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'Germany's River, but not Germany's Border'—The Rhine as a National Myth in Early 19th Century German Literature

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Only a few rivers have captured the imagination of writers, composers, and artists to the extent that the Rhine has. Since the early nineteenth century the Rhine, its landscape and its people have been increasingly incorporated into German national mythology and it is no accident that nowadays in a re-unified Germany people once again fall back upon and revive the Rhine as a symbol of their unity. In 1992, for example, an exhibition at the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum in Ludwigshafen, must I add on the Rhine, entitled *Myth Rhine: A River—Image and Significance*, was organised as a critical re-evaluation of the cultural and political significance of the Rhine from the early nineteenth century to the present.[1]

This article focuses on the construction of the cultural space 'Rhine' as a German national myth in early nineteenth century Romantic literature. It has been stated that the myths of the Rhine were not myths of origin, but rather substitute myths of a neo-mythic ideology supporting the awakening German nationalist consciousness.[2] As Roland Barthes[3] points out, ideological concepts such as nationalism seek out, just as parasites do, possible representations by attaching themselves to already meaningful signs and converting them into second level signifiers for their own purposes. The Rhine and its extensive cultural history were restructured within the ideological field of German nationalism. The ideological mechanism of nationalism obliterates its own novelty. This is achieved by claiming that national values were dormant for centuries and therefore nationalists must re-awaken in the people their sense of unity. German nationalism in the early nineteenth century, in contrast to its French and British counterparts, represents somewhat of an anomaly. Whereas nationalist movements in the other two great West European powers operated within already established borders, Germany did not exist as a state with defined boundaries until 1871. Therefore, notions of 'Volk', culture and language were predominant among German nationalists. It was not until the wars of liberation against Napoleonic occupation (1813–1815) that the issue regarding a western border was raised. Therefore, Ernst Moritz Arndt, one of the most ardent and passionate advocates of early German nationalism, entitled his polemic essay of 1815, *The Rhine—Germany's River, but not Germany's Border*. He argues that rivers never constitute national borders and that the Rhine in particular validates this statement through its rich German cultural heritage on both banks of the river.

The 'discovery' of the Rhine valley as a uniquely German cultural space, however, took place several years earlier, namely around 1800. Although English Romantic travellers were among the first to appreciate the wild sublime landscape, it was German Romantics who applied their notion of 'Volk' and 'Volkspoesie' to the Rhine region. In

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particular two names come immediately to mind with respect to German Rhine Romanticism: Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano. The collaborative idea of compiling *Des Knaben Wunderhorn: Alte deutsche Lieder*, a collection of folk songs, was conceived in 1802 during a joint journey down the river.[4] Arnim and Brentano's compilation of the Lieder was inspired by a notion of 'Volk' and 'Volkspoesie' that dates back to Johann Gottfried Herder approximately 25 years earlier. Likewise, this was the case with their contemporaries, the Grimm brothers, the compilers of 'German' fairy tales (Volksmärchen). Both compilations were guided by an ideological premise, which attributed to 'Volk' a mythical quality extending beyond the mere existence of the people. In fact, it was believed that the common people had lost this bond to their own mythical origin and that it was the task of the poet to re-establish or rather renew this bond.

In particular, it is Clemens Brentano whose poetic involvement with the river was instrumental in the creation of one of the most well known and popular myths of the Rhine; the Loreley. Contrary to common belief, the Loreley myth is not of ancient origin, but rather can be traced back to Brentano's novel *Godwi*, published in two volumes in 1801/02. It was, of course, Heinrich Heine's poem being put to music by Friedrich Silcher that popularised the myth of the Loreley in Germany and beyond to such an extent that the Loreley legend was simply identified as *the* myth of Rhine Romanticism.

