der Weisheit emancipirt.“ (Steffens 1837, Vol. 1, 101).

29 Steffens 1837, Vol. 1, 100.

30 „Die sogenannte Literatur ist zum Spott geworden, und wer sich mit ihr gemein macht, muß sich aus der guten Gesellschaft zurückziehen, um nicht Gegenstand des Spottes oder des stummen Mitleids zu werden. Und dennoch leiden Alle an den Uebeln der verhöhten Literatur. [...] So wird Ironie der Götze des Tages, und sie ist auch da, wo man kaum ihren Namen kennt. Da verkehrt sich das verzweifelnde Hohnlachen in ein anmuthiges Lächeln, das Angstgeschrei in tändelnde Poesie und wird wieder eine Virtuosität, die wir bewundern und genießen. [...] Ob es nun in diesem ekelhaften Spiele einen Ernst, für diese Nichtigkeit eine Wahrheit giebt? Ja, rief er laut mit einer dröhnenden Stimme [...] es giebt eine Wahrheit: der mächtige Wille, der sich selber faßt, die freie That“ (Steffens 1837, Vol. 1, 103 – 104).

This passage almost sounds like a Nietzsche quote. Here, Adrian capitalizes on the instrumental quality of contemporary literature, which is no longer associated with poetry and the poetical genius. To this end, Adrian employs and pays a “political writer” named Wolf, who mainly publishes as – quote – “the editor of a widely read newspaper [...] inexhaustible in witty phrases”, but is also someone who “only gradually gets convinced of the truth of his speech while he speaks”,³¹ that is, someone without firm convictions. Like Adrian, he wishes to undermine religious beliefs and traditional relations between men and women.³² Despite his other ambitions, he is opportunistic enough to write journal articles in favor of the old order after the first riot fails to achieve its goal.³³ On the other hand, he believes that literature has to take a stand, that is, to be political, even while and maybe because it has lost its poetic immediacy:

In our day, all poetry is doctrinal, but anyway you put it, it remains the symbol of a hidden or open message. Goethe, Byron, Tieck, the best poets, prove this most clearly. It is precisely because of this that it has become more powerful, and all means of representation, displeasure with language, shocking of the readers, and the excesses of neo-romantic poetry have only a secondary meaning. Our poetry has ceased to be a mere expression of unbiased sentiment. It arose from reflection, serves it and has long since lost faith in itself.³⁴

In this quote, Wolf displays some ambivalence towards the state of contemporary literature after all, while he attests high moral standards to himself: “A weak humankind is not ripe for our great sentiments, he wrote. What good is it to oppose political legitimacy when man is bound by so many ties, servile and superstitious, to the

31 Steffens 1837, Vol. 1, 164.

32 See Steffens 1837, Vol. 3, 115.

33 See Steffens 1837, Vol. 1, 215.

34 „In unseren Tagen ist alle Poesie doktrinär, sie mag sich stellen, wie sie will, sie bleibt immer Symbol einer versteckten oder offen zugestandenen Lehre. Göthe, Byron, Tieck, die besten Dichter, beweisen dies am klarsten. Eben dadurch ist sie mächtiger geworden, und alle Mittel der Darstellung, Unmut der Sprache, Erschütterung der Leser, die Verzerrung der neuromantischen Poesie, hat nur eine sekundäre Bedeutung. Unsere Poesie hat aufgehört, reiner Ausdruck unbefangener Empfindung zu sein. Sie ist aus der Reflexion entsprungen, dient dieser und hat längst den Glauben an sich selbst verloren“ (Steffens 1837, Vol. 3, 116).

past.”³⁵ Even before Adrian’s assassination attempt, Wolf goes into hiding, an act for which he earns scathing remarks from the villain. His writings are banned, and the police searches for him. According to Adrian, those steps are unnecessary:

When [Wolf] speaks, the audience listens with pleasure, but after a few hours nobody remembers what they heard; when he writes, the reader is baffled, he cannot put the book down until he is finished reading it. But when it is over, he tries to remember the content in vain.³⁶

In any case, this writer/journalist is the ideal embodiment of what Steffens believes contemporary writers in the Young Germany movement to be.

