Philipp Otto Runge, Herder and the Semiotic Language of Nature and Patriotism

Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1810) was a leading German Romantic artist whose iconography represents a transition from the Neoclassical iconography of classical mythology and allegory to an abstract semiotic system of signs and allegory based on a Romantic mystical interpretation of nature. His series *The Times of Day* represents the artist’s perception of the genesis and creation of the cosmos as an act of divine conception encoded in the signs of nature, and symbolized by birth and renewal in the metaphors of flowers and children. Runge’s iconography can be analyzed in the context of organic theories of linguistics, semiotics and nature, aesthetics and ethics, and nationalism during the German Wars of Liberation (1806-1813). Runge’s iconography was representative of a trend among Neoclassical and Romantic artists to promote nationalism and cultural values through the implementation of formal epistemological systems in the medium of art. Runge’s individual iconography reveals a synthesis of rational and mystical systems of knowledge that emphasize Herder’s concept of the German Volk as a unique cultural identity, and presents an analogy between the creation of the cosmos, the organic origins of language and the conception of the German Volk.

In Runge's painting, *The Small Morning* (1808) (fig. 1), based on his print series, *The Times of Day*, Runge was deeply influenced by contemporary mystical Romanticism. His
*Times of Day* illustrates the Romantic concept of the “hieroglyph of nature” as the basic element of language and culture. Read literally, the hieroglyph of the child and ideal woman above surrounded by buds in the border and blossoms above suggests the origin of language as an organic process within early societies as an analogy with the birth and development of a child. Studies for the *Times of Day* suggest literal analogies between the growth and formation of flowers, and that of humans. In the lily for example the structure of the petals is repeated in the compositional arrangement of the infants, and the stem and blossom of the Amarylis is comparable to the form of the woman. (fig.2).

Runge’s life spanned the most important period of the Romantic movement that coincided with the Napoleonic Wars in Germany. His iconography expresses the nationalist sentiments and linguistic theory of Herder that formed the basis of German propaganda movements during the Wars of Liberation. The goal of such programs was to communicate with the *Volk* through the element of nature, and to awaken their sense of cultural unity and identity through art and literature. The physical scientific support was provided by investigations into color, language and plants, like those of Runge, Herder and Goethe, in which all life was revealed as sharing a divine organic basis.

Runge’s ink drawing *Fall of the Fatherland* (fig. 3) demonstrates a complex nationalist syntax that reveals the synthesis of semiotics and patriotic goals. The mother, supporting the child, plows the earth that buries the husband and father, who died in the Wars of Liberation, becoming a literal fatherland, as an angel helps her drag the plow forward. Military helmets and lances form a decorative border supporting a double Janus of the father’s face at the top of the composition. The compositional design is based directly
on Runge’s *Times of Day* from the preceding year, and a later version from 1809. It suggests the renewal of fatherland following the French defeats through an organic cultural process in which linguistics and ethnicity create cultural and national cohesion through Herder’s concept of race and territory. Superimposing the composition of one over the other reveals the infant emerging directly from the father’s body beneath as his literal seed coming to fruition from the plowed earth, serving as a reminder to German soldiers fighting in the Napoleonic Wars that their sacrifice would benefit Germany in the renewal of the Fatherland through their offspring. The iconography reinforces the message of propaganda to support the Fatherland by volunteering to fight in the Wars of Liberation, but its semiotic origins lay in the practice of using classical iconography to instill new patriotic values through allegory, a practice implemented in political ideology during the French Revolution and Early Republic. The German Romantic language of hieroglyphs, however, went a step further in seeking to communicate the essence of language through the synthesis of myth, science and nationalism.¹

