

Michael Rodegang Drescher

# POETS OF PROTEST

Mythological Resignification  
in American Antebellum and  
German Vormärz Literature



**[transcript]** American **c**ulture **s**tudies

**From:**

*Michael Rodegang Drescher*

**Poets of Protest**

**Mythological Resignification in American Antebellum  
and German Vormärz Literature**

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Michael Drescher analyzes national mythologies in American and German literature. He focuses on processes of mythological resignification, a literary phenomenon carrying significant implications for questions of identity, democracy, and nationalism in Europe and America. Precise narratological analyses are paired with detailed, transnational readings of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Gutzkow's *Wally, die Zweiflerin*, Brown's *Clotel*, and Heine's *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen*. The study marries literature, mythology, and politics and contributes to the study of American and German literature at large.

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# 1. Introduction

## The Nature of Myth and Mythological Resignification

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Every story gives an Achilles' heel to sheer power.

BLUMENBERG/WORK ON MYTH

In 1833, Rufus Choate called upon the inhabitants of Salem, Massachusetts. Choate, a lawyer and politician, was touring the country so as to inspire in his fellow citizens a sense of urgency. Like many of his contemporaries, he felt that the nation was slipping. He was aware of the fact that national unity was slowly giving way to the pressures and divisions of the Antebellum period. In this age of societal unrest, political controversy, and cultural insecurity, he urged his audiences to stand against the problems that threatened the union. Interestingly, he did not elaborate on political or legal factors but invoked a cultural force: the power of literature.

Choate claimed that the “significant American romance” had not yet been written and lamented the fact that the U.S. lacked a literary work which would speak directly to the “affections and imagination of the whole people” (in Boudreau 338). A romance, he argued, would have the power to unify the nation. Such a romance would have to be historical: It would have to look to the past, thereby “taking the people closer to the source of their common experiences.” This, Choate hoped, would help “to heal the wounds caused by diversity” and “recreate one people” (Boudreau 339). In sum, he called for a national literature: Literary works that would unify the nation by giving the people a sense of their origins, their common values, and their shared destiny. He was, in fact, calling for myth. Mythological literature was to excavate, reflect, and *create* national identity. In this context, he drew an interesting comparison: Choate regarded the national myths of the Greeks as “great Waverley Novels” (11). The time had come, he claimed, for the American “Iliad and Odyssey” (12).

As topic of such a national myth, Choate envisioned a specific literary material: the Puritan character.<sup>1</sup> The novelist should return to this “heroic age” and highlight Puritanism’s “*human influences*” (Choate 2, 22). These secular notions might be relied upon to guide the nation through the crisis (Boudreau 339). Thus, by remembering the Puritan fathers, modern, more secular Americans would be reminded of their origin, their mission, and their common patriotic duty. Such a novel’s focus was to lie on the “infant people” of the United States (Choate 22, 17). The “founders of the race”, however, were to stand side by side with the Revolutionary fathers, those who “walked hand in hand together through the valley of Death in the War of Independence” (24, 37). An American romance, Choate hoped, would effect the changes in the national mindset to “perpetuate the Union itself.” It would constitute an “ancestral recollection,” a “fountain for the healing of the nations” that could render the union indivisible: “Reminded of our fathers, we should remember that we are all brethren” (36f).

In the following decades, many an author would answer Choate’s call, but they would not merely reflect a historical past. In their writing, novelists included the demands of the future and thus rewrote the present. This was, however, not restricted to America. A similar development occurred on the other side of the Atlantic.

Also in 1833, a young writer and scholar returned to his alma mater in Kiel to lecture on aesthetics. Indeed, it would be his first and last engagement as lecturer. But Ludolf Wienbarg would continue to work as a publisher, writer, and journalist, although his efforts increasingly attracted statist persecution. The famous Bundes-tag prohibition of 1835 against the Young Germans would seriously dampen his creative endeavors. Nevertheless, the literary movement which the 1835 prohibition sought to crush takes its name from Wienbarg’s lectures at the University of Kiel. *Aesthetische Feldzüge* [Aesthetic Crusades], published 1834 in Hamburg, is devoted to the vision of a united, free, and democratic Germany. On the title page, he dedicates the book to “the young Germany”<sup>2</sup> (Wienbarg i). The loosely connected literary group, which included Heine and Gutzkow, would henceforth be referred to as *Junges Deutschland* [Young Germany].

Like Choate, Wienbarg invokes the power of literature to transform the nation. In his dedication, he calls upon all German authors to make a choice: to either write for the old or for the new Germany. He goes on to programmatically define what

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1 It should be noted that Choate elaborates on a second topic for the writing of a national romance, namely the fate of Native Americans during King Philip’s war. Aware that modern Americans built “houses upon their graves,” he calls to “preserve their history” (25). Thus, Choate offers a second, colonial subject for the writing of a national American novel.

2 [Dem jungen Deutschland gewidmet].

that choice must entail. Calling oneself liberal, for instance, is insufficient, for many who write for the nobility or for academia designate themselves as liberals (Wienbarg v). So as to write for a young and modern Germany, three steps are necessary. First, one must occupy a clear anti-feudal position and abjure the “old German nobility.”<sup>3</sup> Second, one needs to reject an “overcome scholarliness”<sup>4</sup> and ban it to the “grave”<sup>5</sup> where it belongs. Third, one has to oppose all forms of “old German philistinism.” Wienbarg’s literary program rests on the elaboration of a historically informed dialectic: the old, bigoted, and decadent Germany vs. the young, free, and contemporary Germany. Like Choate, Wienbarg calls for literary endeavors so as to influence the state of the nation. He envisions a “better and more beautiful life for the people”<sup>6</sup> as a result (vi).

This call to literary arms seems necessary to Wienbarg, because the academic institutions, once the cultural “levers of change,”<sup>7</sup> have grown decadent and teach slavery instead of freedom (vi, viii). Literature, on the other hand, is deemed to possess the power to raise its voice for the establishment of something new and thus hail a cultural spring which will end the long inertia of German politics (x). Wienbarg does not prescribe a specific topic like Choate, nor does he advise looking to the past. Indeed, he rather urges his audience to look forward. But he insists on the marriage between literature and politics so as to influence history and establish a better future for the German nation.

The call for political literature is what unites Wienbarg and Choate’s speeches. Both invest in literature as a vehicle for political change. At the same time, Choate explicitly calls for an archaic strategy, i.e. for the use of the past to make sense of the present. Wienbarg, in contrast, rejects all past institutions and calls for a focus on the now. Whether they excavate or reject historical narratives, Wienbarg and Choate make narratives of the past a paramount factor in the consolidation of their respective nations. The literary and political work on those narratives, more precisely described as mythologies, will occupy the study at hand.

## Mythological Resignification

I am interested in how authors used mythologies for their own purposes. Traditional myths experienced a phase of conscious political rewriting in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and I wish to inquire as to the exact nature of that transformative semiological pro-

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3 [altdeutschem Adel].

