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## Pagan Memories, National Myth. Felix Dahn's *Julian der Abtrünnige* and *Erinnerungen*\*

Felix Dahn (1834-1912) was a crucial author for the creation of German nationalist thought during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. His works give us an insight into the average culture of the German bourgeoisie of that age. Although Felix Dahn's most renowned work is *Ein Kampf um Rom* (Leipzig 1876), a novel set in Ostrogothic Italy in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, this German nationalist novelist and academic invested more efforts in his own scholarly works (e.g. the series of volumes on *Die Könige der Germanen*, 12 voll., 1861-1909) and in other literary production. He preferred other of his own novels and literary compositions to *Ein Kampf um Rom*, and also considered his historical novel *Julian der Abtrünnige* (1893) to be one of his most significant works<sup>1</sup>. *Julian* belongs to the literary genre of the *Professorenroman*, that is, historical novels written by university professors; it is ultimately a *feuilleton* and is full of pathos and rhetoric. However, the novel is very meaningful to understand the *völkisch* thought that characterized Dahn and his German contemporaries, that is, their nationalist beliefs connected to the idea that nations were defined by their ethnic background<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 4 t. 2, 649, he argues that he finds other of his own works better than *Ein Kampf um Rom*, e.g. *Sind Götter?*, *Odhins Trost*, *Felicitas*, *Fredegundis*, *Bis zum Tode getreu*, and *Rolandin*. However, he was glad that Otto von Bismarck read *Ein Kampf um Rom* twice. See RENDINA 2015, 886-887. For the importance of *Julian der Abtrünnige* according to its author, see *infra*.

<sup>2</sup> For the remarkable persistence of the myth of Julian in European literature, see REBENICH 2020. For the *Professorenroman*, see MITTNER 1971, 718. For Dahn, see MOSSE 1957; *Id.*, 1976, 68; *Id.*, 1982, 31-33 (with the remark that the other literary works by Dahn had not the same success as *Ein Kampf um Rom*); *Id.*, 2008, 104-106. Dahn's novel on Julian the Apostate is rarely considered in scholarship; see, however, the study by BEBLICH 2011 and the mentions by BROWNING 1976, 233; RICHER 1992, 678; MARCONE 2019, 263; and REBENICH



Dahn's intention was to replicate the success of *Ein Kampf um Rom* with *Julian der Abtrünnige*, which for many aspects, including its length, was more ambitious than his short novels from the series *Kleine Romane aus der Völkerwanderung* (13 voll., 1882-1901). The novel thus had a great personal value for Dahn<sup>3</sup>. *Julian der Abtrünnige* is almost forgotten today; however, in Dahn's Memoirs (*Erinnerungen*) it is stated that many copies of the novel were sold at that time, as it had six reprints in the first year after its first appearance, and was also well-liked by the philologist Richard Foerster (the editor of the works of Libanius, the great Greek rhetorician and friend of Julian), who claimed that it was a better literary creation than *Ein Kampf um Rom*, as Dahn also thought it to be<sup>4</sup>. In the Memoirs, two precursors of this work are identified: a play by Andreas May and some poems by Dahn himself. Andreas May, a playwright who was a friend of Dahn's family, authored in 1853 a tragedy entitled *Zenobia* (not referring to Zenobia, the queen of Palmyra, but to a fictional priestess), which actually focused on Julian<sup>5</sup>. This tragedy was successful with the public and Dahn later dedicated to May a ballad entitled *Julian* (published in 1883); Dahn also wrote a further ballad on Julian<sup>6</sup>. Interestingly, in his Memoirs Dahn never seems to mention Henrik Ibsen's play on Julian, *Emperor and Galilean* (published in 1873), which is surprising if we consider the wide reception that Ibsen's plays then had in the German-speaking world<sup>7</sup>.

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2020, 415. According to BEBLICH 2011, 165-166, in the novel Julian is not an apostate who makes a wrong religious choice, but a young hero who is eager to fight in battle. Corrupt Romans and Christians try to obstruct his projects, while Germanic warriors, although military enemies of Julian, represent a positive force.