Herder’s *History of Mankind* describes the formation of the Teutonic tribes as a cultural entity based on shared values, ethnicity, land and language.² Herder’s writings profoundly affected the development of the Romantic movement and German nationalism. By the end of the first decade, Napoleon had transformed the German states into a fragmented entity of disparate states led by nobles and princes wavering in their loyalty to German interests. Napoleon's creation of the Rhineland Confederation precipitated the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire and abdication of Francis I in 1806. A relic of medieval Christendom since it was created by Charlemagne in 800 CE,
the historic institution continued to define German cultural identity and nationalism during the Napoleonic Wars. Faced with a lack of political unity not resolved until unification of Germany under Bismarck in the late Nineteenth-century, cultural unity emphasizing common linguistic and historic origins was substituted for German political unity. German propaganda located in the military strategic centers of Vienna and Berlin stressed loyalty to the Fatherland, and cultural nationalism based on language, while German Romantic artists and authors responded by creating works that reflected German cultural heritage and nationalism.

Rousseau and Herder both wrote essays on the origins of language taking into consideration the role of communal societies in forming identity through their relation with the external world. Rousseau, who traced the anthropological origins of models of constitutional government in the Social Contract, that later influenced the French Revolution, wrote that art and music, like language, communicated signs with a moral meaning, rather than mere aesthetic sensations. Like Herder, Rousseau perceives a close correlation between music and poetry believing them to form a common origin preceding languages. Music and “melody do not affect us merely as sounds, but as signs of our affections, of our feelings,” according to Rousseau. Herder’s theory of language was based on his broader theory of humanity, and the development of civilization. Language was the basis of civilization according to Herder: “…language is a feeling which is…a law of nature.”


The use of symbol and allegory, such as the French female allegory of Liberty or the Republic (fig. 4) had its origin Neoclassicism and the revival of Classical Antiquity that occurred during the years surrounding the French Revolution and Early French Republic. At this time, art and aesthetics were viewed as an alternative language of political propaganda that could be used to instill patriotic values in society. Runge was influenced by the former Director of the Dresden Art Academy, Giovanni Casanova, who had studied in Rome under Neoclassical artist Anton Raphael Mengs. Runge was given access to a collection of Mengs’ casts in the Dresden Academy. These forms reappear as ideal classical female figures in Runge’s Times of Day, and have their origin in widely used artist handbooks on allegory and symbol such as Cesare Ripa’s Iconologia (1593), or Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s Versuch Einer Allegorie (1766, 1799) which also includes a discussion of Mengs’ figures of the nine muses in his Parnassus (fig. 5) (1761) fresco for Cardinal Alessandro Albani’s villa in Rome, a commission that was completed while Winckelmann served as the cardinal’s secretary and curator. Parnassus was a theme that influenced Runge in its classical conception of divine order expressed through Apollo, the god of the sun, who presides over the nine muses, each governing one of the different arts.5

Color and image as the divine origin of language in a hieroglyph of order, life and culture, is articulated in Runge’s poem entitled The Times of Day, in which it corresponds to Genesis, and the creation of the world. It was the first word spoken. The word of God first spoken in Genesis reverberated throughout God’s creation of nature in the form of light and color: “Die Farbe sind’s die erst das Wort gesprochen,”6 Color also had specific
theological iconographic significance symbolizing the Trinity represented by the “highest light” and three primary colors. These colors in turn could break down into a thousand colors in the world. Thus, our experience of God would be absorbed through our experience of the world. Here, the flower becomes the organ of God in the symbol of the white lily. The primary colors are further revealed through the form of the rose (red), sun (yellow), and sky (blue). The female figure who symbolizes the origin of life, can also be associated with the classical goddess Diana, while the female figure representing morning represents Aurora, the dawn. Runge’s color theory, like that of Goethe, defined white as light equated with goodness, while and darkness symbolized evil. Blue instilled reverence like a father, while red was a mediator between heaven and earth. When the two combined in the night, it would create a fire and a yellow that served as a comforter. The semiotic syntax of the metaphysical world is described in basic abstract form in Runge’s theory and illustrated in the form of the woman, child and flower.