In the light of Steffens’ biography, these tirades against a younger generation of writers was not always to be expected. As Helge Hultberg points out, some authors like Ludwig Börne and Theodor Mundt were substantially influenced by Steffens’ anti-rational tendencies. However, these alliances proved to be temporary, as Steffens shared neither these authors’ distanced attitude towards religion nor their cosmopolitan tendencies.³⁷ In 1835, while he was already thinking about *Die Revolution*, Steffens managed to prohibit the inaugural lecture for Theodor Mundt’s professorship in classical philology at the University of Berlin. The reason: Steffens disapproved of the author’s book *Madonna* (1835), in which Mundt criticized the censorship regime of the time. At the time, that practically amounted to a professional ban.³⁸ In fact, it was not until 1848 that Mundt was appointed to a regular professorial chair in Breslau. He subsequently returned to his former university in Berlin in the following year.

35 „Für unsere großen Gesinnungen, schrieb er, ist das schwache Geschlecht nicht reif. Was hilft es, gegen die politische Legitimität hervorzutreten, wenn der Mensch durch so viele Bande knechtisch und abergläubisch an die Vergangenheit gebunden ist“ (Steffens 1837, Vol. 3, 113).

36 „Wenn er spricht, hören ihn die Zuhörer selbst mit Vergnügen, aber nach ein paar Stunden weiß keiner mehr, was er gehört hat; wenn er schreibt, ist der Leser gereizt, er kann das Buch nicht hinlegen, bis er es durchgelesen hat. Aber, wenn es zu Ende ist besinnt er sich vergebens auf den Inhalt“ (Steffens 1837, Vol. 3, 118).

37 See Hultberg 1981, 94–95. However, Hultberg reports incorrectly that the conflict was about the oral exam of Mundt’s doctoral dissertation. In fact, Mundt had already received his doctorate from the University of Erlangen in 1830.

38 See Hultberg 1981, 96–97.

The other important presence of literature in *Die Revolution* is a literary salon hosted by Edward's foster sister Amalie. In Steffens' text, her salon is a place where the upper echelons of society meet and intellectuals spread their ideas. The most prominent examples from early 1800s' Germany are the salons of Rahel Varnhagen and Bettina von Arnim in Berlin, both of whom Steffens knew personally and mentioned in his autobiography. Salons first emerged in Early Modern Italy and France and subsequently spread across Europe. They provided a space where the nobility and bourgeoisie could informally meet and exchange ideas. According to Jürgen Habermas, Enlightenment salons, along with coffee houses, greatly contributed to the emergence of a public sphere in 18th century Europe.³⁹ Moreover, they were an important place for the arts, where aspiring artists could make their entrance into society and secure support, but also distribute their ideas. With regard to these aspects, they remained important institutions in Europe throughout the 1800s. Amalie's salon is the embodiment of all that. She invites aspiring authors as well as Adrian who seizes the opportunity to discuss current political writings and strengthens his ties with honorable members of the local society. One writer Amalie invites expresses his views and they come remarkably close to Adrian's and Wolf's statements:

Spiritually, as in every other respect, our age is a progressive one. [...] He must be blind who does not see how even important men of the recent past have hardly any idea about what moves young minds now, what is taking shape in philosophy, in poetry, in all areas of literature. It is as if a new spiritual organ wanted to create a new era. [...] The murky hopes, the languid longing for an afterlife have lost all meaning for us, who concede to the earth, the flesh its right, and the distant empty heaven with its imaginary magic is of course lost to us.⁴⁰

39 See Habermas 1984.

40 „Unsere Zeit ist im Geistigen, wie in allen Richtungen, progressiv. [...] Blind muß derjenige sein, der nicht einsieht, wie selbst bedeutende Männer der nächsten Vergangenheit kaum eine Ahnung haben von dem, was jetzt die jugendlichen Gemüter bewegt, was sich in der Philosophie, in der Dichtkunst, in allen Richtungen der Litteratur zu gestalten sucht. Es ist, als wenn ein neues geistiges Organ eine neue Zeit schaffen wollte. [...] Die trüben Hoffnungen, die matte Sehnsucht nach einem Jenseits hat für uns, die wir der Erde, dem Fleische sein Recht zugestehen, alle Bedeutung verloren, der ferne leere Himmel ist freilich mit seinem erträumte[n] Zauber verloren“ (Steffens 1837, Vol. 2, 218).

