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The Political Theology and Polemical Tactics of Bruno Bauer

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to an ongoing revival of interest in the intellectual history of the German *Vormärz*, and to an emerging body of scholarship on the influential political philosopher and Bible scholar Bruno Bauer (1809–1882). While, during much of the twentieth century, Bauer was remembered primarily for his relationship with the Young Marx, more recent scholarship has attempted to examine his work on its own terms, and to consider his unique contributions to the history of republicanism and radicalism in particular. But to date, no one has provided a systematic and synoptic account of his theology during the crucial years of 1838 to 1843. This article aims to fill that gap in the literature. It argues that Bauer's political thought cannot be understood independently of his theology, his church and religious histories, and his Bible criticism. In doing so, it provides new insights into the significance of theology for the polemical debates of the *Vormärz* more generally.

KEYWORDS

Bruno Bauer; political theology; Young Hegelianism; Biblical criticism; republicanism; radicalism; methodology

Introduction

For most of the twentieth century, the German Bible critic and Hegelian theologian Bruno Bauer (1809–1882) was remembered largely for his relationship with the young Karl Marx, with whom he worked closely in the late 1830s and early 1840s, or the years when Marx was writing his doctoral dissertation and preparing for a career in the university.¹ Either that, or people recognised his name because of the role he played in Albert Schweitzer's widely read *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, in which he was credited with composing "the first sceptical life of Jesus."² In the recent past, however, interest in Bauer's work independently of his connection to others has grown consistently. In the early 2000s, nearly simultaneous monographs by Massimiliano Tomba and Douglas Moggach provided fresh interpretations of Bauer's political thought and revealed its significance for the radical and republican traditions.³ A steady stream of articles has since appeared as scholars recall just how influential he was during the German *Vormärz*, reassess the nature of his collaborations with Marx, and attempt to come to grips with his expansive body of work.⁴ But this new research, impressive though it often is, has yet to supply a systematic, historically

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contextualised account of Bauer's theology. This is a conspicuous oversight, given that a set of fundamental theological claims sits at the basis of not only his Biblical criticism and religious histories but also, in many ways, his politics as well. Indeed, while to the best of my knowledge he never employed the term, at least not in any consistent manner, if we had to name one concept capable of capturing the majority of Bauer's work, we would be hard pressed to do better than "political theology." The modest aim of this article is to trace the development of Bauer's political theological project as it took shape from 1838 to 1843, or the years when, unquestionably his fame, and arguably his intellectual powers, reached an apex. In doing so, though, I also want to suggest that a better understanding of this aspect of Bauer's work can shed important new light on the place of theology in the intellectual history of the *Vormärz* more generally.

Born as the son of a respected porcelain painter in the town of Eisenberg in 1809, Bauer studied at the University of Berlin where, in 1829, he was awarded the Royal Prize in Philosophy for an essay on Kantian aesthetics—a prize adjudicated by none other than Hegel himself. With such a commanding endorsement in tow, he began lecturing at the University of Berlin in 1834 where he was initially associated with those who David Strauss would dub the "right Hegelians."⁵ Indeed, one of Bauer's first tasks as a young scholar was to compose a conservative Hegelian response to Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, or the controversial book in which Strauss argued that the Gospels were best understood, not as accurate accounts of empirical events, but as the collective myths of an early Christian community, and that the divine truth was revealed, not in a historical individual, but in the history of humanity as such. Bauer wrote reviews of each of the book's two volumes, which appeared in the Hegelian *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik* in 1835 and 1836. He then wrote a synopsis of the debate that emerged around the book for the same journal in 1837. The crux of Bauer's challenge to Strauss was to suggest that, despite his stated intentions, his work was neither original nor Hegelian, but a reinvention of eighteenth-century rationalist Bible criticism in the wake of more recent scholarship on the concept of myth. He also noted the proximity between Strauss's notion of collective myths and Spinoza's substance, and the sense in which both failed to grasp the essential generative power of subjective freedom and what Bauer called "self-consciousness." And while he was not yet the firebrand he would soon become, Bauer's treatments of Strauss did display one personal trait he would go on to exploit to great advantage—a singular capacity to sense an impending intellectual storm, and to situate himself directly in its path.

Between the years 1838 and 1843, Bauer's career can aptly be described as meteoric. He lit up out of nowhere, astonished everyone as he raced across the firmament, and just as quickly vanished from view, or at least became significantly less interesting to what was at the time an especially fickle reading public. His first major work was his *Kritik der Geschichte der Offenbarung*, which appeared in two volumes in 1838, and which endeavoured to locate the Old Testament within a larger history of religion in the ancient world. Inasmuch as it represented the Bible in particular and human history in general as organised around the Christian revelation, that work was thought to be orthodox in its orientation. But the following year, Bauer shocked his colleagues by releasing his polemical *Herr Dr. Hengstenberg*, which took the form of a series of open letters to his younger brother, and which systematically dismantled the Biblical literalism and Christian apologetics of the powerful Pietist professor and theologian Ernst Hengstenberg.

From this moment on, Bauer's political theology became increasingly radical, as he boldly intervened in a series of heated debates over religious and church history, Prussian and European politics, the political significance of Hegelian philosophy, and, most notably, the critical and historical study of the Gospels. When Prussian state authorities initiated an investigation of his work that culminated in him being stripped of his licence to teach, he became something of a *cause célèbre*, and for a brief time his name reverberated throughout the German literary world. But by 1844, the Prussian establishment had successfully extracted him from any position of institutional power, and he and a small group of followers concentrated their efforts on a literary magazine that had little or no influence beyond the scope of those who contributed to it. He played a negligible role in the 1848 Revolutions, and, like many of his generation, his later thought became idiosyncratic and conservative, its primary claim to fame being its influence on the young Nietzsche. But, along with being of intrinsic value, the material Bauer produced between 1838 and 1843 left its mark on more than a few figures who would not have been the same without it—including Marx, but also Engels, Max Stirner, and his own younger brother Edgar.

What follows is broken down into three sections. The first begins with a brief account of Bauer's early career but focuses on an examination of: (1) *Herr Dr. Hengstenberg*, a work that, along with announcing Bauer's radicalism, introduced his polemical method, which involved engaging his opponents where they were strongest and dismantling their discourses from, as it were, the inside out; and (2) his crucial but easily overlooked *Die evangelische Landeskirche*, in which he defended Friedrich Wilhelm III's unification of Prussia's Lutheran and Calvinist congregations under a single state church and called for the subordination of religion to science and the public authority of the state. The second section considers Bauer's critical-historical work on the Gospels, including his *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte des Johannes* and the three volumes of his *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte der Synoptiker*. Here it is important to recognise that Bauer understood what he called free, universal, infinite self-consciousness to be, not the negation of Christianity, but the culmination of a historical process in which the Gospels played a pivotal role. Moreover, he conceived of his own critical work as part of that same process, and, by publishing his discoveries while in the process of making them, believed he was contributing to the history of revelation, or the actualisation of self-consciousness in the world. The final section will focus on three more explicitly political works: the satirical *Die Posaune des jüngsten Gerichts*, in which Bauer sought to reveal the revolutionary character of Hegel's philosophy by pretending to be a conservative Pietist minister raging against it; its sequel *Hegels Lehre von der Religion und Kunst*, in which he developed the same arguments further by polemicising against an array of contemporary philosophers and theologians; and his *Die gute Sache der Freiheit*, in which he responded to the events that had led to his dismissal from the University of Bonn, and proposed that they represented a regressive usurpation of the state by the church.⁶ I conclude with a brief reflection on the revolutionary nature of Bauer's early thought, and its contribution to the practices of intellectual history.

