COMMENTARY:

THE ROMANTICISTS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO PSYCHIATRY

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I. INTRODUCTION

Romance medicine, indeed, the period of the Romanticists, flourished during the first half of the nineteenth century. Although Germany was its home base. Romanticism exerted its influence over much of European psychiatric thought during the period from 1800 to 1850. The Romanticists were interested in the whole being of man. They attempted to look into man's soul and dig out the buried passions and feelings which for reasons unknown remained hidden. Their task was to bring out this concealed material in their own special way. Their writings and theories seem to fall into the areas of philosophy, theology, and even mysticism. Indeed, their rival contemporaries, the somatologists or those expounding an organic basis as the sole cause of mental aberrations, scoffed at them and referred to them as "Philosophers" and "Theologians." ¹

The Romanticists liked to write in a very flowery style which was typical of the German prose of that era. Their writings were long and contained much description and abounded in metaphors. However, if one has the patience to plough through it all, one is amazed at the genius and foresight of these gifted men. In fact, some of the writings seem to be related to Freud, who came upon the scene a few years later. Perhaps they should rightly and deservedly be called the forerunners of Freud.

Freud, of course, formulated his own ideas. He was known, in fact, to have brought forth his own theories without having previously read to any extent the works of the Romanticists. ² Zilboorg¹ states that the Romanticists were rich in ideas, but that they were still steeped in the past, and that their terminology was religious, sentimental, and metaphysical.

But just where do the Romanticists fall in the scheme of the development of psychiatry? Perhaps the following diagram will serve to illustrate their proper historical place.
II. THE ROMANTICISTS

To discuss fully all of the great Romanticists and their contributions to psychiatry would perforce constitute a book in itself. However, I have chosen several figures whose writings, I believe, were quite significant and contained a good deal of foresight.

J. P. Richter (1763-1825) deserves to be mentioned first. He was neither a physician nor a psychologist. He was a novelist. Writing in 1804, he referred to the unconscious as the unknown “inner Africa,” wherein lies a second world which never becomes conscious. The unconscious, he states, does indeed exist, but its boundaries are without limit, and its contents are unknown.