<sup>3</sup> See *infra*: «Wer diese „Erinnerungen“ [...] verfolgt hat, begreift, wie mich dieser Stoff ganz aus der Massen anziehen musste: [...] der Widerstreit der antik-heidnischen und der christlichen Lehren mit Hereinziehung einer tragisch-heroischen, monistischen Weltanschauung, d. h. eben der meinen» («Anyone who has followed these Memoirs [...] will understand why this material was extremely important for me: [...] the struggle between the ancient pagan and the Christian teachings with the involvement of a tragic-heroic, monistic vision of the world, that is, my own vision of the world»).

<sup>4</sup> DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 4 t. 2, 749.

<sup>5</sup> See also *infra*. As BEBLICH 2011, 157 points out, May's *Zenobia. Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen* (München 1853) was one of the several dramas that were dedicated to Julian in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were written in German.

<sup>6</sup> DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 2, 323-324; vol. 4 t. 2, 745-746. May's play is also mentioned in RICHER 1992, 678.

<sup>7</sup> For the profound reception of Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean* in German literature, see FABER - HØIBRAATEN 2011, 147-312. For the reception of Ibsen's works in general in German literature, see WILLIAMS 1994, 166, who observes that Ibsen's plays first found a stage in Germany.



Dahn's novel, which consists of three volumes, narrates the story of Julian, as a private citizen and a student (337-355), as a Caesar (355-360), and as an Augustus (360-363), in the first, in the second, and in the third volume respectively<sup>8</sup>. The work generally follows the sequence of historical events, but with many poetic licences. For example, in the novel Julian gathers a synod of bishops to debate with them (and taunt them), and has a public discussion with Athanasius of Alexandria: both episodes are fictional<sup>9</sup>. However, the most prominent among these licences is the large role attributed to Merowech, also named Serapio. Although an Alamannic chieftain named Serapio is indeed a historical figure, Dahn came up with the idea that he became the most loyal friend of Julian and instructed him on the many virtues of the Germanic *Volk*, in addition to defining Serapio as Frankish instead of Alamannic<sup>10</sup>. The aim of such emphasis on Serapio is to introduce in the novel a hero belonging to the Germanic world – a world that is described as exceptionally virtuous<sup>11</sup>.

The prominence of the Germanic *Volk* is the most characteristic aspect of this novel, as in the other works by Dahn. However, there are many other aspects of the novel that are consistent with other works by Dahn, both literary and scholarly; we could thus define *Julian* as a *summa* of Dahn's *völkisch* thought.

Dahn's *Memoirs (Erinnerungen)* are especially important to identify the main themes of this novel. They were published between 1890 and 1895 (thus, in about the same years as *Julian*). The themes and the process of composition of the novel are addressed in the *Memoirs*, although not frequently. Occasionally, the novel comes to Dahn's mind: for instance, when telling about his visit to Paris he mentions the role of *Lutetia Parisiorum* in the novel<sup>12</sup>. When mentioning his own family doctor, he refers that he had similar ideas to those of Julian<sup>13</sup>. A character of the novel was modelled after

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<sup>8</sup> For the tripartite division of the novel, see BERLICH 2011, 163.

<sup>9</sup> DAHN 1893, vol. 3 chapters 12 and 32. For Dahn's awareness of the distinction between historiography and historical novels, see BERLICH 2011, 164-165.

<sup>10</sup> For Serapio, see DRINKWATER 2007, 155; BERLICH 2011, 166.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, DAHN 1893, vol. 2 chapter 31 for the chastity (*Keuschheit*) of the ancient Germans.

<sup>12</sup> DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 4 t. 2, 412.