Runge’s color theory Die Farbenkugel was first published in 1810, however, he carried on a lengthy correspondence with Goethe as early as 1806 in which the two discussed their color theory. In his correspondence with Goethe, Runge also discussed his artistic development that included copying casts by Mengs and studying under his pupil Cassanova. Goethe, who advocated the study of classical antiquity in Rome, arrived at a similar color theory to that of the artist, in that the science of optics merged with Neo-platonic color symbolism and Romantic nature worship in landscapes. Runge created color charts, arranging the primary colors on the three points of a triangle with blue at the apex, red on the lower left, and yellow on the lower right. He then added the secondary
colors created by mixing the primary colors along the arms of the triangle. Then, he arranged the varying shades of these colors around a sphere with white at the top, and black at the bottom. (fig. 6).\textsuperscript{10}

At the same time, Christian and Classical imagery combine to create a unified semiotic system of based on existing lexicons of meaning. The organic development of the seed into a blossom, for example according to one scholar, can correspond to traditional Christian theology and represent the progress of the human soul from the dark earthly globe at the bottom of the frame to the eternal morning star of Venus and the Star of Bethlehem.\textsuperscript{11} Runge writes of the beauty of Raphael’s Dresden Madonna (fig. 7) and Guido Reni’s Aurora (fig. 8), both of which express the loftiest sentiments and a connection with the universe. The purpose of art, he writes is to record nature with an image that in turn evokes a thought. In representing nature, one not only recorded the image, but also the feeling evoked by it. The figure of the woman in Runge's Small Morning is based on the Christian iconography of the Virgin Mary, and allegorical women in Greek mythology who "evoke the most beautiful thoughts in the soul." Greek art, too, he acknowledges evoked a concept of ideal beauty through its portrayal of divinity in the form of the Greek gods.\textsuperscript{12} The artist’s iconography formed part of an evolving Romantic iconography based on nature symbolism. His use of the child and flower, for example, are a hieroglyph also found in the writings of Novalis, and represent an organic unity. Novalis, like Runge, envisioned a poetic synthesis in that nature was a body like a tree and humanity formed the buds.\textsuperscript{13} The flower represented the image of humanity within the cosmological principle. Like the flower, morning too was the
representation of the beginning of the world and symbolized the origin of meaning itself: the original symbol or sign. Both French and German philosophers who advanced theories of semiotics applied to political propaganda suggested that cognition preceded conscious thought in the perception of the image. Nationalist theories, like that of Herder, went a step further in suggesting that cognition and language were dependent upon common racial, ethnic and linguistic origins. German propaganda thus sought to appeal to common linguistic origins to encourage loyalty, but to also exert influence through a subliminal appeal to morality and divinity in the aesthetic response. Germans had only to appreciate the beauty of the landscape and nature of the Fatherland to understand their duty to protect it.

Fichte’s Addresses is based on Herder’s theory of literature in which nationalist identity and morality are established by folklore. For Fichte, literature was the single most important defining feature of national character. A people’s literature defined not only its identity and sense of communal existence but its laws and ethics. Political applications of Herder and Fichte’s philosophy appeared in the propaganda of the Wars of Liberation in which Arndt and Müller appealed to the nationalist tenor introduced by these earlier philosophers. National unity here was based not on a commitment to representational legislative government, but a cultural and ethnic identity that defined Germans as sharing a common language and culture and fighting a common enemy. Hegel also maintained that religion was the “spirit of a nation” and the most important feature of society. Folk religion, according to Hegel, was a product of culture that had the power to influence the individual through imagination and enthusiasm. The great “pure images” of folk religion
could inspire the individual to feelings of benevolence. Thus is possessed the power to mold the character and virtues of a people and a nation.\textsuperscript{14}