The Young Theologian

History and Revelation

The definitive feature of Bauer's intellectual attitude, one that he imparted to his protégés (notably Marx), was undoubtedly his combative nature. And this was already on display in his earliest writings. His reviews of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* were exceptionally complicated, very much like the work of a young man with something to prove.⁷ But the thrust of his argument came through clearly in his "Schriften über Strauss Leben Jesu," in which he surveyed the debate sparked by the book and intervened sharply at every point. In essence, while Bauer disagreed with Strauss's conclusions, he nevertheless wanted to protect the idea of a historical and Hegelian approach to the Gospels from Strauss's many orthodox and supernaturalist critics. Thus, he insisted that "the gospels cannot be explained otherwise than historically," and he repudiated those who proposed that Strauss's book had revealed "the destructive nature of the Hegelian philosophy."⁸ As Bauer saw it, Strauss's critics were correct to perceive his theories of collective myths and the divinity of human history as pantheistic. However, despite what Strauss claimed, his argument was not Hegelian but Spinozist. And Hegel's system was "exactly the opposite" of Spinoza's. "While in Spinoza self-consciousness is lost in substance," Bauer maintained, for Hegel "substance is only recognised as an inner movement of self-consciousness" (341). At the same time, Bauer was keen to reject any suggestion that the fault of Strauss's book had to do with the moral character of its author or an "evil will" (342). Rather, Strauss's work was part of a historical process, or a process of what Bauer called "revelation." It spoke to "a struggle" that was "now taking place" between self-consciousness and the world, thought and being, or subject and object—a struggle that was "intended to bring about the unity of the two." Here, Bauer declared, one could not avoid the conflict that Strauss's studies of the Gospels brought to the fore. Rather, the "contradictions" would have to be "worked through" (343).

While, as mentioned, Strauss labelled him a right Hegelian, it is worth noting that Bauer's other contributions to the *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik* typically took aim at supernaturalist theology and Bible criticism from a "speculative" or Hegelian standpoint. For instance, in his "Die Glaubenslehre der evangelisch-protestantischen Kirche" he ridiculed the supernaturalist Johann Christian Friedrich Steudal's book of the same name and opposed the "thinking reason" of Hegel's philosophy of religion to the "brittle subjectivity" of supernaturalism, which ultimately relied on arbitrary subjective belief in miracles.⁹ Similarly, in "Untersuchungen über den Pentateuch" he responded to Friedrich Heinrich Ranke's literalist interpretation of the first five books of the Bible. Ranke's work was understood by many to be a successful supernaturalist response to the rationalist argument that the Pentateuch consisted of contradictory "fragments" cobbled together from a variety of oral and written traditions. Bauer reaffirmed the fragmentary nature of the text but also insisted that, when approached speculatively, it displayed a "formal unity" that transcended the contradictions.¹⁰

Bauer brought this same speculative approach to his *Kritik der Geschichte der Offenbarung*, which began with a long introduction that traced the historical development of the concept of religion through Greek, Jewish, Roman, and Christian forms, and

then took up the monumental task of organising the Old Testament into a coherent history of revelation, from the formation of Jewish “legal consciousness” to the messianic preparation for Christianity’s “true self-consciousness.” Indeed, the central argument of the work was that “revelation” was “a historical phenomenon,” and that religious truths did not transcend history, but emerged through it, and specifically through the dialectical work of contradiction and negation.¹¹

This last point caused enough controversy among Bauer’s readers that he felt compelled, in the “Vorrede” to the second volume of the study, to respond to suspicions about the true purpose of his project. The question was whether a religious truth could involve contradictions, and whether revelation could be understood as entirely internal to the movement of history. The “method of modern philosophy,” Bauer wrote (referring to the Hegelian dialectic), “at first will appear to faithful theology as blasphemous and profane.” For here “the barrier and the contradiction are placed in the self-consciousness of the absolute spirit as it has developed historically.” Theology, Bauer continued, “regards the course of revelation either as a simple identity or as a straight line in which the one point continues in a calm flow without jolts or shocks.” It therefore “cannot recognize the negativity that is at work in this course, driving it forward and closing it in a circle.” For if it did, “it would have to recognize evil and sin as an inner moment in the divine decree.” It would, that is, have to recognise evil and sin as necessary elements of revelation, or moments in its historical unfolding. “If we want to use the word sin,” Bauer continued, “it was sin, for example, to remain at the standpoint of the law after the Christian revelation had appeared.” The correct approach would instead acknowledge that:

The historical preparation for each higher stage of revelation always took place when the spirit withdrew from the immediately preceding stage and turned first to itself and into its infinite inwardness. This introspection, which was always abstract in the beginning, was evil and was a sin against the previous determination of revelation, and yet it was necessary if this was to be transcended historically and the need for a higher level was to be awakened. The fact that the divine self-consciousness in its worldly and historical reality must grasp the determination which it must nevertheless again annul is based in its general form on the fact that God converts the eternal inner world of the idea into the judgment, i.e., into the world of particularity, where he can see the actuality of the difference as such.¹²

The dense Hegelian idiom notwithstanding, Bauer’s basic point was straightforward enough. There could be no final determination of sin and no eternal law. For the movement of negation in history meant that current sins would become norms, and past norms would become sins. Thus, while at this point Bauer was still organising his thought around the Christian revelation, he was clearly on a collision course with orthodoxy—something that became explicit in *Herr Dr. Hengstenberg*.

Bauer Contra Hengstenberg

Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg was a fervent opponent of all forms of rationalism and best known for appropriating its critical-historical methods for the supernaturalist cause or seeking to reconstruct with science what science had endeavoured to destroy. Along with his *Evangelische Kirchen-Zeitung*, a biweekly journal designed to engage directly in the controversies of the age, his most important works were his *Christologie des Alten Testaments*, which appeared in three volumes between 1829 and

1835, and his *Beiträge zur Einleitung in des Alten Testament*, which also included three volumes published between 1831 and 1839.¹³ The former opposed the rationalist reduction of the Old Testament to myth and undertook a detailed examination of the text intended to show that the Old Testament prophets announced the same Christ as the New Testament apostles. It sought, among other things, to establish the authenticity of the Book of Daniel, especially its messianic prediction of the coming of Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem, which rationalist critics had placed in doubt. The latter addressed the accuracy of the Pentateuch. Whereas rationalists pointed to a host of historical, geographical, and archaeological infelicities in the text, Hengstenberg drew on recent travel reports and scientific investigations in defence of its literal truth. The aspect of his work that exercised Bauer in *Herr Dr. Hengstenberg* was his claim that Mosaic law was not superseded but sustained in the New Testament, that it predicted the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and that its system of rewards and punishments—or what Hengstenberg called “the Mosaic economy”—applied not only to this world, but to the next. This was a set of claims that Hengstenberg developed in a section of the third volume of his *Beiträge zur Einleitung in des Alten Testament* titled “Die Theologie des Pentateuch und seine Ächtheit,” and specifically a subsection on “Das Zurücktreten der Lehre von der Unsterblichkeit,” which Bauer took as his point of departure.¹⁴