<sup>13</sup> DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 4 t. 1, 42-43: «Mein Hausarzt war Professor Geigel, ein hochbegabter, sehr eigenartiger Mann; kurz vor seinem Tode veröffentlichte er ein verwundersames Buch, in dem er alles Ernstes das Christentum, an das man nicht mehr glaube, ersetzen wollte durch Wiedereinführung des Walhallglaubens, in welchem aber die Götter nur sinnbildliche Bedeutung haben sollten: etwa wie Julian der Abtrünnige den heidnischen Volksglauben zu einer mystisch-symbolischen Lehre erheben und durch solche blutlose Hirngespinnste den lebendigen Gott des Christentums wie die lebendigen Gestalten



one of Dahn's pupils and friends, as stated in the Memoirs<sup>14</sup>. But there are also longer and more in-depth reflections on the novel in the Memoirs. Some pages concern the process of writing this novel, its themes, and the reasons why Dahn developed his interest in the figure of Julian the Apostate. He narrates that

«Das Jahr 1893 sah den Abschluss eines Werkes, das ich gleich nach dem Erscheinen des „Kampfes“ (1876) in Angriff genommen hatte: des Romans „Julian der Abtrünnige“. Ja, ich kann sagen, dass mich diese Aufgabe schon als ganz jungen Studenten beschäftigt hatte, da ein Trauerspiel aus jener Zeit von Freund May in München gegeben wurde, in dem mein lieber Vater diesen Kaiser prachtvoll darstellte: später habe ich die tragische Gestalt in zwei Balladen behandelt. Wer diese „Erinnerungen“ von den Ritterspielen und „Harald und Theano“ an verfolgt hat, begreift, wie mich dieser Stoff ganz aus der Massen anziehen musste: Römertum in der Zeit des Verfalls, Germanentum in der Zeit des kräftigen Aufsteigens, Heldenschaft in der Schlacht bei Straßburg, das Phantastische eines Krieges im fernen Asien und nun, zu dem Alten tretend, das Religionsphilosophische, der Widerstreit der antikeidnischen und der christlichen Lehren mit Hereinziehung einer tragisch-heroischen, monistischen Weltanschauung, d. h. eben der meinen. Das Werk erheischte viel mehr Vorarbeit als weiland der „Kampf“: denn das Gotische in diesem und die äußere Geschichte von Theoderich bis Teja war mir altvertraut: es musste also nur die römisch-byzantinische Kulturwelt ein wenig durchforscht werden. Aber bei Julian galt es, außer dem Germanischen und der damaligen Staats- und Kriegsgeschichte Roms die ganze rechtgläubig kirchliche (Athanasius) Lehre und zumal das höchst schwierige, mystisch-symbolische System Julians selbst und seiner Lehrer zu ergründen, was wahrlich weder leicht noch lustig war! So arbeitete ich denn siebzehn Jahre in den Quellen<sup>15</sup>». («The year 1893 saw the completion of a work that I had begun immediately after the publication of *Kampf* (1876) [*scil. Ein Kampf um Rom*]: the novel *Julian der Abtrünnige*. Indeed, I can say that this task had already occupied me as a very young student, since a tragedy from that time was written and staged by [our] friend May in Munich, in which my dear father portrayed this emperor magnificently [*scil. Zenobia, see supra*]: later I treated this tragic figure in two ballads. Anyone who has followed these *Memoirs* from the knights' games [*scil. the children's games Dahn played as a boy*] and *Harald und Theano* onwards will understand why this material was extremely important for me: the Roman

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des Olympos zu verdrängen träumte» («My family doctor was professor Geigel: a gifted, highly peculiar man who shortly before his death published a remarkable book according to which he seriously wanted to substitute Christianity, in which no one believed anymore, by re-introducing the *Valhalla* faith, and in which he suggested that the gods should only have a symbolic meaning, like Julian the Apostate had dreamed of elevating the pagan folk beliefs to a mystical-symbolic doctrine and of displacing the living God of Christianity as well as the living figures of Olympus through such bloodless fantasies»).

<sup>14</sup> DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 4 t. 1, 66. Another brief reference to the novel is *ivi*, vol. 4 t. 2, 762.