4 [todte Gelehrsamkeit].

5 [Grabgewölbe].

6 [besseren und schönerem Volksleben].

7 [Hebel des Umschwungs].

cess. Indeed, I hold that some authors employed a specific strategy to effect the transformation of older narratives, a transformation which resulted in myths that would be applicable to their contemporary situation. They resignified myths so as to invest them with democratic qualities, thereby furthering the dissemination of their own political ideas in the process of national identity building. This study examines the literary strategy which guided their rewriting process.

This strategy is best described as *mythological resignification*. Barthes notes that myth is related to *form* rather than to content; it is “a mode of signification” defined not by the “object of its message, but by the way it utters this message” (109). I am interested in the exact manner in which these systems of signification are transformed in order to redefine the inherent message. For the signification *is* the myth, it is the only aspect that is “consumed in actual fact.” Here, Barthes relies on Saussure to parallel mythological signification and linguistic sign. The signification presents the “associative total” of myth’s meaning-making process, a semiological entity which “points out” and “notifies,” which makes “us understand something and imposes it on us” (113, 117). In this context, it is crucial to understand that myth, in order to function, distorts history: Its *form* is emptied of previous meaning (history, morality, geography, biography etc.) and then enriched again with a new *concept*. The concept is “at once historical and intentional,” it “reconstitutes a chain of causes and effect, motives and intentions” and thus implants new meaning and knowledge in the signification (117-120).

This distortion, however, is not “obliteration.” Meaning that has been distorted is “deprived of memory” but “not of existence.” Meaning can be recuperated (Barthes 122). There is always a “halo of virtualities” in the final signification of myth, a space “where other possible meanings are floating.” It is in these “remains” of meaning, I argue, that *resignification* comes into play (132). By returning to lost or distorted meaning (i.e. through historical critique), old meanings can be refuted and new meanings can be installed to inform a myth. If myth is indeed speech “stolen and restored,” then this act of semiological theft can be repeated (125). Thus, mythological resignification entails acts of *appropriation*, *transformation*, and *reinstallation* of meaning in the process of myth-making.

Relying on Barthes, I define mythological resignification as a politically informed method of writing characterized by the appropriation, transformation, and reinstallation of a mythology.<sup>8</sup> Mythological resignification uses a traditional civic

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8 A number of similar approaches need to be contextualized at this point. The first is *usable past*. Tuleja notes that usable past originates with Brook’s critique of commercial traditions in America (16) and shows how traditional practices can be revived and appropriated in order to suit contemporary concerns (1). Texts in this study use the past, but the semiological processes at play here are not covered by this terminology. Usable past is con-



myth, distills its core meaning (*mytheme*), and transforms or adds to that meaning so as to produce a variant myth. This variant is designed to be applicable to the contemporary situation and (like all civic myth) negotiates a national identity. Importantly, I deem mythological resignification to be a conscious political strategy to reinterpret the foundational values of a community; these acts of semiological transformation represent the pushing of a value-system by means of literature.<sup>9</sup>

Myths were paramount for the negotiations of nationality before the American Civil War and the German March Revolution. Some texts used mythological references for the sake of argument, imagery, or ornament (*referential treatment*). Others made use of myths in order to either confirm (*affirmative treatment*) or refute them (*critical treatment*). But there are some texts that transcend referentiality, af-

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cerned with invention rather than evolutionary transformation; the term does not entail the transformative element that resignification insists upon. The latter is not concerned with the excavation of past material to be used in the present but with presently existent material which is transformed. Usable past, for my purposes, is too broad a term. Further, Fludernik's idea of *narrativization* describes the cognitive-constructivist notion that readers "narrativize texts as they read." In other words, they transform any given discourse into a narrative. Thus, narrativity is "projected" onto or "recognized" in the text by the reader (109). Narrativization is useful for processes that construct a narrative from pictorial/performative representations of myth. But it does not apply in the case of resignification, which illustrates the conscious transformation of an already existent narrative into a variant. Lastly, a term to which mythological resignification is highly indebted is Blumenberg's *work on myth*. Work on myth explains how Western thought has relied on transforming myths so as to explain history and communities. Blumenberg claims that "the stock of myth that has come down to us is the product, not of a reverent handing down [...], but of an unsparing process of 'natural selection.'" Myths have been "optimized," especially by storytellers, in order to adequately explain the world (Work xx). Mythological resignification is work on myth: It attempts a refinement of Blumenberg's broader argument of evolutionary transformation. While Blumenberg concerns himself largely with the anthropological function and historical-evolutionary nature of myth, mythological resignification seeks to grasp the exact narratological and semiological processes of the rewriting process.

- 9 Blumenberg notes that a myth may be historically given but must not present an a priori nucleus from which variants evolve. It rather presents one variant (usually the most successful variant) that has survived the test of time and societal appreciation. Thus, mythological resignification is governed by a "Darwinism of verbosity." Just as ancient myths are the result of an evolutionary process, modern myths are the result of a process of textual and oral evolution (Work 176).

firmation, and/or critique. This latter group used myth to produce new civic mythologies which were attuned to modern democratic demands.

So as to illuminate this issue, I chose four literary works for my analysis: Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1851), William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853), Karl Gutzkow’s *Wally, die Zweiflerin* (1835) and Heinrich Heine’s *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen* (1844). Their analysis has produced the chart below. Indeed, the following is but a theoretization of the strategies given in the texts and particular deviations will be discussed later. But in its essence, mythological resignification adheres to the following:

I. Work on Basic Myth:	a. Preparation
	b. Exposition
	c. Denaturalization
II. Work on Variant Myth	a. Preparation
	b. Mythemic Elaboration
	c. Naturalization

Mythological resignification begins with the basic myth (I). Here, the resignification is achieved in three steps: the preparation of the basic myth (Ia), its exposition (Ib), and its denaturalization (Ic).

In the *preparation* phase, authors recur to mythological references or design images that foreshadow the basic myth. This prepares the reader for the second step, the *exposition* of the basic myth, where the actual mythological narrative is presented. As the basic myth is given, a process of *denaturalization* begins: Historical critique is employed to reveal the mythology as mythology. Thus, the basic myth’s capacity to present itself as historical is rendered mute, and the myth is revealed as either the present’s nostalgic (mis)interpretation of the past or as the expression of a past overcome by the present. The main function of denaturalization is the revelation of the basic myth’s incompatibility with contemporary reality and/or the revelation of the present’s deviation from traditional values. Indeed, a denaturalized basic myth is no longer able to claim influence on society and a new myth needs to be constructed to fill that void. This denaturalization focuses on the basic myth’s mytheme, i.e. its core meaning, which is exposed in the process.

As the basic myth is denaturalized, the variant myth is constructed (II). This construction process can also entail a preparation phase (Ia), followed by a mythemic elaboration (IIb), and a subsequent naturalization of the variant (IIc).

