

Nationalism on Stage: Kleist's Drama *Die Hermannsschlacht*

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Referring to Kleist's drama *Die Hermannsschlacht* (written 1808 / published 1821) and thus to Arminius, chieftain of the Cherusci, in the context of a volume on Ossian and national epics might appear misleading for three reasons. Firstly, there seems to be no clear evidence that Kleist quoted Ossian directly in his work. The only occasion when he actually mentions Ossian is in a text published in 1810 in the *Berliner Abendblätter* concerning the famous painting by Caspar David Friedrich, "The Monk by the Sea". But this text is not originally by Kleist himself, rather an adaptation of one written by Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim (Schmidt, 2003, I: 355). Nevertheless, Wolf Gerhard Schmidt recognizes a pervasive presence of Ossian in Kleist's work, not in terms of direct quotation, but more in the sense of imagery and style, mainly in the description of nature and conflicts (both in terms of ethics and of power and violence).¹ He even refers to the *Hermannsschlacht* which presents a primary Germanic atmosphere that could not be imagined without the Ossianic tradition, particularly as developed by Klopstock (Jung, 2004). And Kleist's Herrmann himself seems to Schmidt a protagonist modelled on Fingal in his preference for action over words, cultivating firmness and indomitability in battle with considerateness and clemency in peace ("Härte und Unbeugsamkeit im Kampf sowie Besonnenheit und Milde im Frieden"; Schmidt, 2003-4: II, 934 f.). Schmidt also recognizes that Kleist has taken these characteristics a step further to another level of deep existential uncertainty. The second reason why dealing with Herrmann or Arminius in this context might be misleading is that, unlike Ossian, Arminius is a figure from history, a source-based existence that does not refer to the mythical but to the actual historical beginnings of a nation. Referring to Arminius is the equivalent of referring to the Celtic queen Boudicca in the British Isles or to Calgacus in Caledonia or to the Gallic chieftain Vercingetorix or to the Lusitanian hero Viriatus, all united in their struggle against the Roman Empire. And finally, dealing with Arminius (and Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht*) in the context of national epics is also misleading because the story of Arminius has never been presented as an epic. His historical victory over the Roman Empire has mostly been presented in terms of staging and drama.

1 Cf. the reviews by Lampion (2005) and Bär (2006).

Being unable to show how Kleist read Ossian, Herrmann being a historical figure and the *Herrmannsschlacht* not being an epic, we might conclude that I have chosen the wrong case for the topic we are dealing with. Before we come to this conclusion, let me try to present a thesis which might appear odd at first glance. I will try to show Kleist's drama on Arminius as the example of what national epic heroes are good for – or bad for. Kleist's play provides a kind of pattern that helps to understand how epics might work in the imagination of communities – to quote Benjamin Anderson's famous expression. You will understand that I think about this question on the basis of the German experience with nationalism in the twentieth century: first in its fatal *furor* as Nazism and later in its absence as a divided non-nation integrated and fully committed to the higher values of Europe and cosmopolitanism.

Arminius was first mentioned by the Roman historian Strabo and then widely characterized by Tacitus, who was born not even fifty years after Arminius' victory in the famous battle against Varus. Germans did not remember Arminius except in moments of crisis, first in the time of the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; Tacitus was rediscovered at the beginning of the sixteenth century – and so was the story of Arminius. A first moment of crisis where Arminius could appear as a national liberator might be found in a famous text written by Ulrich von Hutten in 1529; in the seventeenth century it is Christian David von Lohenstein who gives a version in prose; and in the eighteenth century Johann Elias Schlegel, Friedrich Georg Klopstock and Christoph Martin Wieland turn their attention to him. But the climax of his success as a figure of national identification turned out to be the nineteenth century due to the Napoleonic wars against the background of which Kleist's drama was written. All through the nineteenth century we find a wide interest in Arminius, based on the national movement which led to its most famous expression in the monument built in honour of Arminius in the Teutoburg Forest, where the battle was believed to have taken place. During the early twentieth century, and particularly during the Nazi-regime, Arminius or Hermann was used as a permanent reference to what the German nation would be capable of achieving. By the end of World War II the fascination definitely ceased. When in 2009 Germany might have celebrated the bimillennial anniversary of the historic battle, there was no significant commemoration; not even the media wanted to explore the spectacle of a victory that led to German's *Sonderweg* over centuries. Germans are definitely not interested in their national hero, a by-product of history which the world would like to enjoy for a long time.