<sup>15</sup> DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 4 t. 2, 745-747.



civilization in the time of its decline, the Germanic civilization in the time of its powerful ascent, the heroism in the battle of Strasbourg, the fantastic character of a war in distant Asia [*scil.* Julian's military expedition in Persia] and now, in addition to the ancient world, the religious-philosophical debate, the struggle between the ancient pagan and the Christian teachings with the involvement of a tragic-heroic, monistic vision of the world, that is, my own vision of the world. This work required much more preparatory work than *Kampf* once did, for the Gothic history and the external history from Theoderic to Teja in this novel were familiar to me; thus, only the Roman-Byzantine cultural world had to be researched a little. But in Julian's case, apart from the Germanic history and the political and military history of Rome at that time, the whole orthodox ecclesiastical doctrine (Athanasius) and especially the extremely difficult, mystical-symbolic [philosophical] system of Julian himself and of his teachers had to be fathomed, which was certainly neither easy nor fun! So I worked on the sources for seventeen years»).

In these same pages Dahn also explains that some issues were presented by Julian's character: he was a valiant emperor and general, but he was too vain. In addition, he was also a 'problematic' hero, as he was defeated both in war by the Persians, and on the moral ground by Athanasius (in the fictional debate between Julian and Athanasius that has been mentioned)<sup>16</sup>.

There are several thematic connections between the Memoirs of Dahn and the novel on Julian the Apostate. First of all, Dahn presents his own ideal view of an ascetic intellectual. Julian the Apostate is used by Dahn to build this image. When Julian is still a young, Christian student, he assumes a self-punishing attitude. His teacher, Lysias, criticizes him because

«Es ist aber Überhebung, ist geistlicher Hochmut, durch heimliche Kasteiung mehr Ruhm als die Brüder vor Gott gewinnen zu wollen<sup>17</sup>». («It is presumption, it is spiritual arrogance, to want to get more glory before God than the [spiritual] brothers through secret mortification»).

Julian, when he is still a Christian, explains his plans for his life: «Lernen, beten, büßen, büßen, beten, lernen – so verstrichen mir die Jahre hier. So werden sie wohl verstreichen, bis ich sterbe – hoffentlich bald. Lernen, büßen, beten!<sup>18</sup>». («To learn, to pray, to atone, to atone, to pray, to learn – so my years passed here. So will they also pass, until I die – soon, as I hope. To learn, to atone, to pray!»).

Later on, Julian, after converting to paganism, still states that «Ich arbeite Tag und Nacht, ich schlafe nur zwei Stunden<sup>19</sup>». («I work day and night, I only sleep two hours»).

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<sup>16</sup> DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 4 t. 2, 747-748.

<sup>17</sup> DAHN 1893, vol. 1 chapter 2.

<sup>18</sup> DAHN 1893, vol. 1 chapter 2.

<sup>19</sup> DAHN 1893, vol. 2 chapter 13.



In the Memoirs we see that this model is very similar to Dahn's self-representation. Both Dahn and Dahn's Julian lived ascetically in their mission to compose literary works and improve their own society. This asceticism implied a lack of distractions and complete devotion to these missions. Such a moral example aimed at influencing readers; in fact, Dahn wrote his works in an age when the virtues of individuals were presented as eternal national values and characteristics<sup>20</sup>. The ancient Germans, for instance, were considered to be exceptionally virtuous in sexual matters, as Tacitus had represented them in the *Germania*<sup>21</sup>. Modern Germans were supposed to have inherited these virtues<sup>22</sup>. Dahn thus built an image of the *völkisch* hero as an artist and as an ascetic.