The Loreley legend is an excellent example of how the Romantic projection of 'Volkspoesie' into a mythical past created the ideological premise for nineteenth century German nationalism. Initially, the terms 'Volk' and 'Volkspoesie' signified in Romantic aesthetics a critical notion opposing the alienation and divisions found in modern society. 'Mythology' was at the centre of Romantic poetics serving as a means in overcoming the perceived shortcomings of modern society; its loss of a sense of community and connection to the (religious) transcendental. Mythology could reconcile modern science and religion, nature and spirit. Since organised religion, according to Romantic belief, had lost its integrative function, the task of reconciliation now shifted to the Romantic poet. Poetry was seen as an agency to unlock the unconscious spirit of nature and once again give it meaning. A difference, however, in the approach to mythology becomes apparent between the early Romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) and the second generation, Clemens Brentano ranking prominent among them. Friedrich Schlegel wrote in 1800: 'We have no mythology, but, I do add, we are close to getting one, or rather, it is time for us to work towards its creation.'[5] Clemens Brentano, in his novel *Godwi*, contradicts Schlegel's assessment: 'A new mythology is impossible, as impossible as an old one; because all mythology is eternal.'[6] Both approaches include major consequences in their respective poetic production. In the case of Brentano, his notion of mythology's eternal quality allows him to insert his own poetic writing into this presumed eternal context. Poetry, according to this approach, is remembrance of and re-connection with a mythical context that was only temporarily forgotten. The creation of a new mythology, as with Schlegel, acknowledges the break of modernity with the old mythical context as well as the impossible return back to it. Brentano's poetics allow him to claim that his own poetry participates in and reconnects to old mythology. Therefore, when Arnim and he modified and embellished[7] most of the folk songs included in their anthology *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, they not only thereby created the sentimental tone which became the hallmark of German folk songs, but they also put into poetic practice the notion of the (Romantic) poet as the guarantor of the continuation of mythology.

Already in his novel *Godwi*, Brentano incorporates different versions of ancient myths, sometimes as parody, and sometimes creating new myths. The sources Brentano resorted to are at present still a matter of speculation. Most likely it was an ancient echo myth combined with a reportedly actual curious echo heard by the Rhine rock, later known as the Loreley rock, to create the Loreley ballad in the novel *Godwi*.[8] Some 10 years after the publication of *Godwi*, Brentano's Loreley tale had already progressed to the status of a well-established local folk tale. When Heinrich Heine wrote his Loreley poem approximately 20 years later, the antiquity of the Loreley myth was fully in place in the German public mind. In the years to come, it became the most well known of all Rhine myths, thus greatly contributing to the shaping of the collective national consciousness through wide acceptance among the German middle class as a genuine German folktale. All traces of the myth's authorship had disappeared by the time Heine published his adaptation of the tale. During the 20-year period between 1802 and 1823 the character of the Loreley herself also changed from Brentano's tragic heroine who dies the death of love, to the siren who causes the death of fishermen on the river in Heine's poem. Brentano's original ballad portrays Loreley as 'a sorceress' who is so beautiful that men cannot help but fall helplessly in love with her, except, of course, the one who she herself loves. She approaches a bishop to seek advice. The bishop, himself stricken by her beauty, tells her to become a nun. On her way to the convent, accompanied by three knights, she wishes to take one last look at her beloved's castle from atop the Loreley rock. She climbs the rock followed by the three knights. Upon reaching the summit, she mistakenly identifies, in a state of delusion, a fisherman in his boat as her lost lover. Thereupon she plunges into the river from atop the rock to her death. The knights, neither able to reach the top of the rock, nor to climb back down, die a horrible death without the blessings of the church. From this time onward, the echoes of their voices crying out for Loreley could be heard. The echo is of course produced by fishermen and travellers sailing past the Loreley rock. In Brentano's poem Loreley is not a men devouring witch, but rather a woman consumed by her own passion for a lost lover.

It has been argued that in both Brentano's and Heine's poems the river Rhine is only of minor significance and that only later did the myth become closely interwoven with the river itself.[9] Such an assessment, however, ignores the cultural and historical context in which the Loreley myth was created and is deeply embedded. Brentano's ballad is one of many poems incorporated into his novel *Godwi* in which the Rhine and its surrounding landscape is constantly present throughout the narrative. *Godwi* stands out as one of the earliest examples of German Rhine Romanticism. Contrary to British Romantic interest in the Rhine which was primarily expressed through images and poems of its landscape, German Rhine Romanticism was from its inception tied to the folklore of the region. In other words, the German Romantics' interest in the Rhine was motivated by language through which they constructed a cultural space that was in harmony with their notion of 'Volk'. Several years after the publication of *Godwi*, Brentano wrote *Rheinmärchen*, a series of fairy tales published after his death in 1842. In this work, the author once again adopted his own legend of Loreley, however, this time converting her into a water fairy who no longer resides atop the rock, but rather whose abode is a castle underneath the waves of the river.

