

## Literature and Politics in Germany of the 1830s: Karl Beck's Role in the *Junges Deutschland* Movement

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The purpose of this study is to describe briefly the reception of Karl Beck (1817–1879), a Hungarian-born Jewish-German poet, by the members of the Young Germany movement of the 1830s, and to show that — similarly to most of his fellow Young Germans — Beck's literary fame was largely due to his involvement in that movement.<sup>1</sup> In other words, we contend that it was not Beck's lyrical talent that made him into a notable spokesman of Young Germany. Rather, it was his association with the Young Germans and his ability to express in an unusually daring tone the social, political and artistic needs of his age that lifted him out of obscurity and made him for a while a "celebrated poet" of Germandom.

### *Junges Deutschland*

Contrary to some of its counterparts (e.g., Young Europe, Young Italy, Young Poland), Young Germany or *Junges Deutschland* was not a radical political, but a literary movement.<sup>2</sup> This does not, of course, mean that *Junges Deutschland* lacked political goals; for indeed it did not. But as it never really took the shape of a formal organization, and since its members were all poets, writers and journalists who limited their activities to propaganda in a literary form, *Junges Deutschland* never even came close to resembling the political-conspiratorial make-up of Mazzini's Young Italy.<sup>3</sup> And this holds true even though the majority of the Young Germans concentrated on writing political poetry and other forms of political literature.

*Junges Deutschland*, therefore, was primarily an informal literary movement, whose members were drawn together by their attachment to liberalism, by their belief in social and political progress, and by their resolve to propagate their convictions through creative works. Thus, instead of establishing conspiratorial organizations for the purpose of

overthrowing the existing political regimes, they went to war against the literary and artistic ideas of *l'art pour l'art* established by Goethe in Germany. They rejected Goethe's world view, shifting their admiration to Schiller who emerged as the true champion of political and personal freedom. By using literature to expose the social and political needs of their age, the Young Germans became powerful exponents and practitioners of the so-called *Tendenzliteratur*. Thus they proclaimed in *belles-lettres* the need to deal with urgent social, economic, and political problems, as did Victor Hugo and other French Romanticists before them.

In addition to Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Börne — respectively the greatest German lyricist and the greatest political publicist of that period — the key members of *Junges Deutschland* were Ludwig Wienbarg, Karl Gutzkow, Heinrich Laube and Theodore Mundt. But their ranks also included such lesser writers and poets as Gustav Kühne, Georg Herwegh, Ferdinand Freiligrath, Hermann Marggraf, Karl Herlossohn, Ernest Wilkomm, as well as the already-mentioned Karl Beck.

Throughout the existence of this movement in the 1830s and early 1840s, the Young Germans' primary source of inspiration was Paris, or more specifically Heine's and Börne's radical and satirical writings produced in Paris. Heine and Börne were the most politicized German creative writers of that period. Because of their open criticism of Metternich's oppressive political system in Germany, they both ended up as political exiles in Paris. But their absence from Germany did not lessen their influence upon the Young Germans. On the contrary, their exile may even have increased their influence. Certainly their politically-inspired writings, such as Heine's *Französische Zustände* (1832) and Börne's *Briefe aus Paris* (1830-1834), greatly contributed to keeping *Junges Deutschland* in existence under the strictest censorship. By writing about the ideals of liberalism and about French developments after the July Revolution of 1830, and by contrasting the French political and social scene with the situation of Metternich's Germany, Heine and Börne kept the flame of hope alive in the hearts of their fellow poets and countrymen. This was especially true of Börne's *Briefe aus Paris*, which soon became the handbook of contemporary liberalism, not only in Germany and the German-speaking lands, but also in the non-German provinces of the Habsburg Empire.

Most of the Young Germans who remained at home congregated in Leipzig, in that period the center of German intellectual and literary life. Called "little Paris," Leipzig was indeed the meeting place of both aspiring, as well as established poets, writers and journalists. Under the

leadership of Gustav Kühne, the members of Young Germany grouped around the newspaper *Die Zeitung für die elegante Welt*. From an aesthetic point of view, however, few of the Young German writers possessed more than average literary talent. Yet, thanks to the demands of the reform-minded public, and the vigorous publicistic activities of the group, the Young Germans enjoyed considerable influence and prestige. These circumstances momentarily heightened the appreciation of their literary output — an acclaim that later proved to have been largely undeserved. But having turned out to be average poets who achieved recognition primarily because of the timeliness of their topics and their daring expression of the needs of their age, does not necessarily lessen their role in literary history. And because this role, at least collectively, was an influential and admirable one, all of the Young Germans — including Karl Beck — deserve to be remembered by posterity.