As a boy, Dahn was as a devout Christian as 'his' Julian<sup>23</sup>. As Julian in the second passage from *Julian der Abtrünnige* that has been quoted, the young Dahn wished to live a life of hard work that would hopefully lead him to an early death. Even as he lost his Christian faith and became an agnostic, Dahn maintained the idea that hard work could give life a meaning; he argued that, although life is hopeless and meaningless and there is no afterlife that can reward us for our good actions, we can stand heroically against the difficulties of life and overcome unhappiness through hard work<sup>24</sup>. As we can read in his Memoirs:

«Also: Pflicht und Arbeit, Arbeit und Pflicht bis zum Umfallen, und wenn zu einem frühen Tod, den ich bestimmt ahnte: - desto besser! Denn alsdann desto sicherer die Aussicht, zwar ohne Sieg, aber mit unbeflecktem Schild zu fallen. [...] Stark war an mir nur der Entschluss zu strengster Arbeit und Askese, der Beschluss, nicht ohne rühmliches Ringen zu erliegen und zu sterben; stark also war nur ein obwohl überschwänglicher und irre gehender, doch ganz außerordentlich tatkräftiger, tapfrer Idealismus<sup>25</sup>». («So: duty and work, work and duty until fainting, and if this led to an early death, which I found inevitable – so much the better! Because so much surer was the perspective of falling without victory, but with a spotless shield. [...] In me, the decision to work hard and live ascetically and the determination not to succumb and die without a glorious fight were strong. Thus, an extraordinarily active and brave idealism, although excessive and naive, was strong in me»).

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. HOBBSAWM 1987, 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> Tac. *Germ.* 18-19.

<sup>22</sup> RENDINA 2015, 884.

<sup>23</sup> In addition to the already quoted passages, Dahn's Julian, as a boy, could not fall asleep before his Christian mother blessed him: DAHN 1893, vol. 3 chapter 32. For the young Dahn's Christian devotion, see DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 1, 139-140, 225-226.

<sup>24</sup> For Dahn's loss of faith and his ongoing ethical mission of hard work, see DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 1, 229-231, 290, 294-296, 298-299; vol. 2, 4-7, 176, 181; vol. 3, 360-361, 380.

<sup>25</sup> DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 1, 297, 299.



The passage «bis ich sterbe – hoffentlich bald» in the novel is strikingly similar to «zu einem frühen Tod, den ich bestimmt ahnte: – desto besser!» in the Memoirs. This hopeless vision of life, in which life can only become meaningful through hard work, is also present in Dahn's later life. However, throughout Dahn's Memoirs and his other works, life can become meaningful through two additional factors as well: the faith in the *Volk* and in the values of family. For Dahn, these two aspects were essential for the German nation, and thus have a large role in his thought.

The centrality of the *Volk*, which gives meaning to an otherwise meaningless life, can be appreciated in Dahn's *Ein Kampf um Rom* (1876). Here, the Ostrogothic king Teja proclaims a hopeless philosophy according to which the devotion to the *Volk* and a heroic attitude to life can make life meaningful, although everyone is destined to be subdued by fate<sup>26</sup>. Among the characters of *Julian der Abtrünnige* there is a similar prophet of a hopeless, heroic philosophy of life (which is only made worth living by the faith in the *Volk*): the already mentioned Serapio. He is clearly a spokesman of Dahn's own ideas, as admitted by Dahn in his Memoirs, in which the agnostic Serapio is presented as Dahn's *Liebling* (most beloved character), and the bearer of Dahn's *Weltanschauung*<sup>27</sup>. Julian the Apostate's ideas, on the other hand, are too unrealistic and idealistic for Dahn<sup>28</sup>. The identification of Serapio's ideas with Dahn's own ideas is also demonstrated by the correspondence with other works by Dahn, including the Memoirs.

In *Julian der Abtrünnige*, Serapio is criticized by his friend Jovian for his own tragic, heroic, hopeless ideas (*Das ist ja aber trostlos! Keine Unsterblichkeit, keine Freiheit, kein Gott [...], keine Hoffnung, dass das Gute siegen müsse, kein Vater im Himmel; «But that is hopeless! No immortality, no freedom, no God [...], no hope that justice must triumph, no Father in heaven»*)<sup>29</sup>. However, he answers in the following way:

«Ich lebe nicht für mich, ich lebe für die Meinen. Aber nicht für die Menschheit, die ist ein hohler Schall! Der Mensch dient der Menschheit, indem er seinem Volke dient [...] Das höchste Gut des Mannes ist sein Volk, Ihm sollst du leben, sollst du sterben auch! [...] Götterglauben ist kindlich. Gott leugnen ist Wahnsinn. Gott suchen ist alles<sup>30</sup>». («I do not live for myself, I live for my own

<sup>26</sup> DAHN 2012, 797.