The *preparation* of the variant takes place at different points, sometimes after the work on the basic myth, sometimes parallel to it. In a second step, new material and meaning are infused in the making of the myth. As mentioned, the basic myth's denaturalization distills its core meaning, its mytheme. This mytheme is now unfolded, transformed, or expanded, a process best described as *mythemetic elaboration*. Mythemic elaboration offers the possibility to construct a variant and results in the *naturalization* of the same. The variant is developed into a myth proper, once more blurring the lines between fiction and fact.

The process of mythological resignification as given here cannot be more than a theoretical and simplified summary of the processes evident in the texts. But the study of myth demands a precise scientific terminology. So, in order to secure a terminological clarity throughout, I will refer to the specific stages of mythological resignification using the given terms and abbreviations (e.g. exposition of basic myth [Ib], naturalization of variant myth [IIc]).

Myth is a highly complex field. At the same time, it is perhaps one of the most important and underestimated cultural forces in our societies – despite (and because of) the alleged victory of *logos* over *mythos*. Indeed, Antebellum and Vormärz authors used archaic strategies and recurred to witches, heroes, gods, and kings to further democracy. However, they rewrote myths not so much to describe the past but to affect the present. In order to do so, they constructed new, civic mythologies which are also inhabited by witches, heroes, gods, and kings but of a different, modern kind.

## Myth and National Identity

So as to discuss the use of mythology to further democratization and to produce a national identity in the United States and Germany, I generally define *myth* as a narrative system of meaning which unites a chain of interlocked concepts and produces a collective and cultural identity (Barthes in O'Brien 62).<sup>10</sup> In defining national identity, I rely on Anderson and hold that a *nation* is an “imagined political community,” a “limited” and “sovereign” communal construct. It imagines a societal “communion” and a “character” which sets it apart from other nations (6f). But

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10 Two aspects need to be highlighted here. First, myth is a narrative system of meaning; it is permeable and subject to transformation. Second, myth produces identity, and the resignification of myth as discussed in this study aims at the construction of an American and German national identity.

while the “dawn of the nation” can be allocated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, negotiations of what it meant to be American or German continue into the 19<sup>th</sup> and beyond (11).

Indeed, for Germany, which regarded itself as a nation without a nation-state, negotiations of national identity were paramount. Wehler notes that in the early 1800s, German elites began to develop a nationalism based on the ideas of liberalism and unity (Dynastien 167). The idea of the nation was originally carried by a bourgeois reform movement, and intellectuals and writers tried to excavate German characteristics by investigating the origin of Germans as a people. This early idea of the nation was still influenced by humanist values of freedom and equality (Scheuer 13). However, the qualities of this “Emanzipationsideologie” [ideology of emancipation] would be transformed in the course of the century, continuing the establishment of a nationality which was of such crucial concern to Vormärz culture (Eke 24, 26).

National identity was also an issue in America. Boyer notes that the U.S. – albeit a consolidated nation-state at the time – was threatened by dissent and dissolution and likewise had to negotiate a cohesive identity. Like in Germany, intellectuals and writers discussed the characteristics of what it meant to be American. But immigration, calls for cultural independence, the conflict between federal and state levels of government, and the issue of slavery fractured the young nation. The resulting threat of disunion was answered by a developing nationalism which still needed to articulate itself both politically and culturally (537). Again, national identity was central to these negotiations.<sup>11</sup>

Both German and American approaches to national identity rely on Hegelian ideas. While the state is imagined as the institutionalized “organization” of a community, the nation becomes synonymous with the people (*Volk*). Nationality was held to exist in peoples that are aware of themselves and of their particular “nature” (Perperzak 513). As such, the nation presents a primarily “spiritual principle,” although being part of a people may also have natural (read ethnic) aspects. Nationality is believed to be a “natural phenomenon,” perhaps the most basic phenomenon of human existence (514). In this context, a people is invested with a spirit (*Geist*) which has a “typical way of life and work, including intellectual and ethical abilities and customs.” The nation, subsequently, presents the “incarnation of the universal spirit [*Weltgeist*], which differentiates itself in materially and psychically different configurations.” The spirit of an individual nation (*Volkgeist*), then, is the expres-

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11 Bercovitch has written on the relevance of the Puritan myth for national identity building, and my analysis of American texts is indebted to his research. His work on the Puritan myth is extensive. For more see Bercovitch: *The Office of the Scarlet Letter* (1991); *The Rites of Assent* (1993); *The Puritan Imagination* (1974); *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975); *The American Jeremiad* (1978).

sion of the *Weltgeist* in a historical moment and in a specific people. While the term nation derives from Latin *nasci* (to be born) and suggests a “natural genesis,” the principle that rules a people’s culture and history is “spiritual:” The *Volksgeist* constitutes “the spirit of a people, which makes itself known in the national self-consciousness” (516).

Nationalism and national identity are complex and controversial terms and almost impossible to define.<sup>12</sup> For this study, I shall use Anderson for the term nation and rely on his concept in defining *national identity* as a set of constructed notions and characteristics which describe origin and inherent qualities of a people. National identity allows for the definition of membership in the community and thereby enables belonging and rejection. It further defines general characteristics of the people that form the nation. National identity is dynamic and governed by a complex process of societal negotiations which attach meaning to its constructed categories.

Anderson notes that the idea of a nation produces categories infused with cultural meaning (12). I shall return to this issue, for authors diverge on their understanding of nation. Still, a general adherence to Anderson’s conceptualization should be born in mind throughout this study. The nation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century presents a *community*, and this community is believed to possess a *character*. Its members have specific characteristics, a common genesis, a *Volksgeist*, and importantly, a future destiny. How the texts position these identities in the flow of history, where they allocate their origin, and how they imagine their community’s future will occupy the analysis. What they all do, however, is employ an archaic strategy: They look back to the past so as to determine the origins of their communities and thus deduct aboriginal (read mythological) characteristics.

Mythologies often deal with the foundation of worlds, communities, and nations. But they also touch upon the individual, their nature and place in reality. In this context, American and German authors employed myth so as to employ literature politically. Their assumption of political control through myth is a crucial point for the texts in this study. The mythologies that will be analyzed in the following are found in texts of authors who seek to *rewrite* the most fundamental values of

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12 For more on the rise of nationalism in Germany, see Winkler: *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, Vol.1. (2001), especially chapters 1, 3, and 5; Michalski: *Der Gang des deutschen Denkens* (2010); Berger: *The Past as History* (2015); Poole: *Nation and Identity* (1999). For a history of American national identity, see Cananau: *Constituting Americanness* (2015); Hacker (ed.): *The Early Republic and the Rise of National Identity* (2014); Pollard: *The Literary Quest for an American National Character* (2009); Citrin: *American Identity and the Politics of Multiculturalism* (2014); Taylor: *Thinking America* (2010); Kermes: *Creating an American Identity* (2008).

their respective polities. They do so to open up the confinements of national identity and allow for a broader, more democratic approach to nationality, unity, and belonging. Rewriting mythology means the rewriting of the world itself, and these stories' ambition is nothing less.