### *Karl Beck*

Beck appeared on the German literary scene like a youthful meteor who quickly captivated most of the progressive literati around him. Karl Gutzkow referred to him as the “German Byron”; Friedrich Engels compared him to Schiller.<sup>4</sup> Yet a few years later, virtually everyone forgot about him.

Born in 1817 to a Jewish grain merchant in the southern Hungarian town of Baja, Beck was hardly destined by birth to become a spokesman for German liberalism. The elder Beck ignored the future poet’s natural artistic inclination, which showed already at an early age, and strongly discouraged his son’s plans for a literary career. But this did not deter young Beck, who continued his interest and won several prizes in literary competitions both at the Baja Elementary School, as well as during his gymnasium studies in Pest.

After completing his secondary education in 1835, Beck enrolled at the School of Medicine in Vienna. He decided to study medicine not because of his fondness for the field, but because medicine was one of the few professions open to Jews. Thus, not surprisingly, during his stay in Vienna he concentrated almost exclusively on his literary interests, in the company of students with similar bent. It was at this time that he established a life-long friendship with the aspiring young poet, Jakob Kaufmann. Their correspondence reveals a great deal about Beck’s poetical career.

Within a year of entering medical school young Beck’s aversion to the

study of medicine became so intense that he abandoned his studies and returned to Hungary. He left Vienna with a heavy heart, but with an even greater determination to make a name for himself in literature. While serving as an apprentice at a Pest granary, Beck made several unsuccessful attempts to have his poems published. But since he wrote in German, this goal proved to be even more difficult to achieve than he had expected. Influenced by the surging national revival of the 1830s Magyar intellectuals no longer favored poets and writers who failed to use Magyar as their means of literary expression. But because Beck could not, or would not forsake German for Magyar, he had no other option but to try his luck in the German-speaking world. Since he was already acquainted with some of the publications of the Young German writers whose ideas and aspirations greatly appealed to him, he decided to move to Leipzig where he hoped to gain at least some degree of poetical recognition.

### *Beck among the Young Germans*

A virtually unknown foreigner in a strange country, Beck found it difficult to strike roots in Leipzig. It took him a while before he was able to join the ranks of the Young Germans. To make matters worse, he was constantly under surveillance by the local police, who were suspicious of every newcomer. In order to remain in Leipzig, he was forced to enroll in the School of Medicine at the University, even though he had already abandoned his medical studies in Vienna. These initial difficulties drove young Beck into a melancholic state of mind that often haunted him in times of spiritual crises. The bitter tone of his letters to his friend Kaufmann in Vienna attest to this fact. "I am so discouraged that I do not even attempt to justify my silence," he wrote in a letter dated September 9, 1836. "Even now I can bring myself to write only a few lines. But my thoroughly unfavorable and hopeless situation explains everything. . ."<sup>5</sup> Although some of his poems were published in newspapers already during the late summer of 1836, his pessimism lingered. This may explain why he made no attempt to publish his collected poems. He admitted that his individual poems were accepted by the Leipzig newspapers and read with "great enthusiasm."<sup>6</sup> But he found that "the publishers are extremely difficult to deal with and pay very little."<sup>7</sup> And he simply lacked the strength to argue with them.