Actually, this statement would not have sounded out of place in the Early Romantic era, which Steffens had been a part of – apart from the attack on religion, of course. But here, Amalie’s reaction amounts to a sacrilege in the eyes of the author. According to her, the young poet has “given us a heavenly present, which can make us forget Schelling, Schleiermacher, Goethe, Tieck”.⁴¹ Under the tutelage of her dislikable husband Rembrand [sic], Amalie is also an avid reader of Honoré de Balzac,⁴² demonstrating the negative influence of French literature. Later, she regrets having read – quote – “Dumas, Victor Hugo, Balzac, and the newly opened school of witty Germany”, as they had confused her mind and their supposed beauty had turned into grotesquely distorted features.⁴³ In this novel, the mutual reception of French and German literature is catastrophic anyway: “Poetry and Philosophy became social in Germany and society philosophical and poetic in France.”⁴⁴ Hence, the confusion experienced by Amalie as a reader. Consequently, Amalie then longs for the simple pleasures of past art (the names Goethe and Tieck come up again). She gives up her claim to emancipation and returns to the side of Edward, Louvet, and their friends.⁴⁵

Obviously, Steffens’ portrait of German literature in the 1830s is grotesquely distorted. However, some tendencies that Steffens describes do have a root in reality. One has to bear in mind that Steffens’ formative years in Germany were 1798 to 1802, characterized both by his connections to the Early Romantics of Jena and his acquaintance with Goethe. Compared to that, much had changed in Germany’s literary field. There was indeed a higher number of professional writers. The publication of books was increasingly supplemented, even replaced by journals. Publishers like Johann Friedrich Cotta implemented a two-tier system of publications, where renowned authors – such as Steffens – were able to publish books, whereas the majority only got to publish their writings in

41 Steffens 1837, Vol. 2, 219.

42 Steffens 1837, Vol. 1, 321–322.

43 Steffens 1837, Vol. 2, 222–223.

44 Steffens 1837, Vol. 3, 266. Also, see Karsen 1908, 151.

45 Quite possibly, this character was inspired by Steffens’ friend Charlotte Stieglitz (1806–1834) who committed suicide. Steffens literally attributed her death to the effects of contemporary literature: „Es war die Poesie unserer Tage, die [sie] zerstörte“ (Letter to Josef Max, 1 January 1835, qtd. in Tietzen 1871, 28).

journals.⁴⁶ If they wanted to survive in their profession, they did have to write for money, not for the sake of creating great art alone, unlike, say, someone like Goethe. They were, by default, journalists, and journals were more oriented towards current affairs, but unlike books, they were also a throwaway medium. In fact, most of their novellas, unlike *Die Revolution*, never made it into book format.⁴⁷ Many writers also fought a constant fight with a fierce censorship regime.⁴⁸

Of course, much of the literature of Young Germany was indeed political, criticizing the existing political order in an age of restoration, though it was not quite as anti-religious as Steffens claims. Moreover, the ideas of literature as an autonomous art were not as prevalent as they had been in Weimar Classicism and the Early Romantic movement. What Steffens delivers is therefore partly grounded in reality, but only as a caricature. In any case, he shares the sentiments of his characters. In an 1835 letter to his publisher Josef Max, he stated:

We are not just struggling with [Ludwig] Börne and [Heinrich] Heine. Messrs. Gutzkow, Duller and whatever we call these imitators of the French who imitate us [Balzac, Hugo, and the like];⁴⁹ they form a veritable tumor in our literature. The same goes for our exuberant women's confessions, the more pathological the more ingenious they are, such as Rahel [Varnhagen] and Bettina [von Arnim].⁵⁰

46 For the general situation of writers in 1830s Germany, see Groetzinger 1998.

47 See Meyer 1998.

48 See Heady 2009.

49 This accusation refers to French writers allegedly copying German Romanticism, e.g. Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, and Alexandre Dumas père.