I am interested in the method with which authors endeavored to influence politics through literature. This interest includes questions pertaining to the mythological material that is used in order to effect said influence. As I will use and compare American and German texts, I will also ask about methodological and material similarities and differences. Which myths are significant for American and German identity? How are they rewritten and why? Which images, metaphors, and plot structures are used to effect the rewriting? Which values are worked on and to what end? And finally: What do American and German narratives share and what makes them differ? These are the questions that inform this study.

The answers given will illuminate the concept of mythological resignification, elaborate on processes of national identity making, and comment on the nature of political literature. They will further inform on the transnational character of mythological resignification as a literary method. However, the concept of mythological resignification is indebted to a number of scholarly approaches. Thus, a few comments must be made regarding this study's methodological foundations.

## **Myth as Narrative Emancipation**

Myth is a mode of narration which may occur orally and is later preserved in written form. It may also present itself pictorially in the case of images, acoustically in music, or in rites, customs, and performances. In short, it is impossible to give a satisfactory definition of myth that achieves absolute accuracy: "No single theory of myth can cover all kinds of myth. The variety of traditional tales is matched by their variety of origins and significance; as a result, no monolithic theory can succeed in achieving universal applicability" (Morford and Lenardon 3). In order to develop the notion of myth, I will offer a more complex definition relying on mythologists Morford and Lenardon:

Myth is a many-faceted personal and cultural phenomenon created to provide a reality and a unity to what is transitory and fragmented in the world we experience—[it] provides us with absolutes in the place of ephemeral values and with a comforting perception of the world that is necessary to make insecurity and terror of existence bearable. (4)

This definition points to three crucial aspects. First, myth is both personal and cultural. It applies to the individual as well as to the community. Second, myth produces a social reality. It creates unity and cohesion in an otherwise fragmented

world. Third, myth creates and carries values and ideas which bear didactical and therapeutic functions. It dispenses insecurity and allows for agency while simultaneously alleviating the terror of existence.

This study will elaborate especially on *foundational myths* which explicate a nation's past and origin. In this context, myth satisfies the societal yearning for "fundamental orientation." Indeed, this desire was at its most intense in ages of cultural insecurity like the Antebellum and the Vormärz. Mythologies appease this desire by relating "events surrounding the beginnings and origins of things" and thus construct a fixed point of societal reference (Morford and Lenardon 5).

*Civic myth* is another term for this type of myth and goes back to Roger Smith. Civic myths describe "'compelling stories' that explain 'why persons form a people, usually indicating how a political community originated, who is eligible for membership, who is not and why, and what the community's values and aims are'" (in Thomas 184). I shall use *civic* and *foundational* myth as synonyms, as they both describe narratives that focus on national genesis and transport social values. Here are stories that derive the explication of the present (and the future) from an imagined aboriginal state of nature. Blumenberg notes that such a *status naturalis* is always prevalent in mythology. Stories of beginnings are found in the Hebrew bible, the Norse Edda, and in Greek and Roman myths. Foundational myths, indeed, are among the most common stories in the mythological repertoire (Arbeit 53).

I am highly indebted to Hans Blumenberg and his elaboration on the nature and function of myth. In his study *Arbeit am Mythos* [*Work on Myth*] (1979), Blumenberg explains how and why myth was used in imagining societal beginnings. He notes that myth exists to fulfill a very specific function: human empowerment and the prevention of anxiety (Work 15). Mythological empowerment opposes "archaic anxiety," a feeling caused by the overwhelming "absolutism of reality." This emotion is not appeased or dissolved by myth but rather "avoided." Anxiety is prevented by giving form and materiality to those conditions of life which are formless and immaterial (9).

Blumenberg holds that this obviation of anxiety is of Adamic character; it presents an act of name-giving and the subsequent assumption of control (Arbeit 10). It is rooted in humanity's comprehension that objective reality lies outside their dominion: "What [reality's absolutism] means is that man came close to not having control of the conditions of his existence and, what is more important, believed that he simply lacked control of them" (Work 4f). The *overcoming* of reality's absolutism is one of the central functions of myth (Arbeit 10). Primordial "*Angst*" [anxiety] is rationalized into "*Furcht*" [fear]. Here is a rationalization based on the "supposition of familiarity," the explanation for the inexplicable, and the nominalization of the unnamable (Work 5f). The method to achieve this transformation is not just nominalization but rather its expanded form: the "*Kunstgriff*" [trick of art] of *fictionality* (Arbeit 10).

What has become identifiable by means of a name is raised out of its unfamiliarity by means of metaphor and is made accessible, in terms of its significance, by telling stories. Panic and paralysis [...] are dissolved by the appearance of calculable magnitudes to deal with and regulated ways of dealing with them. (Work 6)

For Blumenberg, myth becomes “Lebenskunst” [life’s art], a capacity that functions towards the possession of the world and a wresting of control from the powers that be (Arbeit 13). Art – in this case fiction – becomes the weapon that wrests power from reality and transfers it into human hands: “To have a world is always the result of an art” (Work 7).

This form of mythological empowerment always begins in an aboriginal state of nature: The first step from absolute human submission to a free (but adverse) reality on Earth occurs in this *Naturzustand*. Adversity aside, this newly created reality is *man’s domain*, a sphere in which humanity is empowered to act out freedom. These states of nature tend to be free of time and space but are not restricted to the unknowable past. Modernity, for instance, looks to the medieval ages and finds its own “Dark Age” from which a supposedly more powerful (because enlightened) human race emerges (Arbeit 16). Similarly, Vormärz and Antebellum negotiations of origins need not look to a timeless past but find their national geneses in historical time.

Every new beginning, be it primordial or historical, offers material for myth. This is especially true if those who write these myths seek to overcome absolute powers that need to be checked by a soon-to-be empowered humanity; this is the case in ages when humanity seeks, as Heine puts it, “the re-installment of man in his divine privileges” (in Work 13). Blumenberg claims that if a community is faced with absolute powers, the writing of myth presents an attempt at overcoming. This is true for the Genesis or the Prometheus myth. But it also holds for the beginnings of nations: Every text in this study entails a proactive democratic dissent, a refusal to bow to the respective powers that be – may they be monarchy or slavery – so as to wrest power from those who hold it and transfer it to those who seek it.

Blumenberg states that, when facing gods, it is helpful to know their weaknesses. Indeed, these weaknesses, the floors in the divine armor, are *written*. When Paris faced Achilles during the sack of Troy, he aimed for his heel, the only spot where the demi-god was vulnerable. I hold that mythological resignification does the same. By rewriting stories, it rewrites the powers themselves: “every story gives an Achilles’ heel to sheer power” (Work 16). This is what the authors in the following chapters endeavored to do. This is what mythological resignification seeks to accomplish: the writing of Achillean heels.