During his first months in Leipzig, therefore, Beck saw very little chance for poetic recognition. As a result he encouraged his friend Kaufmann, who also planned to move to Leipzig, to have his poems

published in Vienna, before tempting his fate in the midst of the Young Germans. Beck believed that one had to have a volume of poetry published first in order to gain any kind of recognition in Leipzig. As he wrote to Kaufmann: "Germany is not at all like you imagine it to be."<sup>8</sup>

Yet, despite his relatively slow start and initial disappointment, Beck remained in Leipzig. This proved to be a wise decision, for in the course of the following year his fortune changed radically. In 1837 the prestigious *Die Zeitung für die elegante Welt* began to publish his poems, which immediately lent him a certain degree of recognition. His early poems included "Auszug aus Ägypten," "Mondnacht," as well as a group of sonnets entitled "Fannys Tagebuch." He dedicated the latter to Fanny Tarnow, who enjoyed wide renown as a translator of French literary pieces. She was also one of the leading intellectuals in Leipzig literary society and a regular contributor to *Die Zeitung für die elegante Welt*. Contrary to some claims, Beck did not fall in love with the older "lady of the world." But Fanny's superior intellect made a lasting impression on the young and still rather provincial poet. Beck soon became a frequent guest in Fanny's literary salon, where he mingled with a number of noted literary figures, many of whom influenced his personal and poetical development. As a result of these exposures, Beck began to feel more at home in Leipzig society. His lyrical expression also showed a marked improvement. All this resulted in the growing recognition of his talents, and by the middle of 1837 he had won the attention and approval of most of Leipzig's progressive writers and intellectuals. The influential Gustav Kühne became his closest mentor. In one of his letters, Kühne revealed his enthusiasm for the lyrical talent of the young poet by referring to Beck as his "extraordinary intellectual child."<sup>9</sup> He published Beck's poems in his newspaper, adding his own laudatory introductions and enthusiastic comments. Kühne also introduced Beck to all of the leading members of the Leipzig literary societies. Moreover, he arranged meetings between Beck and many of the prominent German writers who visited Leipzig during these years, and who were either members or supporters of the *Junges Deutschland* movement. In this way, Beck established a close relationship with the acknowledged leaders of the movement, which included Gutzkow, Laube, as well as Wienbarg, all of whom were favorably impressed with the young poet.

Beck created a sensation in Leipzig literary circles not only with his poetry, but also with his appearance and personal habits. Described by fellow poet Franz Dingelstedt as "short, young looking, slight of stature with a strikingly handsome face, dominated by eyes of deep blue framed by long lashes,"<sup>10</sup> Beck generally created a favorable impression.

But his appearance was deceiving. His open countenance concealed an introverted personality, which occasionally exhibited eccentric behavior. We know from Kühne's memoirs that Beck often felt out of place at social gatherings. He would frequently sit alone in a corner for hours, smoking a cigar. Then he would suddenly stand up, thank his hosts for their kind hospitality, for "allowing him to sit in silence for hours,"<sup>11</sup> and then he would quickly take his leave. Kühne's recollections reveal that Beck was considered an eccentric and his eccentricity also extended to his manner of dress. This was also noted by the contemporary literary historian Rudolf Gottschall, who described the attention Beck aroused with his picturesque Hungarian attire.<sup>12</sup> The braided waistcoat and the spurred boots provided a peculiar sight in Leipzig society and added a touch of the "exotic" to Beck's personality. Beck further enhanced his romantic appeal by hinting that he was a political emigré, who had been driven from his homeland because of his liberal views and his love of freedom. These devices enhanced Beck's popularity, and Kühne and his friends were proud of their "Magyar poet,"<sup>13</sup> whom they treated as if he were "some rare phenomenon from a far-off never-neverland."<sup>14</sup> Gottschall further substantiated Beck's popularity in his memoirs when he recalled that "when the topic of conversation turned to Karl Beck, I found everywhere the same enthusiasm. [He] was the pampered darling of the Young German journalists."<sup>15</sup> Thus, despite his initial difficulties, Beck's poetry and his personality combined to earn him widespread recognition. In fact, he soon came to be celebrated as the "great hope" of the *Junges Deutschland* movement.

#### *Beck's Development as a Poet*

Young Beck was quickly swept up by the ideas of Young Germany. Its ideologies and objectives were not entirely new to him. He had become acquainted with the movement through reading and through his involvement in the Viennese literary circles. But not until arriving in Leipzig did he make the goals of *Junges Deutschland* his own. He gave expression to their hopes and aspirations in his poetry, but without fully appreciating the significance of the great contemporary and social issues.<sup>16</sup> His lack of full comprehension is best shown by the confused and disorderly fashion he incorporated the dominant ideas of the age into his poetry. But Beck's fellow poets and writers were unaware of this confusion. Like Beck, they too lacked an adequate background for properly understanding the basic social and political issues of their age. This in turn explains their overestimation of Beck's poetical talents, as well as

their reasons for placing so much hope in him as one of the major advocates and defenders of the ideals of the age.