Bauer began *Herr Dr. Hengstenberg* by acknowledging the danger of challenging someone as powerful as Hengstenberg, and the difficulty of arguing with an opponent who, when bereft of reasons, would appeal to an unfalsifiable “Word of God.” Given that orthodoxy could always evade “philosophy” in this manner, Bauer wrote, “I want to do it differently, and to seek out the opponent where he is strongest.”¹⁵ He thus attacked the apologist on the level of apologetics, and provocatively characterised the detail of his commentary as a kind of “guerrilla war” in which “you must fight the isolated man in a thousand gorges” (98). While he knew his brother would try to persuade him to take up a positive project rather than a polemic, he insisted that “everything positive is already oppositional” and “is itself negative.” “All I want,” he claimed, “is for investigations into the history of revelation to come closer to their goal” (6). The key to Bauer’s argument concerned “infinite self-consciousness,” or a kind of inner infinity. As Bauer saw it, without this concept, one could not have immortality in the Christian sense. Here the infinite was not an external expanse of space and time. It was instead the experience of the individual and their capacity for faith and reason. On Bauer’s account, Jewish religious consciousness could comprehend God’s plan as predestination, and thus have prophesy. But this was distinct from the Christian concept of the immortal soul. Thus, in his effort to equate Mosaic law with the Christian understanding of Heaven, and to say that the rewards and punishments of the former applied to the latter, Hengstenberg confused “future providence” with “future judgment.” Judaism could contend that God’s plan unfolded in the world and understand “physical spirit as a divine purpose,” Bauer explained. But the “inner infinity of the spirit” introduced by Christianity was of a different order. And only an individual soul of this sort could be considered immortal or submitted to divine judgment. “As long as infinity and eternity of spirit spreads out into this outer world,” Bauer wrote, “as long as the harmony of both sides [that is, the inner and the outer] is still torn apart by its discord, the thought of a future judgment remains ruled out and rendered impossible” (12).

But for Bauer, Hengstenberg's erroneous conflation of "providence" and "judgment," or Judaism's external infinity and Christianity's internal one, was rooted in a deeper misunderstanding of history, on the one hand, and the relationship between form and content, or the symbol and its meaning, on the other. Hengstenberg's procedure was to track down every hint of Christian doctrine in the Old Testament and to claim that these proved a continuity between Jewish and Christian law. In other words, and as Bauer explained, for Hengstenberg, "the law remains what it is," namely "the absolute truth," and the only thing that Christianity added was "knowledge of the lawgiver" (13). Hengstenberg, that is to say, "wanted to present the law in its original immediacy as a straight line that could very easily lead to Christianity without breaks or bends." Here "the law contained no obstacle that had to be overcome for immortality to be revealed" (15). For Bauer, on the other hand, not only did Mosaic law contain obstacles that had to be overcome to arrive at the Christian revelation; the law *was* the obstacle that had to be overcome. "Is the law not the obstacle that still separates the spirit from its eternity," Bauer asked, "because it still separates subjectivity from its essential content"? (18). The Mosaic law, in other words, and its economy of rewards and punishments, concerned a relationship with nature, the family, and a particular historical people, one that was focused on life in this world. Indeed, Bauer proposed, the particularism of the Mosaic law "even now" (that is, in the middle of the nineteenth century) represented "a barrier to the existence" of Jews in "the state" (72).¹⁶ Christianity, on the other hand, afforded "subjectivity" its "essential content" by unifying each individual—each immortal soul—with God. Here the law would not be externally imposed on individual subjects, but autonomously and rationally chosen by them. It would be, to evoke Romans 2:15 and Hebrews 10:16, the law written in their hearts and minds.

Bauer's criticism of Hengstenberg's approach to the problem of form and content was closely related. Hengstenberg assumed that historical changes in the form of law could occur without affecting the content, and thus that form was nothing more than an empty external expression of an underlying truth which remained impervious to historical change. Or more accurately, Hengstenberg understood the various historical stages depicted in the Old Testament as so many "imperfect" expressions of an eternal truth that was finally revealed in the New Testament. However, on Bauer's account, to grasp history's real movement, this idea of the "imperfect" had to be interrogated more rigorously. "The defect that makes the imperfect imperfect," Bauer explained, "is not a pure, unreal nothingness but the inner determination of the thing, and what makes it what it is" (105). In other words, one could not separate form from content, and characterise the first as a more or less successful "means" for expressing the second. Rather the two were mutually determined, and any alteration of one involved an alteration of the other.

The same set of claims applied to religious ceremony and symbolism. These could not be understood as merely formal expressions of a true content. They simultaneously expressed and determined the content. For Bauer, this principle had a bearing on both the study of religious history and the critique of apologetics. For it meant that one could not, for instance, characterise Jewish rituals as symbolic expressions of a truth that would be revealed in Christianity. Different rituals *eo ipso*

expressed different truths. Similarly, it meant that the Biblical apologist could not avoid contradictions in the Bible by claiming that some aspects of it were literal descriptions of fact while others were merely symbolic. Indeed, for Bauer, there was no such thing as the “merely” symbolic. And the task of the historian was not to discern the eternal truth concealed behind the changing historical forms, but to trace the emergence of truth through those forms, or through the struggles and contradictions between them.

State, Church, Revolution

Significantly, as Bauer’s next major work—*Die evangelische Landeskirche*—made clear, this process of truth emerging through contradiction was not confined to the past. On the contrary, as Bauer saw it, contemporary Prussia was witnessing an example of world-historical importance, namely Friedrich Wilhelm III’s effort to unify its Lutheran and Reform congregations in a state church. This policy was announced in a Cabinet Order issued by the King in 1817. Part of a larger programme of administrative centralisation, it curtailed the autonomy of the churches, and gave the state the power to appoint ecclesiastical officials and enforce a uniform liturgy. It was vehemently opposed by both Lutheran and Reform nonconformists, so much so that, in 1834, the King issued another Cabinet Order that sanctioned the imprisonment of recalcitrant priests. But Friedrich Wilhelm IV began his reign in 1840 with an effort to quell the tensions, including an amnesty for imprisoned clergy.¹⁷ In *Die evangelische Landeskirche*, Bauer mounted an impassioned defence of the policy, and of state power more generally. He situated Friedrich Wilhelm III’s campaign to build the state church in relation to the historical struggles of the Hohenzollern dynasty and presented it as nothing less than “the greatest moment in Prussian history that has ever come.” He warned of the reactionary forces that were infiltrating the state, and that had managed to exclude “philosophy” and “science” (by which he meant Hegelianism) from positions of power. And, in a blatant effort to flatter the king, he compared “the unification of centuries old struggles and aspirations” made possible by the state church to “the union of the prince and his subjects in one infinite interest.”¹⁸ At the same time, the book was initially published anonymously, and it is easy to see why. For it treats the state church, not simply as an act of administrative centralisation, but as the absolute subordination of religion to secular power, and the culmination of both the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

The first thing that strikes the reader of *Die evangelische Landeskirche* is its sonorous, often cryptic tone. To emphasise what he took to be the historical profundity of the events in question, Bauer mobilised a foreboding imagery of thunderstorms, torment, and upheaval. The text was broken down into five tightly argued sections. An introductory “Ausichten” set out the crisis just described—both the emerging threat of the state being appropriated by religious conservatives and the commitment of “science” or “philosophy” to the project of the state church. Here the state was not understood as a collection of positive institutions but in Hegelian terms as the actualisation of spirit in the world, or what Bauer called “the real presence of the rational and the divine” (5). As Bauer saw it, mysticism and reaction might have recently taken hold of it. But this was necessarily a temporary setback, or a moment in the historical dialectic destined only to intensify the contradiction and thus accelerate its resolution. “The state can sometimes err,” Bauer

wrote, “become suspicious of science, and resort to coercive measures. But reason belongs to it too intimately and its movement is far too vital for it to err for long” (18). The following section, on “Die fürstliche Haus,” narrated the history of Prussia and the Hohenzollern dynasty as the emergence and conflicted development of the state, and of its reliance on and protection of free scientific inquiry, particularly on matters of religion. Bauer then turned his attention to “Die Union,” or the unified state church itself, “Die Presbyterial-Verfassung,” or the autonomous constitutions of the churches, and especially their systems of governing councils or synods, and “Die Lehrstand,” or the teaching profession, and the question of whether the training of clergy should be administered by the churches or the state.