## Work on Myth and Basic Mythologies

The mythological explication of reality to dispense powerlessness points towards a crucial yet fallible distinction: *mythos* vs. *logos*. Blumenberg notes that in contrast to Enlightenment views, which derogate myth as the stuff of irrationality, myth is an intricate part of the human drive for knowledge (Arbeit 37). Myth, according to its critics, only found the objects for which philosophy offered the adequate (i.e. rational) method of explanation. However, myth is not a “precursor” to science or philosophy but a dynamic part of their processes: “The boundary lines between myth and logos is imaginary and does not obviate the need to inquire about the logos of myth in the process of working free of the absolutism of reality. Myth itself is a piece of high-carat ‘work of logos’” (Work 12).

Myth and logos are not opposites but rather interwoven approaches to reality. Blumenberg reminds us that myth is not primarily interested in explanation but in agency: It centers on the connecting to, positioning in, and influencing of reality. It goes beyond the epistemological character of logos although it partakes in the human need to explain (Arbeit 19). Myth, therefore, produces an “anthropomorphic relaxation” in the face of material power. It soothes the bitter “seriousness of life” and, by means of its empowerment, feels for the frontiers of human possibility (Work 23). It pushes the limits of what may seem possible; a crucial ability for human progress, and of course, political literature.

If myth pushes the preconceived borders of the possible, how does the rewriting of myths work to effect political change? For the term *mytheme*, I rely on Lévi-Strauss’ elaborations in *The Structural Study of Myth* (1955). Mythological resignification is concerned with this structural element which presents myth’s “gross constituent units,” i.e. the central topoi or motifs of a mythology (Lévi-Strauss 431). In this context, Blumenberg gives numerous examples of reworked mythologies (Arbeit 89, 129, 166, 438). The writing of variants seeks to give myth a new form while staying true to its inherent mythemes. Variants adhere to mythemes, they present a variation of meaning and interpretation. They may parodize or negate them, but they nevertheless keep faith with the very nucleus of representation (Arbeit 40, 165). The latter claim, we shall see in the following analysis, is not without its issues. Indeed, a mytheme can and sometimes must be transformed (but not rejected) to successfully achieve a transformation in meaning.

Further, Blumenberg differentiates between *Grundmythos* and *Variationsmythos*. The “*basic myth*”<sup>13</sup> is a full blown narrative (e.g. the Prometheus myth) encap-

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13 In translating *Grundmythos* and *Variationsmythos* as basic and variant myth, I dissent from Wallace’s translation (fundamental myth and art myths) (Work 174). Blumenberg

culating an inherent mytheme (e.g. *Fire-is-Culture*). The “variant myth,” in contrast, presents the transformation of the basic myth (Work 192). Blumenberg holds that variants are myths of the given time, variations of the basic myth’s timelessness poured into the here and now of history, and a direct result of the ongoing work on myth (Arbeit 192).<sup>14</sup> Be that as it may, I will not endeavor a genealogy of myth in this study but focus on the *use* of specific existent myths, on the process of rewriting and adapting myths for political purposes within Antebellum and Vormärz cultures.<sup>15</sup>

Blumenberg is correct when he states that myths, regardless of age, are continuously dynamic; the process of working on them is ever ongoing. Myths seem to concern the past, while they in fact concern the present:

The [basic myth] occupies, if one may put it this way, a special position. It is located precisely on the axis of symmetry between where we come from and where we are going, between what comes to be and what ought to be, between fall and ascent. (Work 188)

This fixation on the present may comfort our ignorance regarding the exact genesis of myth. Blumenberg notes that theories about the source of myth are redundant, because we do not and cannot know them: “Is that bad? No, since we don’t know anything about the ‘origins’ in other cases either” (45).

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understands *Kunstmythos* and *Variationsmythos* as synonyms; I have chosen *Variationsmythos* as the term is better suited for this analysis.

- 14 Blumenberg complicates this clear cut distinction because it suggests a normative hierarchy or genealogical chronology of myth. The notion of basic myth, he states, is very often confounded with what may be called an original myth. Yet the basic myth, no matter how ancient, should not be regarded as the beginning of myth (Arbeit 192). The conception of a basic myth as original is an illusion, a kind of imagined mythological *status naturalis*. The basic myth is rather the *visible form* of mythology: It “is not what was pre-given, but rather what remains visible in the end, what was able to satisfy the receptions and expectations” (Work 74). Therefore, basic and variant myths do not exist in a clear cut hierarchy or chronology; they rather exist next to each other.
- 15 Again, one needs to be aware of the fallacy of assuming a clear cut genealogy of myth. The ancient visible forms of myths are not the sires of the newer visible forms; they are *all* variants of stories that at one time or another became visible in written form. They are interconnected and related yet present but *one* moment in the evolution of myth. This certainly is frustrating; but the prerequisite of scientifically investigating mythologies is to allow for a certain degree of chaos. It lies in the very nature of myth to resist institutionalization, to be pluralistic, and partially ineffable (Arbeit 203).

## Variant Mythologies

The partial ineffability of myth demands an even more precise scientific treatment of the matter. In order to bring order to the chaotic realm of myth, the following table may be helpful.

Mythology:	Narrative system of meaning
Mytheme:	Inherent core motif or topos of a myth
Basic Myth:	Textual myth acting as referent
Variant Myth:	Textual myth resulting from resignifying a basic myth
Civic Myth:	Textual myth transporting societal origin, values, and aims

The development of variant myths is constituted by the elaboration on a mytheme: It is never “pure imagination that is at work, but rather the elaboration of fundamental patterns” that constructs the variant (Work 176). By means of this elaboration, the variants are successful in presenting that which is already inherent in the basic myth itself. This process distills and excavates mythemes by working on them.

Blumenberg exemplifies this by recurring to Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*. He describes this narrative as a variant of myths that imagine human beings emerging from the earth. There are numerous examples for this basic myth: In Genesis, the creator forms Adam from the “dust of the ground” (KJV Genesis 2:7); Greek gods fashion mankind from the metals found in the depths of the planet (Hamilton 85); Zeus forms woman out of earth (Hesiod 121). Plato’s variant is able to distill these stories’ mytheme. *Leaving-the-Cave* is inherent to all these mythologies: the emergence from darkness to light (Arbeit 84).

Indeed, mythological elements are formable and encourage transformation. Myth – an ever dynamic product – eludes the rigid categorizations of chronology. As mentioned above, one cannot regard myth in a clear cut line of cause and effect but needs to be aware that the processes of transformation present the constituting elements of the mythological condition itself. We never see a last, complete, and perfect myth: All we see is myth at work. And while I follow Blumenberg’s concept of work on myth, I need to rely on another approach for the details of the actual reworking process. How is resignification effected in narratological, aesthetic, and imaginary terms? So as to elucidate the exact mechanizations of mythological resignification, I must return to Roland Barthes.