Even the titles of Beck's poems written during this time reveal the extent to which he immersed himself in the ideals of the Young German writers. Titles such as "Der Gefangene," "An Heinrich Heine," "Schillers Haus in Gohlis," and similar headings characterize the content of his poetry. During this time, Börne's influence also began to show in Beck's poetry. He was especially impressed by the older poet's love of freedom, and by his willingness to enlist his poetical talents in the service of progress. Beck was proud to acknowledge Börne as his master. Beck's admiration for Börne is especially evident in a cycle of poems entitled "Neue Bibel," in which he eulogized Börne on the occasion of his death in 1837. In these lyrics Beck portrayed Börne as the unequalled champion of human rights and freedom of expression, a man who even refused to enter heaven without being assured complete personal freedom. Upon reaching the gates of the other world Börne's first question was: "Are we to remain free in your heaven?"<sup>17</sup> There is a great deal of warmth and enthusiasm in these poems, and they are devoid of the customary pathos, excessive description, and forced imagery that dominated much of his previous poetry.

One of the *Junges Deutschland* writers' most important literary and intellectual means of expression was the use of satire, sarcasm, and irony. A mocking derisive tone dominated the lyrics of the age, which was used primarily as a form of attack against the prevailing social, political, and economic system that stood in the way of progress. But satire was also employed as a weapon in battles involving matters of principle and personal disagreements. Besides Heine, one of the lesser poets who used an extraordinarily cynical style was Ludwig Hermann Wolfram, a man of reactionary sympathies, who frequently made Kühne's literary friends the object of his mockery.<sup>18</sup> In his *Dichter Nachtwegen* Wolfram ridiculed the ideals of the *Junges Deutschland* movement, but he was particularly critical of the Leipzig circle. His most cutting remarks, however, were reserved for Karl Beck, whom he portrayed in his long epic poem, *Faust*, as one of the evil spirits. Wolfram thus belittled the Young Germany movement by satirizing the achievements of its members, and by cynically parodying their alleged "rescue" of German literature from total annihilation.

Such incidents disturbed, but could not alter the unfolding of the Leipzig circle. Nor could they hinder Beck's poetical success and popularity. Beck achieved the first climax of his fame in 1838 with the publication of his first volume of poetry entitled *Nächte. Gepanzerte*

*Lieder*. This collection, and in particular the poem “Die Eisenbahn,” composed on the occasion of the opening of the railroad line in Dresden, quickly popularized Beck’s name throughout the German-speaking world. The poem is an allegory, a praise of the railroad system which Beck saw as the zenith of technological achievements. He considered the railroad as the embodiment of the new world to come. According to one of his later critics, Hermann Solomon, Beck displayed in this poem “the spirit of a prophet predicting the change that the new invention would initiate not only in the area of trade, but also on the political front.”<sup>19</sup> “Die Eisenbahn” appeared in many newspapers in Germany, and “ignited everyone, and made its author an overnight success.”<sup>20</sup> Some critics even felt that the publication of Beck’s first volume resulted from the success of “Die Eisenbahn,” which singled him out of the ranks of the hundreds of anonymous poets.

“Die Eisenbahn” was undoubtedly an outstanding poem with an extraordinary impact upon contemporary readers. Its success has been noted by many critics, including Rudolf Gotschall, who later became one of Beck’s closest friends and admirers. But it is doubtful whether this poem was the only reason why Beck’s first collected volume was accepted for publication. The German world of the 1830s supported hundreds of poets endowed with modest talent, and most of them were able to secure a publisher sooner or later. In view of his noted poetic endeavors and growing popularity in 1837, it seems rather unlikely that Beck would have been an exception to this rule. It is more likely that “Die Eisenbahn” merely contributed to the success of his first volume and thus enhanced his poetic fame. On the other hand, the popularity of Beck’s first volume also prompted the reading public to overestimate his lyrical talents. In the long run, his success may have contributed indirectly to his downfall, because later — when he was unable to satisfy the hopes that were placed in him as a poet — the disappointed critics and public first turned against him, and later forgot about him entirely.