The most important—and most incendiary—section of *Die evangelische Landeskirche* was “Die Union.” Here Bauer argued that, while defenders of the state church presented it as a relatively pacific merger of two faiths, its “opponents” had in fact “seen more clearly” what was at stake. For they understood that it was not a mere administrative issue but constituted a “tremendous reversal which overthrows the visible church.” “The union,” Bauer wrote:

is the fact and law of the Enlightenment in the church; it is the revolution perfected in the church. It is the fear and terror of the Protestant hierarchs and that is why it will still have to endure a heated battle. Should the state momentarily deny it, it will not succumb, because those who have recognised it in its world-historical greatness as the last judgment on the intractability of the church will confess it before the world. Science will fight back for them with all the more joyful courage since in it they defend the law, the state itself, and the dearest legacy of their founder. (36)

By the “founder” of the “science” that was prepared to “fight back” in defence of the state church, Bauer undoubtedly meant Hegel. And Bauer’s approach, which emphasised the opposition between the particular and the universal, was fundamentally Hegelian. For Bauer, religion was the source of all particularism, including individual egoism and communitarian identity.¹⁹ Bauer held that the act of unifying two particular churches would not create a third, larger, but still particular church. It would, instead, absorb all religion, and thus all particularism, into the state, and in doing so actualise the universal.

More specifically, Bauer explained that, as a condition of entering the union, both the Lutheran and the Reformed churches would have to abandon their particular doctrinal provisions and exclusive confessional requirements. In short, they would have to become open to one another’s members. But in practice, this meant the dissolution of both. “The fact that no denomination excludes the other from their community really only means that there is no longer any particular external community of denominations,” Bauer wrote. He then imagined an interlocutor’s misguided response: “But don’t the unified churches now and as such form one church? Have the two not become a new external community?” To which Bauer replied: “the theologian who wanted to affirm that position would only prove that he does not know what a church is.” Because, for a church to exist, it “must appear visible and make itself known.” And “the *notae externae* of its visibility are the teachings and sacraments” (47). But this was exactly what the union compelled the churches to abandon. Thus, Bauer declared, “the church as such, the church that must necessarily appear as visible, has perished in the union.” The “union” was “the abolition of the particular churches and of exclusiveness in general, without which the visible church

cannot exist" (48). It was "the consistent implementation of the Enlightenment" and "the public recognition of the Enlightenment raised to law" (49). It represented, in other words, the end of "the statutory church system" and of the church as a legal public entity. But the end of the church was not an elimination of the spiritual forces that it contained. Rather, with the union, "the visible church elevates itself into the state." The mysterious, otherworldly deity of the church was thus replaced by "the idea of the God-humanity [Gott-Menschheit]," which Bauer glossed as "the eternal Protestant principle on which all attempts at tyranny and hierarchy must fall, even if they don Protestant robes" (60).

Bauer's discussion of "Die Presbyterial-Verfassung" reinforced this line of thought. He began by noting that "the synods" represented "the most glaring visibility of the churches," and the most obvious expression of the autonomy that the state church would eliminate (67). As Bauer saw it, the strongest defence of the synods was that, whereas the state could only consider "the finite," or the worldly concerns of politics and power, the church councils provided space for the contemplation of "the infinite." Bauer accepted that political order required some relationship with the infinite—that a purely finite politics would be disastrous. However, he insisted, "the state is not a mere finite institution." On the contrary, "it is the only form in which the infinity of reason, the freedom of the highest goods of the human spirit, exists in reality" (104). It was the churches, and not the state, that were finite, the proof of which was their exclusivity, and the fact that they excommunicated heretics. The state, on the other hand, was able to absorb all differences, even that which could be considered evil. Thus, in a striking passage, Bauer wrote:

The state has many monsters within it, which it must tame, educate, civilise, and morally illuminate. Humanity as such in its pure vagueness is the rage that rebels against all positive statutes, the ego is the demon that gnaws through all physical barriers with its cunning dialectics. . . . The modern state can bear within itself all these demons and monsters, tame and illuminate them. But it does not do so as a mere police force. It does not understand its right over them as an external power on its side. What good are worldly weapons against demons, spiritual monsters, and the most subtle and penetrating abstractions? Rather the state, as the all-encompassing existence of everything human, also includes the demons and abstractions. (107)

Whereas the church synods could only seek to avoid struggle and antagonism, or splinter through sectarian disputes, the state was able to contain them, and even to recognise them as elements of "the all-encompassing existence of everything human."

Bauer's final section of *Die evangelische Landeskirche* on "Die Lehrstand" consisted largely of a polemic against the legal theorist Friedrich Julius Stahl and his *Die Kirchenverfassung nach Lehre und Recht der Protestanten*. Stahl, who had recently been appointed professor of law at the University of Berlin (replacing the popular liberal Hegelian professor Eduard Gans, who died suddenly in 1839) was a conservative critic of Hegel and proponent of what he called "the Christian state," or a state designed to balance the centralised power of the monarchy with the corporate autonomy of the churches.²⁰ For Bauer, then, he was a perfect example of the reaction that was seizing control of the state and conspiring against "science" and "philosophy." The issue at stake was whether education should remain in the hands of the churches. But the deeper question concerned, once again, "the visibility of the church," or its legal status vis-à-vis

the state. Stahl argued that the Protestant separation of church and state meant that the former had an independent source of right. This right, he said, predated the state, and could be traced back to Christ and the apostles. But for Bauer, this approach reduced “the visibility of the church” to nothing more than “the bodies of the believers,” when in fact “the true visibility” was a “spiritual existence” that was “not tangible” but “based on law and the legal recognition that the church could only achieve in the state” (126). Indeed, Bauer claimed, the central tenet of Protestantism was not the independent right of the church but Luther’s “justification by faith.” And the effect of this principle, Bauer concluded, was to liberate every believer from the church and its laws so that they could pursue their humanity in the state (131).

Self-Consciousness and the Gospels

By 1840, then, though barely thirty years old, Bauer had already assembled an imposing scholarly arsenal. He had contributed substantively to one of the most contentious polemical disputes of his age. He had developed an elaborate Hegelian analysis of the Old Testament and reconstructed Hegel’s philosophy of history as a theory of revelation. He had courageously challenged one of Germany’s preeminent Biblical scholars and Christian apologists, and, in the process, begun to articulate his own discrete theology of self-consciousness. Finally, and most importantly, he had employed his expansive knowledge of political theology to intervene in a fundamental policy debate over the institutional arrangement of the Prussian state and its historical relationship with the church. In retrospect, we can see that his faith in the revolutionary triumph of a universal rational state was misguided, and that many of his predictions failed to materialise. But we misunderstand Bauer if we read his work as primarily descriptive or prognostic. For its purpose was not merely to represent the truth but to contribute to its invention—not merely to interpret the world, as his most famous student said, but to change it. For Bauer, in other words, writing was less descriptive than performative, and language consisted of what we would call speech acts.²¹ And this was not only how Bauer wrote. It was how he read the writing of others as well. Indeed, this notion that language acts in the world was integral to the work that would consume him in 1840 and 1841, and that would in many ways become his masterpiece, namely his criticisms of the gospels.