## Mythological Naturalization

Barthes approaches mythology differently from Blumenberg. His study *Mythology* (1957) centers on the linguistic explication of modern myths, encompassing wrestling, haute cuisine, and striptease. Barthes finds myth in everyday life, a visible and yet invisible (because *naturalized*) cultural force. He focuses on the linguistics and aesthetics of myth, i.e. on the semiotic construction and the pictorial representation of myths as value-transmitting narratives.

His approach, like Blumenberg's, is of great importance to the present study, as it is the use of imagery, metaphor, and plot that will guide and inform the textual analysis. Barthes' notions allow for insights into the machinations of myths, especially how they function as text and image and how they generate reader impact. While Blumenberg provides the cultural nature and function of myth, I rely on Barthes to elaborate on the more intricate processes that govern the resignifying practice. Also, his notions are telling in answering one of the fundamental questions of this study: Can literature change societal values?

Mythology in a Barthesian sense presents a linguistic-narrative system of interlocked concepts, a "system of communication" "made of material which has already been worked on" (109f). For myth to function it must already exist in the cultural mind: It presupposes a "signifying consciousness." In this manner, myth, whether represented in a text, a film, or in the images of an advertisement, can function "at one stroke" (110).

If we, for instance, consider a painting of mythological significance such as Raphael's *The Sistine Madonna* (1512), a professional or academic understanding of the history of art or of the painting's inherent theology is not necessary to know what it represents. The signifying consciousness that stores the cultural materials of myth quickly decodes the image. Simultaneously, an observer who is out of touch with Western and Christian culture will not be able to access its meaning.

Raphael's masterpiece in mind, we may recur to Hugues Merle's painting entitled *The Scarlet Letter* (1861) and thus illustrate a further point: Myth is "speech stolen and restored" (Barthes 125). The imagery of the Virgin mythology presented in its basic form in Raphael's work is used for the depiction of a variant in Merle's. Here is a representation of an adulteress (Hester Prynne) cradling her illegitimate daughter in her arms – a posture mirroring the infant Christ cradled by his virgin mother Mary. Indeed, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is in itself a rewriting of myth, and I will revisit the novel in Chapter 2. For now, let it suffice to say that the image of the variant functions mythologically due to the fact that the basic myth is resignified in the same yet remains recognizable. A clear referential relationship can thereby be established by the viewer. Herein lies the potential for the transformation and reinterpretation of the basic myth: Myth is "speech stolen and restored. Only

speech which is restored is no longer quite that which was stolen: when it was brought back, it was not put back exactly in its place” (ibid.).

The change that occurs in the process of resignifying mythology allows for the transmission of previously unconsidered material. Thus, resignifying myth means newly interpreting on the grounds of core meanings: The variant needs to stand in an organic relationship to the basic myth’s mytheme, even if it transforms or adds to it. This is what occurs in this comparison: The mytheme of the Virgin myth (*Birth-out-of-Purity*) is not violated but cited and restored in a way that a new, albeit darker meaning is achieved. Here is an opportunity for the reevaluation, reinterpretation, and reinstallation of meaning (and values) in the process of resignification. When considering mythologies which define societal values and norms, working on such myths offers the potential for societal change. Democratic dissent, therefore, finds an ally in mythology. Myth was (and is) used as political vehicle.

However, myth transcends referentiality. It transforms “history” into “nature.” The imagined is presented and received as if it were *real*: As if it were history, not fiction. Barthes explains that this, the process of *naturalization*, is one the most crucial principles of myth. Mythology tends to be either too obscure or too obvious to allow for ambiguity (129). The reader sees it “not as a semiological system, but as an inductive one.” But semiological systems (i.e. signifying systems) are *value* systems, and the reader “takes [their] signification for a system of facts” (131).

Myth has power to transport, negotiate, and reform societal values, but it does not automatically encourage *reflection*. Literature can alleviate this by creating ambiguity or following a rational argumentation. But myth’s force of impact can be dangerous, especially in the realm of imagery, where impact and consumption are by nature more inductive than in reading. Further, myth can create a degree of ideological clarity which can be disastrous if applied to a complex social reality. The same characteristics that make myth a ready ally for democratic dissent also offer their services to every other kind of ideologically charged *politicum*. This study will focus on the democratic side of things. One should, however, be aware of the fact that the results of mythological resignification depend on the hand that wields the pen. Fortunately, it is not enough to rewrite a myth to induce societal change. The question remains how dissent through myth functions in the realm of society, and in which way literature can constitute politics.

## Myth as Political Dissent

Political literature and society stand in a specific relationship. The fields of art and society are not separate but find themselves in a relational condition constituted by cooperation and influence. Regarding the following analyses, I will focus on texts and their authors, not on reader reception; and in order to situate literary dissent in

the broader societal picture, I rely on Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato and their study *Civil Society and Political Theory* (1992). Their approaches to the civic realm will be of crucial importance, as they illuminate the conditions that govern literature's influence on politics.

Cohen and Arato imagine a political community in three categories: a civil, political, and economic society (ix). It is with the first and second that this study is concerned, especially with their reciprocal influence. Civil society is a "sphere of social interaction between economy and the state, composed of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communications" (ibid). Political literature is situated in the last and presents a form of public communication: It partakes in the complex dialogue between authors, readers, publishers, critics, and more. The intermingling of private and public concern and the discussion of values takes place inside this sphere.

Indeed, civil society – in a democratic system – enjoys a privileged (because foundational) position. It is "locus of both democratic legitimacy and rights, composed of private but also of public concern [which] act in concert in order to influence political society and, indirectly, decision making" (Cohen and Arato 564). Civil society is both source and primary sphere of the political process, i.e. the articulation of interest, the holding of debate, and the generation of consent and public will (Schmidt 625). This sphere, Cohen and Arato note, is the center of "normative integration," a space for the reevaluation and legitimization of values and norms (ix). Here, democratic dissent<sup>16</sup> finds its locus: The ability of a polity – i.e. the entirety of political institutions (Schmidt 627) – to allow and respect dissent as a citizen activity is, as Rawls put it, the "crucial test case" for a mature democracy (in Cohen and Arato 568).

Habermas holds that in a democracy, dissent presents a normalized because necessary "component of the political culture" (in Cohen and Arato 567). Dissent for the sake of democratization (especially in a non-democratic polity) is even more crucial. Here, dissent is not only a necessary but a *constituting* element. For polities that are yet to be transformed into a democracy (e.g. the German Confederation) and for democratic polities which need to expand their democratic character (e.g. the Antebellum U.S.), dissent is the fundamental driving force, the "motor" of de-

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16 I rely on Schmidt and define dissent as the differently-minded and diverging position which stands in relation and opposition to a majority or dominant position (192). I shall use the term protest if I wish to highlight the verbal character of dissent (650). Further, democratic dissent is understood as the position-taking for and the furthering of democratic principles against an un-democratic or less democratic dominant opinion. Finally, literary dissent is the expression of dissent by literary means.

mocratization (Cohen and Arato 567). Democratization is, indeed, both: the process of *establishing* a democracy and the *furthering* of the democratic principle in a given polity (Schmidt 167).