#### *Contemporary Assessment of Beck’s Poetry*

The appearance of Beck’s first volume increased both his reputation and the number of his critics. Studies dealing with his poetry and literary works dedicated to him appeared in great number, all of which served as measures of his success and popularity. Among his admirers was Moritz Carrier, the renowned Berlin aesthete and literary critic who sent a poem entitled “Freundesgruss an Karl Beck” to the editors of *Die Zeitung für die elegante Welt*.<sup>21</sup> Praising Beck’s lyrical talents, Carrier



welcomed the young poet as a worthy heir to the ideals of Ludwig Börne. In his poem he portrayed Beck as the legendary phoenix who appears as the reincarnation of Börne and has the noble calling to continue the older poet's struggle for the freedom of the beloved fatherland.

Julius Seidlitz, another critic, also emerged as a Beck supporter. In one of his works, Seidlitz characterized Beck as a young poet still in the *Sturm und Drang* stage of his development, when "the poet wants to reform, to destroy and to rebuild; within him evolves a dark feeling that he must create. But in the darkness of feeling, destruction appears to him as creation."<sup>22</sup> And Seidlitz appeared to have found the key to Beck's poetry. Like all *Sturm und Drang* literature, it too contained a wealth of ideas, vitality and originality — as well as uncontrolled emotions. *Sturm und Drang* was after all a stage of adolescence more attuned to emotion than to rationality. For this reason, Beck's poems lacked a guiding principle which might have produced positive answers, instead of merely criticizing the existing social system. While pointing to this elemental nature of his poetry, Seidlitz also considered Beck destined for greater things, and predicted that the young poet would score his future success in the realm of epic poetry.

Beck's fellow poets were no less enthusiastic about his first volume than his critics. Ferdinand Freiligrath, another well-known poet of the *Junges Deutschland* movement, for example, called Beck "a great fellow, for whom one must have respect — [his poems have] atmosphere, ideas, style and form, all of these expressed in an extraordinary manner."<sup>23</sup> Georg Herwegh, another poet, believed that Beck's poetry in general contains a great deal of "gold," and he is in possession of the Promethean fire which is indicative of greatness.<sup>24</sup> But as it turned out, in the long run, Beck was unable to fulfill the expectations that contemporary critics and fellow poets placed in him.

Although by the end of the 1830s Karl Beck emerged as one of the popular voices of the Young Germany movement, his fame did not endure long. As mentioned earlier, his success resulted more from his ability to voice the temporary needs of society than from genuine lyrical talent. Thus, when the political climate changed, when it was no longer sufficient to criticize, when one also had to suggest positive programs for the restructuring of society, Beck could no longer fulfill the demands of the age, and his popularity correspondingly waned. He soon disappeared into relative oblivion — as did also the *Junges Deutschland* movement which had served as the pedestal of his temporary triumphs. Beck outlived his sudden popularity by several decades. He continued to write poetry and published several notable collections in the years that fol-

lowed. Yet, he was never again as widely acclaimed and celebrated as he had been during his stay in Leipzig, as a member of the *Junges Deutschland* movement.

