Romanticism does two contradictory things to the notion of authorship. On the one hand, the author becomes supremely individualistic, someone who creates out of a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling rather than by correctly and cleverly applying the approved thematic, poetical and rhetorical conventions; whose persona is that of Byron rather than Dr Johnson. On the other hand, there is a de-individualisation of the author: he is merely an Aeolian harp, responding to the vibrancies and inspirations that waft through him, who becomes de-individualised as he loses himself in an inspiration that is collective or spiritual rather than personal. In this sense, the poet can become the voice of his nation, and his role is (to echo James Joyce’s phrase, slightly ironically given to the adolescent idealist alter ego of Stephen Dedalus, in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man) to “forge the uncreated conscience of his race in the smithy of his soul”.

The idea that the ‘nation’ is the collective author and articulator of a collective consciousness: that notion is what I wish to trace here, and the Romantic period, which celebrates the poet’s Self at the same time that it glorifies the collective folk effusions of popular balladry and fairytale, is a crucial period to scrutinise in this respect. The origin of this idea can be found in Giambattista Vico’s Scienza Nuova of 1725, which posited the view that each nations enters the stage of world history in a ‘Big Bang’ of collective self-articulation involving, in one originary foundational moment, the crystallisation of its mythology, epic poetry, language, and law. These elements of human culture and cognition form, at that primal stage, an undifferentiated whole, and to study them a new kind of scientific endeavour is needed, one which Vico calls, not by the appellation of ‘philosophy’ but by the almost-neologism ‘philology’.¹

A century later, the idea of philology as the study of cultural history involving language, literature, law and mythology has become widely

¹ Generally on the conceptual history of philology, including the role of Vico: Pascale Hummel, Philologus auctor; Le philologue et son oeuvre (Bern: Lang, 2003).
accepted, as had the term of ‘philology’ itself, though almost no-one at the time still recalled Vico as the originator of this paradigm. The influence of Vico over romantic historicism by way of Herder is a somewhat shadowy one, on which I hope to throw some light towards the end of this article.

The appreciation of collective-anonymous authorship is certainly a dominant attitude among early-nineteenth-century philologists. Thus, Wilhelm Grimm, when lecturing on the *Nibelungenlied* at the University of Göttingen, pointed out that the most valuable (and archaic) specimens of a national literature were the anonymous, epic fragments (*Nibelungenlied, Hildebrandslied*, Otfrid; and we might add *Beowulf* and the *Chanson de Roland* as analogues from English and French), while later chivalric romance, produced by authors individually known by name (Gottfried von Strasburg, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Chrétien de Troyes) are energized, non-national and less impressive by comparison. The anonymous epic pieces “seem to belong to the nation at large, merely enunciated by a given individual” and “have a firm, well-demarcated content reared on a straightforward base,” while “courtly poets were not quite master of their material and topics and often confuse the foreign tales.”

The rise of the vernacular literatures of Europe as ‘national literatures’ in the nineteenth-century sense involved in large part the retrieval and publication of these primeval epics. Where written documents were unavailable, however, the lacuna was often filled by the edition of oral material. The result is an interesting hybrid: not only does oral literature feed into the rising interest in folklore and the study of popular culture as a performative praxis; it also spills over into the concerns of literary history and the search for vernacular epics. To be sure, the notion of ‘oral epic’ is *prima facie* an oxymoron. The most exalted of literary genres, linked to the names of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Camões and Milton, was in the very root sense of the word *literary*, which is to say a written, literate genre. To see the quality of epic residing in the oral transmission of illiterate demotic performers required, in the early nineteenth century at least, some re-conceptualisation. How this reconceptualisation came about is linked to the extraordinary European reception history of an oral text from the Balkans, the *Hasanaginica*, in the years 1770–1825, reverberating as it did against the then-current debates around Ossian, Homer and the anonymous-epic beginnings of vernacular literatures. *Hasanaginica* and its extraordinary reception trajectory demonstrates how the preoc-

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