Taken as a whole, the animating idea of Bauer’s criticisms of the gospels was that both the gospels and Bauer’s books about them were products of self-consciousness (or free and creative individuals) that also declared the philosophy of self-consciousness (or free and creative individuality). They were, in other words, examples of what they stated, or enactments of what they described. A similar principle applied to the way Bauer wrote and published his criticisms of the gospels. Rather than waiting until he had completed his work, he released his findings in the midst of making them—the conceit being, as noted above, that his own work was contributing to the history of revelation that it examined, or that he was revealing the truth to the world as his research revealed it to him. This partly explains why Bauer began with John, which had always been recognised as the last gospel, as well as the one most influenced by classical philosophy and least connected to historical events. As Bauer noted, he had originally planned to follow his *Kritik der Geschichte der Offenbarung* by establishing “the historical prerequisites for Christianity” or tracing the transition between the messianic culture of the ancient Jews

and the events of the gospels.²² But, he said, he could not find a convincing connection. He then devised the strategy of working through the gospels backwards in order to narrow in on the oldest and most essential messianic message, which he could then attempt to source in the Old Testament. But if that was the plan, it was not at all how things unfolded. Instead, by the time Bauer completed his study of John, he had come to the conclusion that it was almost entirely a literary invention, and that its only authentic elements were the words of Christ himself, “which,” Bauer wrote, “by their simplicity and infinity of content, prove themselves to be the real words of the Lord” (xii).

The stage was now set for Bauer’s most infamous creation: his three-volume *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte der Synoptiker*. Here, and as we have seen many times, Bauer was very keen to ground his study in the methods of his enemies, or to beat them at their own game. He thus did not, for example, want to offer a philosophical criticism of “the essence of Christianity,” as Feuerbach would do the same year. Indeed, already in his book on John, Bauer disavowed the philosophical approach, and promised instead to speak only the language that apologists would recognise. “The apologist,” he wrote there, “if he really examines the following critical process with an unprejudiced eye, would have to remark to his great satisfaction that we have not judged the Fourth Gospel either from philosophy alone, nor even partly with its help, but that we are pure, and move exclusively in the field of historical criticism” (xii). The same idea was developed much more elaborately in the crucial “Vorrede” to the first volume of the criticism of the synoptic gospels. There Bauer set up an opposition between, on the one hand, Strauss’s *Life of Jesus*, and, on the other, the work of Christian Hermann Weisse and Christian Gottlob Wilke, both of whom had subsequently and independently published studies of the gospels that challenged Strauss’s approach.²³ In essence, Bauer thought that Strauss provided the most consistent example of what was called “the traditional hypothesis,” or the notion that the gospels emerged out of the “traditions” of an early Christian community. But this claim was essentially tautological, as the only real evidence for the existence of that community was also the gospels. The alternative method, developed by Weisse and Wilke, was not to posit the origin of the gospels in a “community” for which there was no independent evidence, but to focus on the texts themselves—to, for example, itemise their similarities and differences, and thus attempt to determine the order of their composition, or whether they all might have relied on a unified oral tradition, or a written but now lost “ur-gospel.”

Bauer was deeply impressed by the second approach. But he also thought Weisse and Wilke had not followed it through to its necessary consequences. Bauer began by comparing Strauss and Weisse and suggesting that their two ways of reading the gospels reflected their respective philosophical commitments. “Strauss’s is mysterious,” Bauer wrote. “Weisse’s is positive.”²⁴ For Strauss, “the substance is absolute.” But rooting history and humanity in “the substance-relation” ultimately affirmed “mysteriousness” and “the power of the church.” As Bauer put it, referring to both Strauss’s philosophy and his history of the gospels, “it is mysterious because it is tautological.” Here there was no difference between claiming that the gospels were “formed in tradition” and claiming that they were “the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.” Rather, “the two are the same in principle, since they are equally transcendent, and impair the freedom and infinity of self-consciousness in the same way” (vii–viii). And the virtue of Strauss’s approach was not to have broken with orthodoxy, but to have set out its tenets in a systematic fashion. Weisse’s

work, on the other hand, exemplified what Bauer called “the positive philosophy,” although Bauer found him more interesting than other members of that school because of his willingness to engage with Hegelian thought (x). His empirical method drew him to the conclusion that Mark was the first gospel, but Matthew and Luke must have had access, not only to it, but to a collection of sayings handed down by the apostles, and thus characterizable as “the direct work of Jesus’ personality” (xi). Wilke, for his part, also believed that Mark was the first gospel, but his insight was to suggest that the additions in Matthew and Luke were literary embellishments. More importantly, he showed that “Mark’s work” was “not a copy of an original ur-Gospel but an artificial composition” and that its elements were “determined less by historical context than by preconceived general principles”—that it was not a neutral description of historical events, in other words, but a formally arranged “work of art” (xiii).

On Bauer’s account, once this last claim was granted, the conclusion that everything in the gospels was a work of art was all but inevitable. For, as we saw Bauer argue in his book on Hengstenberg, it was not possible to separate form and content. Thus, Wilke’s suggestion that the form of the gospels was a freely created work of art opened directly onto the question of whether the content was as well. Wiesse and Wilke held firm to the notion that “the content” had somehow “passed directly from the apostles into the synoptic gospels,” and thus, after many detours, returned to a variety of the “traditional hypothesis.” But the real “task of the critic,” Bauer claimed, was “now obviously to examine the content to see whether, like the form, it is also of literary origin and a free creation of self-consciousness” (xv). This, then, became Bauer’s task. And once he had eliminated all positive content from the texts, once he had detached them entirely from reference to external empirical events and recognised them as purely literary inventions, he would be able to approach them with the aim of determining the truth of their own *internal* content, which would also be the true reason for their profound and prolonged influence on human history. And what could the true internal content of the gospels be other than the same spontaneity, creativity, and freedom that had produced them in the first place? What could it be other than infinite self-consciousness itself? Thus, Bauer’s goal was, as he put it, “to find the universality of self-consciousness in the specificity of what is given” (xxi), or to find it in the text itself, without speculating as to the existence of historical events, a traditional community, or even an empirical author.

These larger methodological questions aside, the only word for Bauer’s readings of the gospels is *virtuoso*. They are too detailed to do them justice here. But one key line of thought concerned the origins of the messianic narrative, including the story of Christ’s divine pre-existence, his virgin birth, and his post-resurrection appearances, all of which appeared in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark. For Bauer, this meant that the messianic narrative was a later addition, and that it was not, as had long been assumed, grounded in Jewish messianism—a fact that also explained why Bauer’s earlier effort to discover “the historical prerequisites for Christianity” in the Old Testament failed. Instead, Bauer proposed, the real source of the messianic narrative was classical culture, which was replete with stories of gods impregnating women, and of their children living among humans as heroes. The question now was twofold. First, “who combined the streams into one brook, and managed to draw it so artistically”? Here there were two possible answers: “the tradition of the community” or “the writers” (68). Reiterating his earlier claim, Bauer maintained that: “Tradition as such cannot shape, and is inwardly much too general and

indefinite to produce, a coherent work of art. The individual must accomplish this work" (74). The second question concerned not merely the authorship but the meaning of this combination of Jewish and classical religious traditions. Here Bauer argued that all religious consciousness was human self-consciousness becoming aware of itself by projecting itself onto divine entities. What we found in the gospels—their meaning—was the self-consciousness of their authors realising their own free and creative activity in the process of performing that activity or writing the gospels themselves. Each gospel thus represented "self-consciousness" at a particular "stage in its creative self-development," or self-consciousness accomplishing "a continuous distinction from its own essential content" (82).