Heinrich Heine's adaptation of the Loreley legend stresses the siren motif that ultimately became associated with the Loreley in the popular imagination. The poem dates back to 1823 and, in Heine's typical style, already reflects the author's ironic distance to the Romantics to whom, on the other hand, he is so greatly indebted.

Indirectly, the poem also reflects the political disappointment associated with the outcome of the War of Liberation. How is this distance created in Heine's poem? The actual Loreley legend is framed by the narrator's comments in the first person singular: 'I don't know the reason why' and 'I fancy'. Whereas the Romantics tried to erase their authorship from their own folk songs, Heine reinserts modern subjectivity into the 'folktale' thus creating tension within the poem.[10]

The compiled folk songs of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* are not true folk songs according to the standards established by Herder and later adopted by the Romantics, however, they gained their status as such after publication and especially after numbers of them were put to music. Likewise, the Loreley myth was adopted by the German public only after it went through the above prescribed stages of 'mythification'. While the assumed oral tradition of the compiled folk songs in itself is a projection of Romanticism and therefore the notion of 'Volk' put forth by the Romantics was a product of fantasy, it was nevertheless, or precisely because of it, instrumental in instilling and generating a sense of 'imagined community' in nineteenth century German society. The geographical space of the Rhine valley with its cultural and political significance since Roman times was now being coded as genuinely German. By the time Ernst Moritz Arndt, a journalist and poet and one of the most ardent supporters of the nationalist movement was drumming up ideological support for the war of liberation in 1815 with his polemic essay *The Rhine—Germany's river, but not Germany's border*, Romantic poets had already laid the necessary groundwork in making such an imagined community possible.

Already in 1813, upon the completion of the manuscript of his first novel *Ahnung und Gegenwart* (*Foreboding and Present Time*), Joseph von Eichendorff associated the Rhine with the upcoming struggle for liberation and unification.[11] The hero of the novel, young Count Friedrich and his friend, Count Leontin travel to the Rhine valley when in view of the river they immediately decide to immerse themselves in its waters. The narrator leaves no doubt that this bathing is of mythical significance: 'It was the consecration of strength for the long struggles awaiting them.'[12] The river in this particular scene of the novel had already acquired the mythical status of a national fountain of youth and strength. One of Eichendorff's intentions in this novel was to gain support for the national struggle among the German nobility. When the two young counts immerse themselves in the waters of the Rhine, the narrator presupposes in the reader the cultural knowledge from which this symbolic act derives its meaning. In other words, Eichendorff draws on an already well established literary and cultural tradition of the Rhine as a symbol of German nationalism at the time he sought support among his fellow noblemen for the national cause.

The Rhine chapter of *Foreboding and Present Time* achieves the ideological goal of incorporating the Rhine into German national mythology. Not only does the water of the river possess the quality of purification and consecration for the two protagonists Friedrich and Leontin in this particular chapter, but it also contains Eichendorff's version of the Loreley myth being introduced as a well-known old fairy tale of the Rhine. Leontin sings the first stanza, which to his surprise is answered by one of the locals with the second stanza.[13] The purpose of this antiphony is obvious; it establishes a bond between the elite, to which the poet belongs, and the people. Both possess knowledge of the same national mythology. For Leontin, as a representative of the elite, this was not self-evident, because he is startled when he hears the local man answering with the second stanza of the song. Therefore, the scene serves the ideological purpose of making the elite aware of the national bond already existing between them and the people.

There is an ironic twist to this scene. The novel can be read as a roman à clef in which case Leontin most likely stands for Brentano himself and Eichendorff is not only alluding to him as the author of the Loreley myth, but also crowns him the poet of the people.