<sup>27</sup> DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 4 t. 2, 748.

<sup>28</sup> In Dahn's novel, Julian's peculiar ideas caused his isolation among his contemporaries: see DAHN 1893, vol. 3 chapters 10, 15, 18, and 27.

<sup>29</sup> DAHN 1893, vol. 3 chapter 16. See also BEBLICH 2011, 166-167 for Serapio's agnosticism and his role as Dahn's spokesman. See also DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 3, 541 and *ivi*, vol. 4 t. 2, 675, 677: Dahn had a monistic, tragic, heroic, but not pessimistic vision of the world.

<sup>30</sup> DAHN 1893, vol. 3 chapter 16.



people. But not for humankind: this word is a hollow sound! Men serve humankind by serving their people [...] A man's highest good is his people, for It you shall live, for It you shall die too! [...] Believing in gods is childish. To deny God is madness. Seeking God is everything»).

There is no freedom, there is no afterlife; only the *Volk* matters. This is also Dahn's philosophy: a heroic devotion to the *Volk* until death<sup>31</sup>. Dahn himself was agnostic during his adulthood. However, his position on religious matters seems to be somewhat fluid. According to G.L. Mosse, due to Dahn's enthusiasm for the Germanic gods and ancestors, the Catholic Church accused him of supporting the rise of the cult of Odin in Germany; however Dahn denied that he ever had those intentions<sup>32</sup>. However, Mosse also thinks that Dahn abandoned Christianity to choose pantheism and the religious cult of the *Volk*<sup>33</sup>. He was also close to the *Kulturkampf* movement, although he did not accept the term *Kulturkampf*<sup>34</sup>.

Although B. Beßlich already showed clearly which the role of the *Volk* was in *Julian der Abtrünnige*<sup>35</sup>, we can add that Dahn's reflections on the Germanic peoples in the novel are nearly identical to the reflections on Germanic peoples contained in his own scholarly works. Thus, Serapio explains the causes of *Völkerwanderung* in the novel like Dahn himself had explained them in his own historical researches. In a passage, Serapio, while talking to Julian (with a remarkable freedom of speech), argues that the Germanic peoples had to emigrate from their motherland because of the Romans' hunger for conquest.

«Ihr Römer seid das großartigste und das scheußlichste Volk der Weltgeschichte [...]. Das scheußlichste: durch maßlose Selbstsucht hierbei, 'Verteidigung durch den Angriff', das ist euer fürchterlicher Grundsatz<sup>36</sup>». («You Romans are the most formidable and despicable people in human history [...]. The most despicable: through unrestrained egoism. 'Defence through attack': this is your terrible principle»).

The same concept had appeared in an essay by Dahn, *Urgeschichte der germanischen und romanischen Völker* (1881):

«Der Untergang des Römerreichs – das war das Endergebnis des römischen, zumal cäsarischen Prinzips der 'Verteidigung durch den Angriff' [...]. So wurden die Söhne der Wölfin durch jeden Sieg zu neuen Kämpfen fortgezogen durch jenes großartige dämonische Prinzip, das unter dem Schein der Verteidigung zur Welteroberung drängen musste<sup>37</sup>». («The fall of the Roman

<sup>31</sup> DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 2, 38.

<sup>32</sup> MOSSE 2008, 104. See DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 4 t. 1, 43.

<sup>33</sup> MOSSE 1982, 32.

<sup>34</sup> DAHN 1890-1895, vol. 4 t. 2, 268.