Put simply, then, from Bauer's perspective, the gospels were written by individual authors who, in the process of telling the story of Jesus' miraculous birth, life, and resurrection, were actually, but in alienated form, telling the story of their own miraculous capacity for free creation, and thus the miraculous capacity of human self-consciousness as such. And in finally revealing this truth to the world, Bauer believed he was completing the historical project that the gospels had set in motion. Thus, the third volume of Bauer's criticisms of the gospels—titled *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte der Synoptiker und des Johannes*—because it returned to the fourth gospel, integrated it into this new overall scheme, and disavowed Bauer's earlier claim concerning the authenticity of Christ's words—concluded with two crucial claims. First, Bauer proposed that:

The Christian dogma of the Redeemer is in itself and at the same time history, namely the history of his heavenly descent, his suffering, and his resurrection. This history has been presented in the Gospels as a real empirical process. But we have shown that it is only a dogma, only an ideal product of Christian consciousness. We have therefore at the same time criticised the dogma at its origin and brought it back into self-consciousness where it seems to be most firmly rooted in reality and most inaccessible to doubt.²⁵

The gospels, in other words, were not the stories of an original Christian community that served as the basis for theological dogma. They were themselves works of theological dogma. This meant, first, that there could be no naïve hope of returning to an authentic Christian way of life without the distortions of theology or the priests. There was only theology, as it were, all the way down. And what Bauer had shown was that both the object and the subject of theology was not God, but human self-consciousness. For the same reason, Bauer concluded that:

The question that has occupied our time so much, namely whether Jesus is the historical Christ, we have answered by showing that everything that the historical Christ is, what is said of him, what we know of him, belongs to the world of the imagination [Vorstellung], and indeed to the Christian imagination, and therefore has nothing to do with a person who belongs to the real world. (308)

The question, then, that had occupied Bauer's time had been "answered by being deleted" (308). It was now no longer possible to discuss the historical Jesus. There was no historical Jesus, there was only the human self-consciousness that had, for nearly two millennia, sought to know itself by repeating a small handful of stories about him. Bauer believed he had made that detour forever unnecessary. Human self-consciousness could now seek to know itself directly, without the assistance, which was also the limitation, of religion.

The Good Cause of Freedom

The first volume of Bauer's *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte der Synoptiker* appeared in early 1841. On August 20, 1841, an investigation into his work was authorised by the Minister of Culture Karl Friedrich Eichhorn. The ministry solicited reports from the theology departments of Prussia's universities, asking them to respond to two questions: what was the theological position of Bauer's book; and could Bauer continue in his post at the University of Bonn? The advice of the theology departments was mixed, but on March 29, 1842, Bauer was issued a letter indicating that his *licentia docendi* had been rescinded.²⁶ Bauer's dismissal, however, was but one event in a period of intense radicalism which lasted from late 1841 to early 1843. These early years of Friedrich Wilhelm IV's reign were somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, and as Eichhorn's appointment exemplified, the King populated his administration with conservatives. On the other, he signalled support for a spirit of openness in public discourse. The most striking expression of the latter was a Censorship Instruction circulated on December 24, 1841, requesting censors to be more lenient in their application of the rules and even allowing for criticism, provided it did not challenge the monarchical principle or seek to discredit religion. The result was an extraordinary expansion of the press and, with it, of intellectual activism.²⁷ Bauer, as usual, positioned himself at the centre of the storm, which he and those around him seemed to believe was one or two incendiary articles away from turning into a full-blown revolution. By early 1843, though, the party was mostly over. The King effectively retracted his previous Censorship Instruction. The offending journals were suppressed. The radical faction began to splinter. And a new Higher Censorship Court was established to deal rapidly and harshly with any remaining partisans.²⁸

Bauer's literary output during this period was prodigious, and a full appreciation would require a separate study. But, keeping the focus on theology, we can begin with a brief consideration of two articles. "Die christliche Staat und unsere Zeit," which appeared in the *Hallische Jahrbücher* in June 1841, continued the polemic against Stahl initiated in *Die evangelische Landeskirche*. As in the earlier work, Bauer's aim was both to promote the cause of the state church and to explain the apparent usurpation of the state by reactionary forces. Now, however, the task was more difficult and urgent, as the influence of Stahl's theory of the Christian state had only grown in the interim. Bauer responded with an elaborate speculative history of the relationship between church and state. The Byzantine form, he claimed, represented the identity of the two, the Medieval form their separation, and the Reformation their reintegration. The modern state, however, had not been able fully to master the church, and occasionally became its instrument, because it "remained spiritless"—not an "infinite end in itself" but "an external means to carry out an end that went beyond it" and "to protect externally against a hostile world."²⁹ The same phenomena meant that citizens did not pursue collective freedom in the state but remained atomised and focused on egoistic material concerns. Nevertheless, and despite the successes experienced by the enemies of the state church, Bauer confidently predicted that "science" would find refuge in "the universities and especially the theological departments" from which it would mount a counterattack.³⁰ "Theologische Schaamlosigkeiten," published in the *Deutsche Jahrbücher* in November 1841, was a more bare-knuckled attack on the critics of Bauer's work and significant for the sense in which Bauer now situated himself, not within the existing state, but firmly in opposition to

it. "Free science," Bauer wrote, "is currently prosecuted, denied by the state, stands outside the power that conquers the government." Now for Bauer, it was "not simply a matter of power, but the power of a principle, not mere recognition, but recognition with the principle and because of the principle."³¹

This same stance of the principled outsider characterised Bauer's next, on some accounts most important work, *Die Posaune des jüngsten Gerichts*.³² Here, Bauer adopted the persona of a Pietist theologian claiming to expose the atheistic and revolutionary truth of Hegel's thought. The literary composition of the piece makes it difficult to summarise. But three central themes are discernible. First, whereas Bauer had previously defended the state against the church, in this book he (or his Pietist persona) argued that "the younger generation of the Hegel school" launched their attack "against church and state."³³ Since the Hegelians had been successfully purged from the state, the tactic was no longer to pursue the revolution within it, but to mount an assault on it from without. Second, there was an expansion of the political theological polemic, particularly against more moderate theologians, whose mediating indecisiveness Bauer despised more than their conservative counterparts. Three groups received special attention: "the Old Hegelians" (Bauer mentioned Leopold Henning, Georg Andreas Gabler, and Karl Rosenkranz), who were characterised as either duped or hypocritical; "the Positive Philosophers" (including figures like Immanuel Hermann Fichte, Karl Philipp Fischer, and Christian Hermann Weisse), who sought, using speculative philosophical methods, to establish the positive truth of both the Christian revelation and the natural sciences; and "the Schleiermachers," who Bauer had already challenged in *Die evangelische Landeskirche*, but whose arguments he went out of his way to dismantle here, particularly with respect to Schleiermacher's concepts of "ecclesiastical life" (or the notion that theology should begin, not with philosophical abstractions, but with the lived experience of congregations), and the "theology of feeling" (or the notion that faith could be grounded in a subjective feeling of absolute dependence on God).³⁴ Finally, and most elaborately, Bauer systematically developed his creative appropriation of Hegel and his unique philosophy of self-consciousness.

