

Ida Hahn-Hahn, *Memories from and of France* (1842)

Abstract

Ida Hahn-Hahn (1805–1880) was a much-read author who was well known among her contemporaries. She was criticized in her lifetime for her style and her aristocratic attitude, and later for her racist stereotyping of the “Orient.” Hahn’s *Erinnerungen aus und an Frankreich* [*Memories from and of France*] from 1842 reflects the contemporary pathos that helped elevate the Rhine to the role of Franco-German border. This pathos also informed the presentation of the Rhine as a place that was to be emotionally celebrated.

Source

[...] I returned home from France three months ago. As long as I was there, I did not write a line about it, in part because of a lack of time, in part out of the fear of being all too unfair to the land and people, which both seemed to me very dull and colorless, following Spain so directly. The sun must have been down already for a while before we saw the moon as something other than a white spot. And Spain affected me like the sun, burning, blinding, not matching any color, but also not leaving any out, not belonging to any particular beauty, but melting into itself, powerful, commanding, stimulating the imagination, certain of the future. I found no trace of all that in France! It seemed to me, I cannot say, to be grey, rotten, and dusty! If I had written at that time, it would have become a book of drowsy lassitude; I knew that instinctively. Not even a small spark of poetry flared in me, not a breath of a lyrical mood wafted through my mind. Completely loyal, completely conscientious, and occasionally, when historical memories awoke, I also walked forward with interest, step by step, but I never danced, and even less, flew. I deceived myself completely, like a good wife who punctually does her duty without getting involved in grace, amiability, or enchantment. How that was suddenly different when I came to the Mosel [River], and really so at the Rhine. Oh, dear heart! At the Rhine I am never more than twenty years old. There is a wave-breaking and wing-beating element there, a genuine rapture from song there. I feel at home there. Whether I come there from the Baltic Ocean or from the Guadalquivir [River]—it is always this deep, nameless feeling of home that makes me simultaneously happy, rich, and serene. Ah, the Rhine! What do the poor other rivers say in contrast, the Seine, the Garonne, the Tagus? Those are only small, inferior forces, but no power of the first order like the Rhine. There are a few rivers that represent entire times and peoples and ideas in history. There is the Scamander [Karamenderes] that belongs to the world of Greek heroes, where the gods took the humans’ side and fought with them and against them, and in that way breathed into them I don’t know what unearthly force and beauty. There is the Nile, the priestly river, mysterious like dogma, beneficent like the workings of a divine spirit, cloaked and its effects clear, like a divine teaching. There is the Jordan: that is the river of revelation. Over its waves swoops the sonorous wingbeat of the dove and a voice different from the one that human lips are wont to produce; it resounds like an echo of eternity across the waves. There is the Tiber, the small, muddy river, gigantic and sparkling as a reflection of Rome’s immortal crowns. There is the Rhine, the heroic river! Peoples never cross it but with a drawn sword, yet on its banks, as if under the protection of a hero, life encamps, free, safe, and exuberant. How the cups clink, how the songs resound, how the sagas whisper, how the weapons clank, and how it harkens so closely to the universe, so encouragingly, and meanwhile murmurs its words unceasingly: be strong, my children, be strong! I fall into the Rhine’s embrace—I never approach it any other way. Near it I am home. [...]

Source: Ida Hahn-Hahn, *Erinnerungen aus und an Frankreich*, 2 Vols, Leipzig: Duncker, 1842, Vol. 1, pp. 2–5.
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