50 "Wir haben nicht bloß mit [Ludwig] Börne und [Heinrich] Heine zu kämpfen. Die Herren [Karl] Gutzkow, [Eduard] Duller und wie diese Nachahmer der uns nachahmenden Franzosen heißen, bilden ein wahres Geschwür in unserer Literatur und vollends unsere überschwenglichen Weiberconfessionen, umso krankhafter je genialer sie sind, wie Rahel und Bettina" (Letter to Josef Max, 28 March 1835). One reason for Steffens' refutation of women writers is that he held them intellectually incapable of producing substantial literary texts: "Frauen sind, wenn von geistiger Auffassung die Rede ist, reflectionslos, und ohne Reflection findet keine geordnete geschichtliche Entwicklung statt. Daher ist ihr Einfluß auf die Literatur zwar zuweilen groß, aber vorübergehend, uns in unsern Tagen, wo Alles sich berührt und erweitert, darf man wohl behaupten, daß die Schriftstellerei der Frauen dem geselligen Gespräche immer verwandter wird. Ich besinne mich vergebens auf eine Schriftstellerin, die durch ihre Schrif-

As demonstrated above, Steffens attributed a confessional nature to his literary texts, regarding them as a vehicle to express his political and religious views. Nevertheless, in order to fight the political literature he abhorred, and he abhorred political literature in general, Steffens wrote political literature himself. Karl Gutzkow recognized this in his review of *Die Revolution*: “Political tendency always prevails over poetry. And when political tendency prevails, any poetic interest is ultimately destroyed.”⁵¹

Most likely, this was not Steffens’ intention, but what his novella argues for is a revolution in the initial sense. It promotes the restitution of an old order, that is, an absolutist monarchy as well as a corporate and patriarchal order of society – without the interference of a literature that either amounts to political propaganda, atheism, or to weak, foreign imitations of real literary geniuses such as Goethe and Tieck. By fiercely promoting that message over the course of

ten (und es waren immer nur dichterische) einen bleibenden Ruf für alle Zeit erworben hätte“ / „When it comes to intellectual perception, women are without reflection, and without reflection there is no orderly historical development. Hence, their influence on literature is sometimes great, but transient, and in our day, when everything touches and expands, it may well be said that women’s writing is becoming more and more akin to social conversation. I remember in vain a woman writer who, through her writings (and they were always only poetic ones), would have acquired a lasting reputation for all time” (Steffens 1840–1844, Vol. 9, 218). On the other hand, Steffens’ view of Rahel Varnhagen and Bettina von Arnim is more differentiated here. About von Arnim, he writes: “Ihre reiche, höchst eigenthümliche, seltsame, aber zügellose Phantasie riß mich hin, ich konnte mich ihr dann völlig hingeben, wir gelangten gemeinschaftlich in wunderbare Regionen, und ich erwachte aus einem solchen Gespräche, wie aus einem leichten anmuthigen Traumen. Blitzähnliche Gedanken fuhren während des Traumes durch meine Seele, wanden sich aus den mancherlei wechselnden bunten Gestalten hervor, und erhielten sich wohl auch in der permanenten Form des Begriffs nach dem Erwachen. Seit sie Schriftstellerin geworden, haben diese geistigen Mittheilungen aufgehört, unsere Lebensansichten sind zu abweichend“ / „Her rich, highly peculiar, strange, but unbridled imagination carried me away, I was then able to give myself completely over to her, we reached wondrous regions together, and I awoke from such a conversation as from a light, charming dream. Lightning-like thoughts flashed through my soul during the dream, emerging from the various changing colorful figures, and probably remained in the permanent form of the concept after awakening. Since she became a writer, these mental communications have ceased, our views of life diverge too much” (Steffens 1840–1844, Vol. 9, 214–215).

51 Gutzkow 1837, 333.

900-plus pages, however, *Die Revolution* is a paradoxical text – political literature that argues against the very right for political literature to exist, at least if it is promoting the wrong ideas.

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