## NOTES

1. Some of the more important studies on Beck are as follows: Rudolf Gottschall, "Karl Beck," *Unsere Zeit* (Leipzig, 1880), pp. 801-823; Robert Gragger, "Beck Károly és a német politikai költészet," [Karl Beck and German Political Poetry] *Budapesti Szemle* 138 (1909): 268-299, 448-460, 139: 120-133, 277-297; Eduard Fechtner, *Karl Beck. Sein Leben und Dichten* (Wien, 1912); Heinrich Nellen, *Aus Karl Becks dichterischer Frühzeit*. Diss., Münster, 1908; Ernst Thiel, *Karl Becks literarische Entwicklung*. Diss., Breslau, 1938; Antal Mádl, *Politische Dichtung in Österreich 1830-1848* (Budapest, 1969), pp. 108-148; Ágnes Mária Várdy, *Karl Beck élete és költői pályája* [Karl Beck's Life and Poetical Career], Diss., Budapest, 1970; Ágnes Huszár Várdy, *Karl Beck* (Budapest, in press).
2. On the *Junges Deutschland* movement in general see: Ludwig Geiger, *Das junge Deutschland und die preussische Zensur* (Hamburg, 1886); Johannes Proells, *Das junge Deutschland* (Stuttgart, 1892); Georg Brandes, *Das junge Deutschland* (Berlin, 1904); Desider Bader, *Metternich und das junge Deutschland* (Pécs, 1934); *Literatur des Vormärz*, ed. by Kollektiv für Literaturgeschichte (Erfurt, 1958); Julius Marx, *Die österreichische Zensur im Vormärz* (Wien, 1959); Walter Dietze, *Junges Deutschland und deutsche Klassik. Zur Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie des Vormärz*, 3rd ed. (Berlin, 1962); and Helmut Koopman, *Das junge Deutschland* (Stuttgart, 1967/1968).
3. Walter Dietze demonstrated that by the mid-1830s a number of like-minded young German poets and writers were in fact in the process of establishing a formal alliance, and the realization of this goal was stopped only by an edict of the German Confederation which banned Heine's writings, along with those of Rudolf Wienbarg, Karl Gutzkow, Heinrich Laube and Theodor Mundt. Since Wienbarg's *Ästhetische Feldzüge* (1834) was dedicated to "Young Germany," this name was given to the above writers and poets and to others who held similar views. See Dietze, *Junges Deutschland*, p. 75.
4. See *Telegraphen für Deutschland*, 1839; Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Über Kunst und Literatur* (Berlin, 1950), p. 446; and Ernst Hanisch, "Der junge Engels und die österreichische Literatur des Vormärz," *Österreich in Geschichte und Literatur* 19 (1975): 160-169.
5. As quoted by Nellen, *Aus Karl Becks dichterischer Frühzeit*, p. 53.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Letter quoted by Adolf Kohut, "Ungedrucktes von Karl Beck," *Internationale Literaturberichte* (1898), p. 375.
9. Edgar Pierson, *Gustav Kühne. Lebensbild und Briefwechsel* (Dresden-Leipzig, 1890), p. 63.
10. See *Der Salon. Wochenschrift für Heimat und Fremde*, no. 12 (1839): 106-107.
11. Gustav Kühne, "Karl Beck," *Westermanns Illustrierte Monatshefte* 46 (1879): 498.
12. Gottschall, "Karl Beck," p. 803.

13. In a letter dated September 9, 1836, Beck wrote the following to his friend Jakob Kaufmann: "Like all writers here, I too have the title of 'doctor,' and they call me the Magyar poet who strikes like thunder with his songs." Kohut, "Ungedrucktes von Karl Beck," p. 375.
14. Gragger, "Beck Károly," 138: 283.
15. Gottschall, "Karl Beck," p. 804.
16. Beck's belief that one of the dominant ideas of the Young German writers was the reevaluation of the role of the poet was expressed, among others, in his poem "Sultan." Here he portrayed the poet as a Turkish sultan, who in spite of all manner of temptation, never loses sight of his noble goal, i.e., to win the battle for the glory of his homeland. In another poem, "Märchen," Beck stated that the poet "may no longer tell stories. . . . This Age of Seriousness will no longer believe them." Yet Beck was never able to state specifically how a poet should become a leader in society. See Karl Beck, *Nächte. Gepanzerte Lieder* (Leipzig, 1838), pp. 7-9, 148.
17. Beck, *Nächte*, p. 169.
18. See F. Marlowe [L. H. Wolfram], *Faust ein dramatisches Gedicht in drei Abschnitten* (Leipzig, 1838), also reprinted in Otto Neurath, *Neudrucke literarhistorischer Seltenheiten* (Berlin, 1906), no. 6.
19. Quoted in Nellen, *Aus Karl Beck's dichterischer Frühzeit*, p. 57.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Gragger, "Beck Károly," 138: 287.
22. Julius Seidlitz, *Die Poesie und die Poeten Österreichs im Jahre 1836*, 2 vols. (Grimma, 1837), 2: 102.
23. Wilhelm Buchner, *Ferdinand Freiligrath. Ein Dichterleben in Briefen*, 2 vols. (Lahr, 1881), 2: 266.
24. Georg Herwegh, *Gedichte und kritische Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1839 und 1840. Herweghs Werke*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1845), 2: 76.