This illuminates the central role of dissent for the establishment, defense, and improvement of democracy. A democracy, after all, is the political system whose forms of state and government organizations emanate from the people (Schmidt 164). Dissent is what establishes, defends, and rejuvenates democratic rule (650). The analysis of literary dissent in the given 19<sup>th</sup> century texts will elaborate on the democratic idea but will also show how literature sought to establish and improve democratic governance.

Indeed, I hold literary dissent to be a clear act of *politics*, i.e. the conscious action of pushing a specific policy (Schmidt 601). This means that I will work under the presumption that authors enacting literary dissent influence the political, not *vice versa*. Rather than reflecting social reality and the myths that inform it, their texts rewrite, retranslate, and reinterpret social reality in the literary (Speller 68). They do so in order to disseminate democratic ideas and effect desired changes. How authors effected their dissent and which policies were supported are questions that will be answered in the textual analysis. For now, let it suffice to say that acts of dissent constitute crucial instances for the change and development of democratic polities:

[L]iving in a democracy means dissenting. In short, democracy is nothing more than the institutionalization of a culture that cherishes public dissent; public dissent is nothing more than the cultural process of celebrating democracy. It is a paradox, but it works. (Hartnett 176)

If one wishes to understand how dissent creates order, it is essential to keep the paradoxical relation between dissent and consent in mind. Acts of dissent, literary or otherwise, establish, protect, and further the democratic principle in civil society, a sphere which constitutes the very foundation of liberal democracy (Thomas 202). The question is how literary dissent negotiated these foundations in the U.S. and Germany.

## Comparing Antebellum and Vormärz Literature

The comparison of Antebellum and Vormärz literature renders fascinating insights. If we regard the transformative developments in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a transatlantic comparison of democratic authors and their writing strategies can illuminate our understanding of cultural and literary connectivity. At the same time, we may further our knowledge of the way in which national identities were negotiated and to which degree these negotiations concurred or differed. Lastly, we may better com-

prehend the role literature played in the political and cultural transformations of the time.<sup>17</sup>

At a first glance, the Antebellum U.S. and Vormärz Germany present two completely different polities: the first, a young, democratic federal state, the other a loose confederation of monarchies. However, both found themselves in an age of transformation. While the polities may be different, the forces that molded them were the same: industrialization, urbanization, economic reform, advances in communication and transportation, literary democratization, rise of political dissent, and, importantly, the constant struggle to keep the polity together. Blumenberg notes that times of historical and systemic transition evidence a heightened need for myth (Arbeit 41). And indeed, regional and statist diversity in both countries resulted in the same societal reaction: the desire for a cohesive national identity through myth. American and German societies were in the midst of intense identity negotiations, negotiations which were orientated towards national consolidation by means of the imagination of a national past, present, and future. This, however, was a cultural task. On both sides of the Atlantic, literature was paramount to these processes.

Regarding American national identity, exceptionalism continues to inform the academic debate. Scholars like Bercovitch and Lipset allocate the U.S. outside and in contrast to the historical developments that governed European trajectories.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. thus becomes the *first new nation* (Lipset) and develops a uniquely American ideology. Indeed, while Germany's identity negotiations were conditioned by its feudal past and other distinctive factors, the U.S., seemingly, was free of such restrictions and able to develop a radically different, liberal, and individualistic identity based on the dissent of its first settlers. Following Lipset, this "American Creed" constitutes the basic values which would form the nation's identity: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire (19). In contrast, German national identity was informed by liberal as well as royalist, conservative, and socialist ideas, all of which competed in the framework of a feudal-monarchic past and the imagination of linguistic and historical genealogy.

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17 For an authoritative account of the Antebellum, see Howe: *What Has God Wrought* (2007); Boyer (ed.): *The Oxford Companion to United States History* (2001). For the Vormärz, see Winkler: *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, Vol.1 (2001); Nipperdey: *Deutsche Geschichte 1800-1866* (1998).

18 For more on American exceptionalism see Lipset: *The First New Nation* (1963) and *American Exceptionalism* (1997); Bercovitch: *The Rites of Assent* (1981); Lockhart: *The Roots of American Exceptionalism* (2003); Hodgson: *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (2009); Ludwig: *Die besondere Nation* (2011).



Indeed, the alleged difference between America and Europe, which Bercovitch termed “transatlantic contrast,” resurfaces in Hawthorne and Brown’s texts (Office 35). But nations on the other side of the Atlantic are not only represented as ideological other: Europe is also a space of origin, inspiration, and return. While Hawthorne and Brown affirm a specific American exceptionalism, they also question and contextualize it, especially with regard to their perspectives on the Old Continent.

It is crucial to remember that American exceptionalism, elaborated for the first time in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835), has always been indebted to a comparative, transnational perspective focusing on Europe (Lipset 17). Exceptionalism does not automatically include a claim of superiority but offers the simple assertion of divergence: The U.S. was regarded as a cultural “outlier” with “qualitative differences” (18). But claims of differences, and similarities for that matter, cannot result from a narrow perspective; a broad, in this case transnational approach is constitutive to the elaboration of national qualities.

For national characteristics are themselves negotiated constructions of the time and need to be considered in the context of transatlantic relationality: There are no “autonomous cultures” free of influence (Jay 3). The fact that Boston, home to both Hawthorne and Brown’s literary productions, constituted one of the major transfer sites of transatlantic connectivity, and that Hegelian notions of history, nationhood, and identity influenced American and German authors alike necessitates a transnational perspective.<sup>19</sup> Americans were not only highly aware of European struggles for freedom and identity; Germans, too, were caught up in an ideological force field that championed liberty and individuality across the Atlantic. I will not join Bourne in arguing that there is no “distinct American culture” – or no distinct German culture, for that matter (in Fluck et al. 59). I am also not interested in reciprocal influence on an intratextual, material, or personal level. But I will be paying attention to the *manner* in which national identities are negotiated in literature, and to what degree we need to relocate the borders of national literature if we consider 19<sup>th</sup> century literary work on identity-making values. Barthes notes that mythologists study “ideas-in-form” (112). The question, indeed, is whether or not American and German mythological forms share similar ideas.

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19 For more on transnationalism and the transnational turn in American Studies see Manning and Taylor (eds): *Transatlantic Literary Studies* (2007); Jay: *Global Matters* (2010); Edwards and Gaonkar: *Globalizing American Studies* (2010); Fluck et al: *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies* (2011) and *Transnational American Studies* (2007); Hebel (ed.): *Transnational American Studies* (2012); Christ et al: *American Studies/Shifting Gears* (2010).