<sup>35</sup> BEßLICH 2011, 166-168.

<sup>36</sup> DAHN 1893, vol. 2 chapter 30. Cf. *ivi*, vol. 3 chapter 34.

<sup>37</sup> DAHN 1881-1889, vol. 2 (1881), 420.



Empire was the final result of the Roman principle, mainly stated by Caesar, of the 'defence through attack' [...]. Thus, the sons of the she-wolf were pushed by every victory to new battles due to that formidable and demonic principle that behind the appearance of defence would lead them to the conquest of the world»).

As mentioned above, the importance of family is another crucial aspect of Dahn's works. There was indeed a connection between *völkisch* nationalism and the values of family, as nationalist authors set out to shape those virtues that were supposed to characterize the private lives of the members of a nation<sup>38</sup>. As shown by G.L. Mosse, the manners, morals, and sexual restraint that are now considered standard in the Western world, have a long history in which nationalism has played a significant part, as they altered dramatically with the development of nationalism between the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. These virtues were absorbed and sanctioned by nationalism, which allied to bourgeois mentality and respectability<sup>39</sup>. The development of moral values under nationalist movements had therefore an influence on family. In fact, the ascent of nationalism and respectability coincided with the establishment of the nuclear family. The general consensus was that family served as an effective and easily accessible substitute for the state, moderating passions at their source<sup>40</sup>.

The centrality of family is not only stressed in Dahn's Memoirs, but also in *Ein Kampf um Rom* and in *Julian der Abtrünnige*. In Dahn's Memoirs, Dahn's life with his first wife, whom he divorced, is overlooked, but the happiness of his life with his second wife, Therese Freiin Droste zu Hülshoff, is frequently highlighted. Family life, in a sense, appeared to be compatible with the young Dahn's ascetic attitude, as married life implied respectability and an absence of excesses and vices that instead characterized the southern, Catholic world<sup>41</sup>. In *Ein Kampf um Rom*, the Ostrogothic king Witichis' loyal relation to his beloved wife Rauthgundis is another example of an ideal married couple<sup>42</sup>. In *Julian der Abtrünnige*, the relation between Julian and his wife Helena is a central theme. Julian loves her fondly, and after she dies he buries her in a splendid temple; he remembers her for the rest of his life, he

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<sup>38</sup> With regard to Italy, BANTI 2000, 87-92, 140, 147 demonstrated that the Italian literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed to shaping values perceived as typical of the Italian nation; thus, loyalty, purity, and chastity became the virtues of women, while military valour, concord, and honour became the virtues of men.

<sup>39</sup> MOSSE 1985, 1, 3, 9. For the alliance between nationalism and bourgeois respectability, see also *ivi*, 132-133, 181, 190.

<sup>40</sup> MOSSE 1985, 18, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. MOSSE 1985, 174.

<sup>42</sup> RENDINA 2015, 892.



does not get married again, and his last words are for her<sup>43</sup>. However, we should stress that the historical Julian did not care much for his wife Helena. He barely mentioned her in his large *corpus* of writings, both before and after her death<sup>44</sup>. His marriage to her was basically a political marriage, as she was the sister of Julian's cousin, the Emperor Constantius II (337-361). However, Dahn could not present these historical, prosaic, and 'cold' facts in his novel. The fact that Dahn changed the historical reality so much demonstrates that marriage, and the family life that could derive from it, had a great meaning in his thought. To him, married couples, and thus families, were the basic elements composing the *Volk*. Julian, who is a positive and heroic character in the novel (with very few flaws), had to be presented as a good husband as well.