With respect to the last point, the central argument was that, in his lectures on the *Philosophy of Religion* (which Bauer had just finished editing for publication, and thus knew exceptionally well), "Hegel dissolved religion and destroyed it," but that this project was concealed behind a "double veil."³⁵ The surface-level meaning of the text, Bauer (or Bauer's persona) maintained, was orthodox. Thus, "on almost every page of his *Philosophy of Religion* Hegel speaks of God and almost always he seems to mean that living God who was there before the world came into being" and "who revealed his love through Christ." But this "remnant of literal piety pursued by the older Hegelians" was "a superficial appearance." The "second shell," recognised by Strauss and some of the more astute older figures, was "pantheism" or "religion in the form of substance-relation." Here "the individual mind surrenders and sacrifices itself to the universal, which has power over it as a substance." But this too was a mere "appearance" through which only minimal aspects of the truth could be discerned. In reality, Hegel believed that "the religious relationship is nothing but an inner relationship of self-consciousness to itself" and "all those powers which as substance or absolute idea still seem to be distinguished from self-consciousness" are nothing more than "objectified moments" of self-consciousness. "That," Bauer's persona concluded, "is the essential, horrific core of the system that kills all piety and

religiosity.” And “whoever has enjoyed this kernel is dead to God, for he considers God dead.”³⁶ Hegel, then, was not the conservative court philosopher that so many took him to be. He was the great thinker of atheism and self-consciousness, and thus the harbinger of revolution.

That said, any effort to come to terms with *Die Posaune des jüngsten Gerichts* must acknowledge its literary dimensions, particularly in light of Bauer’s discussions of the relationship between form and content. For, on Bauer’s own account, a formal device like parody could not be characterised as merely ornamental, nor even instrumental (as a tool, for instance, designed to confuse the censor). Instead, and as we have seen, Bauer would insist that the literary form of the text is determined by its philosophical content, and vice versa. And indeed, to the extent that parody confounds any effort to locate an author’s intention, it configures an aspect of the freedom that Bauer ascribed to self-consciousness. For the latter could never be reduced to a single position unaffected by the motion of history but was inscribed in historical processes and thus subject to change. For the same reason, we cannot uncritically assume that, when Bauer’s persona claimed to have unveiled the esoteric truth of Hegel’s philosophy, this was also Bauer’s conviction. On the contrary, from Bauer’s perspective, the truth of a text was not a static semantic content waiting patiently for readers to discover it but a dynamic interaction between the language, the reader, and their world. Not incidentally, Bauer addressed this issue explicitly in his sequel to *Die Posaune des jüngsten Gerichts*, *Hegels Lehre von der Religion und Kunst*. The theologian, he noted there, had a “material interest” in affirming the positive truth of the Bible, as their profession relied on it. They therefore lacked what Bauer called “the free aesthetic disinterest that liberated itself from the object and allows it to move freely.” They lacked, that is, the disinterest required for aesthetic judgment, or the capacity, when faced with a unique (particular) object, to invent a (universal) concept to comprehend it. As a result, “they do not explain the Biblical information, they merely repeat it in an insipid tautology.”³⁷

Hegels Lehre von der Religion und Kunst adopted the same parodic form as *Die Posaune des jüngsten Gerichts* and amplified Bauer’s attack on church and state considerably. It had two basic sections: A long “Vorrede” in which Bauer once again polemicised against contemporary theologians and laid out a radical version of his own position; and a section titled “Hegel’s Haß gegen die heilige Geschichte und die göttliche Kunst der heiligen Geschichtschreibung,” which some scholars attribute to Marx, and which developed a historical and theoretical account of the revolutionary dissolution of religion.³⁸ Bauer’s summary of his own work, which he articulated in the voice of a bitter enemy, was especially powerful, as the use of a persona paradoxically allowed him to speak more directly. He emphasised what he had his persona call his “infernal method,” or his method of reading the gospels as purely literary inventions void of any positive content. More accurately, Bauer understood the gospels to be expressions of religious consciousness. They were, once again, not descriptions of historical events, but theological categories expressed as historical narratives. And this meant that Bauer’s attack on theology was also an attack on the gospels. Thus, Bauer’s persona declared:

One should not imagine that Bauer, when he fought so foolishly against the theologians, wanted to suggest that this was not at the same time a fight against the evangelists. On the contrary! Already in the gospels he discerns a course of development in which the first,

original religious consciousness has become a theological one. According to him, religious reflection is already theological in the Holy Scriptures. It is already that theological reflection that he invariably considers the most abominable, and a betrayal of humanity.³⁹

The gospels were not historical representations of an original Christian community. They were political theological discourses designed to shape human societies according to a set of artificially constructed categories. The question was not whether they were “true,” or whether the events described in them really happened. For Bauer, in fact, that question was a chimera created to avoid the issue. The real question, the one that occupied Bauer, was whether the societies that had been shaped by the gospels could be considered free, and, if not, how to go about constructing and propagating alternative discourses capable of shaping society differently.

Immediately after having his *licentia docendi* revoked, Bauer composed his response, *Die gute Sache der Freiheit und meine eigene Angelegenheit*. In personal correspondence with Ruge from around the same time, Marx noted: “You have probably already read Bauer’s self-defence. In my opinion, he has never before written so well.”⁴⁰ As his later polemics against him would show, few if any knew Bauer’s work better than Marx. And his judgment on this matter was unquestionably sound. While, as we have seen, Bauer’s prose could be frustratingly dense and abstract, *Die gute Sache der Freiheit* was as powerful and indignant as it was parsimonious and elegant. The central claim was that his case proved what he had been arguing all along concerning the relationship between church and state. The former had used the latter as an instrument to exert its arbitrary power. Whereas it should have been subordinated and extinguished by the state, the state had been subordinated to it. “This is, in general, the collision,” Bauer wrote:

that the ecclesiastical and religious interests want to exert themselves at the expense of the concept of the state, and that the state must finally free itself from ecclesiastical and religious paternalism and constitute itself as a state. Criticism is the precondition for the endeavour of the state, since it explains the ecclesiastical and religious power and completely dissolves its pretence to being an unearthly, superhuman power; that is, it brings about the crisis which locates the purely human aspect of ecclesiastical and religious power in its proper place among the other human powers. The question at this moment is only whether the state should judge according to its real, free principle, or whether it is patronised by the church.⁴¹

The injustice, Bauer said, was that theology had used the state to put him on trial before, precisely, theology. His fate was sealed at the outset, as his prosecutor and his judge were identical. Even the most sympathetic of his accusers among the theologians, or those who hypocritically sought to protect that image of free inquiry associated with Protestantism and the German university since the time of Luther, suggested he should have been more circumspect, especially given that he taught in a theology department, and that most of his students would one day become church officials. Bauer replied with an impassioned defence of public freedom and the power of the truth:

When we speak of freedom of conviction in our day, the question is no longer whether a belief can be tolerated, but whether it contains the truth, and how far that truth must change the existing state of affairs. Convictions are no longer private thoughts with which the lonely sage consoles himself in private, but public powers that measure themselves against the power of what exists [*der Macht des Bestehenden*]. (34)

When asked why, given his lack of faith, he did not of his own accord leave either the church or the theology department, he replied that the true critic “does not storm out of the prison but crumbles it from the inside” (210). He acknowledged that the Christian state had become hegemonic and would likely have to be dislodged through protracted and laborious struggles. At the same time, he held out the possibility of change. Thus, he declared that:

The Christian state is the state of bondage and guardianship, the state that does not yet have the courage to be a state. Not only are the subjects ruled, unfree, and patronised, but the government is also unfree, since its principle, namely mistrust, turns the ruled into an alien, threatening mass. It can only ever live in fear, and for the sake of its principle must constantly tremble at the possibility that the governed will finally decide that they want to belong to a true state. (219)

Indeed, for Bauer, the first step towards the “true state” would be the forceful decision of “the governed” to take up their rightful place in the state—to refuse the imposition of false, unworldly laws handed down from on high, and to participate directly in the ongoing process of constituting human laws, thereby self-consciously constructing the conditions of their own freedom. And, at least during the handful of tumultuous years considered here, that was the purpose driving both his politics and his theology.