Runge’s \textit{Times of Day} (1808) coincides with the height of the German Wars of Liberation against Napoleon, and propaganda campaigns such as that of Ernst Moritz Arndt’s \textit{Spirit of the Times} (1808) designed to galvanize the support of German volunteers through an appeal to patriotism and religious feeling. Following a series of dramatic German defeats at Jena, Austerlitz and Tilsit (1807), German military authorities responded with propaganda programs that appealed to German nationalist sentiments, often having their origin in German Romanticism and literature. Friedrich Schlegel, who first defined Romanticism in the \textit{Athenaeum} (1798) in linguistic terms as “universal, progressive” modern poetry in a constantly evolving state of becoming, also defined Germany as the “greatest nation in the world in respect to their cultivation of artistic sensibility and scientific spirit,” and would ultimately turn his attention to medieval German poetry like the \textit{Niebelungen} and nationalist political propaganda he wrote for the Austrian military campaigns.\textsuperscript{15} German Romanticism conflated art, religion and nationalist identity through common linguistic origins as outlined by Herder’s \textit{History of Mankind}. To Runge, art was a pure religion that corresponded to the hieroglyph of the flower. The flower in turn was a symbol of the German \textit{Volk} as an organic entity; it also symbolized the origin of nationalism in language and symbol. The artist’s \textit{Times of Day} ascribes specific meaning to each of the times of day: “Morning is the boundless illumination of the universe. Day is the boundless image of the creature, and the fulfillment of the universe. Evening is the boundless destruction of existence in the origins of the universe.
Night is the boundless deep of the recognition of the undestroyed existence in God.”

In his *History of Mankind*, Herder explains that Genesis was the oldest book written by God himself, and the separation of light from darkness symbolized by the rising sun, or Aurora, represented the hieroglyph of nature. Herder’s work, first published in 1774, introduced the German Romantics to the concept of nature as a symbol and hieroglyph of divinity.

Fichte’s theory closely follows that of Herder in tracing the earliest origins of the German nation from its anthropological and linguistic roots. Delivered as a series of lectures entitled *Reden an die Deutschen Nation* (1806) during the first occupation by the French, his theory reinforced the scientific basis of nationalism first introduced by Herder. All successive German military propaganda writers including Friedrich Schlegel, Ernst Moritz Arndt, and Adam Müller relied on Fichte’s basic argument to support the efficacy of their own nationalist claims. The difference between Germans and other peoples began with the “rootedness” of Germans in both their “original dwelling place” and their original language. While other branches of the same Teutonic stock migrated to other regions and adopted foreign languages, the Germans retained their original lands and language. Speech, according to Fichte, is the cohesive essence, which holds a people together and stores their communal knowledge. Language first arises when people evolve from a sensuous state in nature to grasp supra-sensuous natural objects and designate them for the convenience of communication. The Germans maintained the use of their primitive language, which had an effect on their development as a people. Because of the direct relationship between thought and language, a living language is
viewed as an organic essence, which continues to shape culture. Literature thus becomes a supreme expression of the German spiritual culture and collective will, and it assumes a preeminent position in its capacity to reanimate the people of their spiritual culture. As an extension of its organic animate basis, the social machinery that governs society will be a reflection of its spirit as opposed to the implementation of an abstract finite political model. This organic infusion of spirit into the mechanical state craft is effected by educating the young in their native language. Fichte traces the roots of culture and attributes varying rates of success in intellectual and spiritual development to the maintenance of specific hereditary nationalist stocks. Runge’s *Fall of the Fatherland* and *Times of Day* literally illustrate the concept of language as the origin of cultural identity and first hieroglyph of the *Volk* defined by common ethnicity and linguistic ties.\(^{18}\)

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16 Philipp Otto Runge. *Hinterlassene Schriften.* (Hamburg, 1840), I, 82.


Philipp Otto Runge
*Amaryllis foriissima*
Study for small Morning
1808 oil

Aurora study for small
Fig. 2 Morning. 1808 ink

Philipp Otto Runge
*The Light Lily*
1808

Philip Otto Runge
*Fall of the Fatherland*
Ink on paper, 1809

Fig. 3
Fig. 4
Jean Antoine Gros
*Allegory of Liberty*, 1790s

The Republic
France, 1790s

Fig. 5
State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia
Fig. 6

Fig. 7
Raphael
*Sistine Madonna*
1513-14
Gemäldegalerie
Dresden

Fig. 8