Finally, another element of *Julian der Abtrünnige* belongs to Dahn's *Weltanschauung*: the absence of antisemitism. Dahn was indeed a *völkisch* writer, but he had no negative feelings against the Jews<sup>45</sup>. After all, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nationalism did not always imply racism, as they were two quite different phenomena<sup>46</sup>. According to Dahn, some Jews were greedy, but there is no racial prejudice against the whole community of Jews in his works. Generally speaking, he was not a racist writer, and in *Ein Kampf um Rom* he showed sympathy for racial mixture. In *Ein Kampf um Rom*, he reported with sympathy the philosemitic policy of the Ostrogothic king Totila, who is also in love with a Jewish woman named Miriam<sup>47</sup>. In *Julian der Abtrünnige*, Julian is also a philosemitic ruler. His attitude is especially highlighted when he has the Temple in Jerusalem reconstructed<sup>48</sup>. An earthquake (the Galilee earthquake of 363) later destroys the recently rebuilt temple. After this episode, it is the very Serapio – the main Germanic character of the novel, from whose *völkisch* vision of the world we might expect an antisemitic reaction – who argues that this accident was random and had no religious meaning. The temple fell due to an earthquake, which

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<sup>43</sup> DAHN 1893, vol. 3 chapter 44. See also *ivi*, vol. 2 chapter 36 (with the story of Helena's death and burial): «Mein geliebtes Weib, meine Helena, mein Liebstes auf Erden – ist Tot!» («My beloved wife, my Helena, my most beloved one on the earth – is dead!»).

<sup>44</sup> As stressed by TANTILLO 2001, 44.

<sup>45</sup> MOSSE 1982, 32.

<sup>46</sup> As shown by THIESSE 2001, 175. According to MOSSE 1985, 190, however, the connection between nationalism and racism was often direct.

<sup>47</sup> MOSSE 1982, 32.

<sup>48</sup> DAHN 1893, vol. 3 chapter 9.



certainly also provoked the fall of other buildings, not belonging to the Jews<sup>49</sup>.

In his works, Felix Dahn presents himself and Julian the Apostate as two patriots, and as two inspirers of intellectual honesty and moral righteousness for the recently united Germany. For Dahn, the Germans had to be ascetically devoted to their nation, as Julian was to his own beliefs and as Dahn was to his own moral principles and literary and academic mission. Dahn's *Julian der Abtrünnige* thus illustrates and summarizes the main elements of his nationalist thought.

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<sup>49</sup> DAHN 1893, vol. 3 chapter 31: «Hat denn nicht gleichzeitig die Erde auch anderwärts gebebt?» («Did not the earth shake also elsewhere at the same time?»).



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### Abstract

Felix Dahn's novel *Julian der Abtrünnige* ("Julian the Apostate"), published in 1893, is a representation of the author's view of religion and of his ascetic outlook on life, which are also recorded in Dahn's *Erinnerungen* ("Memoirs"), published in 1890-1895. By highlighting the similarities between these two works, I will demonstrate that the novel on the Emperor Julian is a *summa* of Dahn's nationalist thought, and proposes the model of an ideal national artist through the image of Julian. Thus, I will show to what extent the popular German narrative of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century used images from the late ancient world to illustrate nationalist ideas.

Keywords: Classical Reception, Felix Dahn, German Nationalism, Julian the Apostate, Late Antiquity

Il romanzo di Felix Dahn intitolato *Julian der Abtrünnige* ("Giuliano l'Apostata"), pubblicato nel 1893, rappresenta il punto di vista dell'autore sulla religione e manifesta il suo atteggiamento ascetico nei confronti della vita. Queste prospettive sono presenti anche nelle *Erinnerungen* ("Memorie") di Dahn, pubblicate tra 1890 e 1895. Evidenziando le somiglianze tra queste due opere, si dimostrerà che il romanzo sull'imperatore Giuliano è una *summa* del pensiero nazionalista di Dahn, e propone il modello ideale di un artista nazionale attraverso l'immagine di Giuliano. In questo modo, si osserverà in quale misura la letteratura di consumo tedesca del tardo Ottocento abbia usato immagini tratte dal mondo tardoantico per illustrare idee nazionaliste.

Parole chiave: Ricezione del mondo classico, Felix Dahn, Nazionalismo tedesco, Giuliano l'Apostata, Tarda Antichità