What is true for Arminius as a historical figure is also true for Kleist's drama dedicated to him. When the famous German scholar Walter Müller-Seidel published an extensive study on Heinrich von Kleist in 1961, he explicitly excluded

the *Herrmannsschlacht* from his analysis: Only subject to constant qualification could one consider Kleist's drama as a literary work, he wrote.² That it constitutes something of an aberration seems to be confirmed by a statement made by Kleist himself in a letter to his friend Collin (22 February, 1809), where he explicitly admitted that this drama was calculated for the moment, much more than any other texts he had conceived. Indeed Kleist found himself very much committed to the struggle against Napoleon recently inspired by the policy of Austria, which was the only country to oppose French hegemony in Europe (Samuel, 1973). In his ode "Germania an ihre Kinder" Kleist wrote a famous verse on Napoleon, where we find the *furor* that characterizes the national movement: "Schlagt ihn tot! Das Weltgericht / Fragt euch nach den Gründen nicht!" (Kleist, 1982, I: 27) [Strike him dead, the court of history will not ask for reasons]. Such is the *furor* of nationalism and such is Kleist's wish to change Europe's political destiny. There is a great amount of disappointment, disorientation and despair in the radicalism of such words, but we have no indication that Kleist was not willing to take them seriously and literally. Comparing his national enthusiastic phase with other moments of his career (like the romanticism in *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn* or a certain classicism in *Penthesilea*), it seems as if the political phase was the only one in which Kleist felt he held the proper means for a literary and a practical solution. The poetic force and power of his political and dramatic writing in favour of a rebellion against Napoleon is of the same kind as in other moments of his work – but it is dedicated to the extreme end of a blind national exaltation. It is this radicalism in making poetry serve the ends of blind patriotism that we find in *Die Herrmannsschlacht* – and that seems to me the critical point of national epics in general. Let me give you some examples of how Kleist staged nationalism.

As far as formal structure is concerned, *Die Herrmannsschlacht* follows classical patterns in terms of its blank verse and its five acts. But it is the action and the motivation for it staged in the drama and mainly represented by Herrmann himself that lead to the effects intended by Kleist. This becomes clear right from the beginning, in the first scene where Herrmann tries to convince his colleagues and friends to be ready to fight against the Romans, while the others still wonder what might be Herrmann's intention; they even consider that he might have changed his mind and run over to the Romans. Right from the beginning the other protagonists do not actually understand what Herrmann is planning; they do not even display the intellectual autonomy that would allow freedom of decision. Herrmann will provoke their understanding even further when he asks them whether they would accept to sacrifice everything for the fight against the Romans:

2 Cf. Müller Seidel 1971. I have developed some of the following ideas in Hanenberg, 1995 and Hanenberg, 2002.

all their goods and welfare, wives and children.³ So that they ask in return: But isn't it that what we are fighting for?⁴ The German leaders do not understand Herrmann's message: to be successful in the fight, the will to prevail must be greater than everything, even greater than the things the fight is fought for. Fighting against the enemy is a decision of total radicalism, an absolute aim. From the moment of decision nothing more will count but victory. That is why on the way to victory all means are permitted. Fighting for an absolute aim means that there is no truth, no reason and nothing else but the pure demand of its own right.

Kleist was actually a master in setting himself goals and trying out new projects. *Käthchen von Heilbronn* – as I mentioned before – is an experiment in Romanticism, *Penthesilea* an attempt at classicism, *The Broken Jug* an exercise in the illumination of right and reason. We know from Kleist's stories that none of these approaches could be held effective beyond its own particular demand: what feelings are, what beauty is, how right can be established and truth can be found, is very much a question of viewpoint and of the starting point where the question itself is grounded. Scholars of Kleist's work widely agree that it represents a permanent search for new solutions, as if its author had been able to establish and develop multiple points of view. His own position would have been in-between, nowhere, lost in the radicalism, singularity and idiosyncrasy of each of them.

It is on this experience that Herrmann builds up his project of a fight against the Romans. Scholars of Kleist's work normally do not accept such a poetic and philosophical grounding of patriotic radicalism, but for Kleist the nationalistic viewpoint might have been just one more approach to explore and try out. And for the author, this viewpoint might even have promised to fulfil something that other projects did not achieve: the reconnection with life and actuality. Scholars of Kleist's work should take this approach as seriously as the others that seek to establish islands of poetic eternity.