For Americans are not alone in their belief in exceptionality. Germany claims, in fact, its very own historical exceptionalism, albeit a pessimistic one.<sup>20</sup> Scholars like Winkler, Wehler, and Plessner insist on the distinct otherness of Germany's democratic development when compared to other Western nations. Its hegemonic role in the Holy Roman Empire, its "Reichsmythos" [myth of empire] and traditional federalism, its philosophical and religious currents, and its insistence on culture over civilization are often invoked to explain German history (Winkler 2, 40). These aspects are meant to elucidate on how Germans became the "belated"<sup>21</sup> members in the family of Western democracies (Plessner 11). Wehler's controversial idea of a specifically German path towards democracy (*Deutscher Sonderweg*) seeks to explain the country's fall from civilization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but also its historical struggle with liberal and democratic ideologies (Kaiserreich 11). In this context, national identity is imagined as being restricted to an ethno-historical genealogy. German-ness, so to speak, is not an ideology like in the U.S. – and thus subject to individual assent – but an aboriginal, organic, and historical category (Plessner 48). This claim, indeed, is highly contestable for the Vormärz and will find its critical elaboration in Heine's and Gutzkow's texts. But a scholarly assessment of German exceptionalism, indeed, cannot rest solely on the analysis of German works. It needs a transnational perspective.

A transnational comparison of American and German literature can broaden the preconceptions of our field regarding transatlantic relationality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such an approach will contextualize and challenge the primacy of national literatures and their "insular concerns" (Jay 2). Indeed, national identity is always negotiated in a way that results in some form exceptionalism. The goal of all identity negotiations is to render one's own national character unique, legitimized, and cohesive and thus contrastive to that of others. That, however, does not mean that the construction process is not an open one, allowing and requiring influence, inspiration, and communication. To argue that a national identity is exceptional because its negotiators aimed at exceptionalism is a blatant tautology which must be avoided if we really want to understand the processes of national identity building through myth.

The Antebellum was one of the most dynamic periods in American history, and the Vormärz does not fall short in comparison. I am interested in the role literature

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20 For more on German exceptionalism see Winkler: *Der lange Weg nach Westen* (2000); Wehler: *Das deutsche Kaiserreich* (1973); Plessner: *Die verspätete Nation* (1934); Elsässer: *Der deutsche Sonderweg* (2003); Raulet (ed): *Historismus, Sonderweg und dritte Wege* (2001); Gretz: *Die deutsche Bewegung* (2007); Grebing: *Der deutsche Sonderweg in Europa* (1986).

21 [die Zuspätgekommenen].

played in these tumultuous times. We know that it had a decisive role in cultural and political processes, but the *manner* in which literature negotiated these issues still requires our attention. Did American and German authors approach dissent differently; are their methods of creating national identities similar? Indeed, we should not easily assume divergence on the grounds of national difference, for nationality is a construction: Literature produces nationality rather than *vice versa*. Thus, this study will ask *how* German and American authors created civic myths and whether or not their methods were based on what Fluck calls transculturation (1).

Further, a comparison will help to better define the nature of political literature itself. When does a text become political, and how can we legitimate the use of art for political purposes? When does literature cross the boundaries of aesthetics, when does it become agitation or propaganda, and to what degree does the autonomy of art enter such considerations? Can authors ensure reflection and agency in literature that carries a vested interest? These questions can be answered best by comparing two literary cultures. Such an approach will render differences and similarities and thus help to more comprehensively elaborate the tenets of political literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

For despite the efforts and sacrifices of German democratic authors, one must conclude that their literary endeavors failed in one respect: Political literature may have furthered the revolutionary effort, but it was not able to stir the revolution in a direction which would have resulted in democracy. Similarly, American authors failed in their attempts to peacefully consolidate the nation by means of identity making. Despite their best intentions, the pressures of the age were finally resolved in civil war. It is this literary-historical parallel which further motivates a comparison. Yes, it would be naïve to suggest that literature alone could have prevented the mid-century events. But it must be asked whether and how it could have done its part.

Today, the U.S. remains a deeply divided nation.<sup>22</sup> Highly divergent political, ethnic, and cultural issues dominate the national discourse, and political institutions seem to be unable to effectively overcome these problems. Similarly, the European Union is in the midst of political and economic crises which threaten the foundations of European peace and integration. Europe is in the process of negotiating a cohesive identity, and we must ask whether cultural, intellectual, and political elites can learn from 19<sup>th</sup> century history. Can a new European myth aid the construction of a nation state? Can a redefinition of the American Way placate modern divisions? Who and/or what is to effect an improved democratic integration? A comparison between Antebellum and Vormärz approaches towards unity and identity can

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22 For a recent transatlantic perspective on this issue see: Grabowski and Kosák (eds): *The U.S. as a Divided Nation* (2014).

only further our understanding in this context, and, in the best case scenario, effect a “reciprocal process of Transcultural learning” (Hornung in Fluck et al. 2).

Today, the U.S. and Germany are among the most powerful and influential democracies in the West. But it was the early 19<sup>th</sup> century which began to define their national identities. The analysis and comparison of Antebellum and Vormärz literature offers important insights into the national geneses of these countries. In the transformative 19<sup>th</sup> century, America and Germany found themselves at a point where people like Choate and Wienbarg called upon literature to make sense of a chaotic world and give their nation a past, a present, and a democratic future.

*Poets of Protest* is constituted by two parts. In Part I, *The Pushing of Horizons*, I will analyze novels which use and focus on one central basic myth, seeking to redefine societal values and construct a new outlook on national identity. These texts feel for the frontiers of individual sovereignty and hope to open societal fences. Here, characters change their communities by means of an proactive dissent and thus strive to develop and democratize their societal surroundings. I will discuss Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* in Chapter 2 and analyze this novel’s resignification of the Puritan myth. In Chapter 3, I will turn to Gutzkow’s *Wally, die Zweiflerin* and present the construction of a variant based on the Sigune myth.

Part II, *The Treading of Pathways*, will be devoted to texts which employ more than one basic myth and whose mythopoetic logic differs from the novels discussed in the preceding chapters. Here, the given texts deal with subjective journeys and employ a more focalized and personalized mythological resignification. Their work revolves around the fact that the character’s fates are intricately interwoven with the nation itself. These texts imagine a society shaped by the lives (and deaths) of its individual members; rather than seeking to accommodate the subject inside the societal framework, these works reveal the nation in the character’s trajectories. Chapter 4 will elaborate on Brown’s *Clotel* and discuss the resignification of the Puritan and Revolution myth. Chapter 5, devoted to Heine’s *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen*, elucidates on the resignification of the Three Magi and the Barbarossa myth.

Lastly, a brief conclusion will discuss the consequences of mythological resignification for national identity building in the U.S. and Germany and bring this study to a close by elaborating on the nature of political literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.