The wars of 1813–1815 were crucial in establishing initial mass support for a united German fatherland. The question 'What is German?' was answered contrary to everything that France stood for. Unfortunately, many of the progressive political views and ideas which were introduced by the French, and which German intellectuals initially welcomed, were abandoned in the struggle against French occupation. The Rhine, once again being the bone of contention between the two neighbours, took on the symbolic meaning of a national river. The role German Romanticism played in the early phases of this process cannot be overestimated. German Romanticism represents, according to Hobsbawm's classification, the first and second of a three stage developmental process of the national consciousness. These are characterised as: phase one, 'purely cultural, literary and folkloric' and phase two, a phase in which 'we find a body of pioneers and militants of the 'national idea' and the beginnings of national campaigning for this idea.' In the third phase 'nationalist programmes acquire mass support, or at least some of the support that nationalists always claim they represent.'[14] As demonstrated above, the folkloric aspect of phase one already to a large extent can be viewed as the construct of Romantic notions of 'Volk' that in retrospect, once phase three is reached, acquire the status of folklore.

Goethe was the one who recognised clearly the ideological function of the folk song (Volkslieder) anthologies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In his review of Arnim and Brentano's collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* he notes: 'These types of poems we came to call folk songs (Volkslieder) for some years now, although they are neither written by the people nor for the people, but rather because they reveal something so burly and able (etwas Stämmiges, Tüchtiges) that the core and stem of the nation (der kern- und stammhafte Teil) grasps for things of that nature, keeps them, makes them its possession and occasionally passes them on—such poems are true poetry in the strictest sense; they have incredible appeal, even for us who have a higher level of education (Bildung), just as sight and reminiscence of youth has for the aged.'[15]

The songs were not written by or for the people, but rather by well-educated poets for an educated middle-class readership. Here Goethe anticipates Hobsbawm's analysis of the 'nationalisation' of the European middle classes and analyses precisely the function literature has in this process. 'Volk' as imagined by these poets is a projection of the middle classes to legitimise their struggle for a nation state.

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Notes

1. Richard W. Gassen and Bernhard Holeczek (eds), *Mythos Rhein: Ein Fluß—Bild und Bedeutung* (Ludwigshafen am Rhein: 1992).
2. Richard W. Gassen, 'Der Rhein—ein Mythos', in Gassen and Holeczek, p. 14.
3. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Holl & Wang, 1987), pp. 114–117.
4. *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, collected by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, critical edition in three volumes, edited with a commentary by Heinz Rölleke (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1987). This was first published by Mohr & Zimmer in Heidelberg and Frankfurt in 1806.
5. *Athenäum*, III/1, April 1800, pp. 95–97.

6. Clemens Brentano, 'Godwi oder das steinerne Bild der Mutter: Ein verwilderter Roman von Maria', in Idem, *Werke*, vol. 2 (Munich: Hanser, 1963), p. 308.
7. For a more detailed discussion of these modifications see Gert Ueding, *Klassik und Romantik: Deutsche Literatur im Zeitalter der Französischen Revolution 1789–1815* (Munich: Hanser, 1987), pp. 748–759.
8. Werner Bellman, 'Brentano's Lore Lay-Ballade und der antike Echo-Mythos', in Detlev Lüder (ed), *Clemens Brentano: Beiträge des Kolloquiums im Freien Deutschen Hochstift 1978* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1980), pp. 1–9.
9. Ulrike Fuß, 'Die Loreley: Die Geschichte einer legendären Frau', in Gassen and Holeczek (eds), p. 268.
10. Gerhard Höhn, *Heine Handbuch: Zeit, Person, Werk* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1987), pp. 57–61.
11. Joseph von Eichendorff, in Gerhard Hoffmeister (ed), *Ahnung und Gegenwart: Ein Roman* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984).
12. Ibid., p. 192.
13. Ibid., p. 197.
14. Eric Hobsbawn, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 12.
15. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Des Knaben Wunderhorn', in Erich Trunz (ed), *Goethes Werke*, vol. 12 (Munich: C H Beck, 1982), p. 282.