Conclusion

Anyone who spends any amount of time reading Bruno Bauer will come away with a sense of a divided figure, or someone who straddled two very different historical worlds. On one side, there was Bauer the institutional warrior—the man who pressed his considerable intellectual weight against the great groaning machine of the Prussian state in an effort, from his position as a theologian within the university, to bend the course of history. This Bauer clearly modelled himself on Luther (even to the point of occasionally adopting his literary style) and dreamt of being remembered as the father of a second, atheist Reformation. On the other side, there was Bauer the modern revolutionary—the man who was conversant in the most recent intellectual trends, who was followed by a swarm of fashionable young activists who hung on his every word, and who ran impudent dialectical circles around the doddering gatekeepers of the Prussian establishment. This Bauer idolised the Jacobins and the *philosophes*, believed it was possible to build the world anew with the power of reason alone, and, for a brief moment, was the German reading public’s shorthand for the cause of freedom. One suspects that those who knew Bauer in real life—including the young Marx—experienced the same dichotomy. And, in the case of Marx, it would be more than a little hasty to assume that he was primarily attracted to the second Bauer. Indeed, as Scott Meikle has shown, while Engels was keen to construct a Marx compatible with the natural sciences, even his later work employed traditional metaphysical concepts (essence, totality, form, dialectics) rather than the lexicon of modern science (observation, explanation, hypothesis, induction).⁴² And, while it would be hasty to attribute it entirely to one influence, that was a conceptual apparatus he mastered while working under Bauer’s tutelage.

But it would be a mistake to conclude by returning to the question of Bauer’s influence on Marx. For, both historically and conceptually, his work is far more important than that

single relationship can contain. Indeed, it is not only Bauer's place in intellectual history that deserves to be retrieved and protected. It is also, and perhaps more so, Bauer's understanding of how intellectual history functions—how it can be deployed as a political weapon or used to intervene directly and effectively in the contemporary world. Indeed, while Marx and Engels notoriously sought to dismiss Bauer and those around him as excessively theoretical and incapable of engaging in effective action, Bauer's judgment of his own significance, and of what set him apart from other Young Hegelians, pointed in precisely the opposite direction. Thus, in a summation of his career that he published anonymously in 1845, or just after the period of his greatest influence, Bauer wrote:

The objective historical importance of this man . . . consists of nothing less than the secularisation of theology, which he brought about in the conquest of the heavenly kingdom, and the use of this secularisation for the benefit and sanctity of the earthly one. What Feuerbach did for the individual human being by restoring to him his true nature, Bauer did for the human community and for history. If Feuerbach recognised in alienation the religious view of humanity, Bauer saw the common principle and condition of the institutions of the entire Christian world. While with Feuerbach theology dissolves into anthropology, with Bauer it dissolves into the entire human being in its most diverse manifestations, primarily in history. Feuerbach seeks the basis of religion in subjective psychology; Bauer seeks it in objective history.⁴³

In other words, whereas Feuerbach understood theology as the alienated expression of subjective human capacities, Bauer understood it as a manifestation of the historical institutions of "the entire Christian world," including both the church and the state. His aim was not to recover some abstract human essence, but by revolutionising the political theology of his age, to revolutionise those institutions as well. And, with respect to his work between 1838 and 1843 at least, it is as a revolutionary that he should be remembered.

Notes

1. See Brazill, *Young Hegelians*; Brudney, *Marx's Attempt*; Hook, *Hegel to Marx*; Löwith, *Hegel to Nietzsche*; Mah, *End of Philosophy*; McLellan, *Young Hegelians*; Rosen, *Bauer and Marx*; Stepelevich, *Young Hegelians*.
2. Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 137.
3. Tomba, *Crisi e critica in Bruno Bauer*; Moggach, *Philosophy and Politics of Bruno Bauer*.
4. See Barbour, "Marx, Bauer"; Boer, "Friends, Radical and Estranged"; Greiert, "'Kritische Kritik' und 'pathische Projektion'"; Kangal, "Marx's Bonn Notebooks"; Kodalle and Reitz, *Bruno Bauer*; Schimmenti, "Bruno Bauer's Critical Theory of Art"; Schimmenti, "Bruno Bauer's Critical Theory of Tragedy"; Sørensen and Moggach, "Republic of Self-Consciousness"; Tomba, "Emancipation as Therapy."
5. Strauss, *Streitschriften*, 101–20. See Moggach, *Philosophy and Politics*, 59; Rosen, *Bauer and Marx*, 39–41. Biographical information is from Moggach and Rosen.
6. The one major work from this period that I will not address at length is Bauer's *Die Judenfrage*, which originally appeared as a series of articles in the *Deutsche Jahrbücher* from 17 to 26 November 1842 and was then published as a book in 1843 (Bauer, "Juden-Frage"; Bauer, *Judenfrage*). Partly because of Marx's review of the book in "On the Jewish Question," and partly because of its place in the history of antisemitism, a significant literature already exists on this piece (for example: Greiert, "Kritikische Kritik"; Leopold, "Hegelian Antisemitism"; Peled, "Theology to Sociology"). Adequately engaging with both the text and its historiography would require a separate article.

7. Bauer, "Leben Jesu, Erster Band"; Bauer, "Leben Jesu, Zweiter Band."
8. Bauer, ""Schriften über Strauss Leben Jesu," 321–340; hereafter page numbers are cited in the text.
9. Bauer, "Glaubenslehre."
10. Bauer, "Untersuchungen."
11. Bauer, *Geschichte der Offenbarung I*, xiv.
12. Bauer, *Geschichte der Offenbarung II*, ix–x.
13. Saintes, *Rationalism*, 206–8.
14. Hengstenberg, *Beiträge*, 560–77.
15. Bauer, *Herr Dr. Hengstenberg*, 5; hereafter page numbers are cited in the text.
16. Here Bauer was predicting the argument of Bauer, *Judgefrage*.
17. Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 415–19; Bigler, *German Protestantism*, 38–52; Toews, "Church and State," 603–48.
18. Bauer *Die evangelische Landeskirche*, 18; hereafter page numbers are cited in the text.
19. Moggach, *Philosophy and Politics*, 94.
20. Berdahl, *Prussian Nobility*, 348–73; Toews, "Church and State," 636; Stahl, *Kirchenverfassung*, 100–111.
21. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*; Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 57–127.
22. Bauer, *Johannes*, v; hereafter page numbers are cited in the text.
23. Wilke, *Urevangelist*; Weisse, *Die evangelische Geschichte kritisch*.
24. Bauer, *Synoptiker I*, vi; hereafter page numbers are cited in the text.
25. Bauer, *Synoptiker III*, 307; hereafter page numbers are cited in the text.
26. Moggach, *Philosophy and Politics*, 81; Evangelical-theologischen Facultät, *Gutachten*.
27. Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 436–46.
28. Bauer, *Aufstand*.
29. Bauer, "Die christliche Staat," 541.
30. *Ibid.*, 554.
31. Bauer, "Theologische Schaamlosigkeiten," 471.
32. Moggach, *Philosophy and Politics*, 99–118.
33. Bauer, *Posaune*, 7.
34. Toews, "Church and State," 608–11.
35. Bauer, *Posaune*, 47.
36. *Ibid.*, 48.
37. Bauer, *Hegels Lehre*, 48.
38. Moggach, *Philosophy and Politics*, 222 n. 59.
39. Bauer, *Hegels Lehre*, 40.
40. "Marx to Ruge, March 13, 1843," 400.
41. Bauer, *Die gute Sache*, 33; hereafter page numbers are cited in the text.
42. Meikle, "Marx."
43. Bauer, "Bruno Bauer," 55.

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