Herrmann is very much aware of the fact that reality is a question of viewpoint and that it is possible to induce people to adopt a certain perspective. That is why his main business is deception, delusion and misdirection. The following summary of Herrmann's tactics and policy show how much he is a master in creating misleading viewpoints – for Romans as well as for Germans: He allows the Roman general Varus to invade his country, promising a common fight against Prince Marbod, chieftain of the Suebi. Simultaneously he sends secret

3 “Kurz, wollt ihr, wie ich schon einmal Euch sagte, / Zusammenraffen Weib und Kind, / Und auf der Weser rechtes Ufer bringen, / Geschirre, goldn' und silberne, die Ihr / Besitzt, schmelzen, Perlen und Juwelen / Verkaufen oder sie verpfänden, / Verheeren Eure Fluren, Eure Heerden / Erschlagen, Eure Plätze niederbrennen, / So bin ich euer Mann ” (Kleist, 2001: 27 f.).

4 “Das eben, Rasender, das ist es ja, / Was wir in diesem Krieg vertheidigen wollen!” (Kleist, 2001: 27).

messages to Marbod inviting him to join Herrmann in his fight against the Romans. To convince Marbod, Herrmann offers him the crown and leadership over all Germans. While thus preparing the insurrection against the Romans, he does everything to comfort them in their delusory idea of Herrmann as friend and ally. When the Roman ambassador Ventidius is obviously making overtures to Thusnelda, Herrmann's wife, he even encourages her to play along, just to make Ventidius believe that German women are all in thrall to Roman attractiveness.

But when the Romans start to invade Cheruska, misdeeds and crimes are reported that start to undermine the alliance between Germans and Romans. Herrmann sends some of his men disguised as Romans to aggravate those acts, creating the image of cruel and murderous enemies who seem to abuse German courtesy. Thus, Herrmann enhances Germans' will for the fight against the Romans. An ambush in the Teutoburg Forest leads Varus to Marbod, while Herrmann follows from the rear so that the Romans are completely surrounded and emphatically defeated.

So far we find in the drama the history of a fight between oppressors and oppressed (Esen, 1998). But the fight is not just about territory and domination. Romans and Germans even represent a difference between those who defend a project of civilization on the one hand and those who fight against this project as such on the other. Against Roman civilization Herrmann seems to establish the claim of barbarianism in its own right.

The Romans stand for power and rights, for the right of power as well as for the power of right, the guarantee of civil society. The drama illustrates this aspect in a scene where Quintilius Varus extends the Roman protection of German rights even to the question of gods: Wodan, the German deity, should be accorded as much respect as Zeus himself.⁵ The Romans do not act as enemies, but as guarantors of right and order, following higher principles of justice and the sacred.

We can observe the opposite of this in a scene after Herrmann's victory. One of Varus' leaders asks Herrmann to protect him from violence and death, evoking his rights as prisoner and Herrmann's responsibilities as victor. Herrmann's answer is clear and short: How can Romans refer to right when they came to Germany to oppress the country and the people? There is only one answer that Roman right deserves: a doubly heavy cudgel to kill the Roman.⁶

5 "Denn Wodan ist, dass Ihr's nur wisst, Ihr Römer, / Der Zevs der Deutschen, Herr des Blitzes / Diesseits der Alpen, so wie jenseits der; [...] / Und kurz, Quintilius, Euer Feldherr, will / Mit Ehrfurcht und mit Scheu, im Tempel dieser Wälder, / Wie den Olympier selbst, geehrt ihn wissen" (Kleist, 2001: 75).

6 "Du weisst was Recht ist, Du verfluchter Bube, / Und kamst nach Deutschland, unbeleidigt, / Um uns zu unterdrücken? / Nehmt eine Keule doppelten Gewichts, / Und schlagt ihn todt!" (Kleist, 2001: 143 f.).

Herrmann is not interested in right and mercy. His principle is the cudgel. And his wife follows him in this. While at first she began to believe that the Roman officer actually loved her, Herrmann soon makes her see that he is only interested in her hair which is to be shorn completely after the expected Roman victory. It is easy for her to entice her would-be lover into a silent garden where instead of her arms the cruel paws of a bear will embrace him.

Neither right, nor mercy, nor love: there is nothing one can count on, when the absolute goal of national interest is to be achieved.

And there is a further reason why everything seems to lose its validity: the conditions under which one decides what to do. Three elements are mentioned in Kleist's texts that cast profound doubt on the reliability of these conditions. The first is language, the command of its sound and meaning. There is a striking example of how the lack of language competence leads to a complete loss of orientation. As the Romans are not able to understand – as one of the Roman generals himself complains – the difference between “Pfiffikon” and “Iphikon”, and as they even confound day and night because “Tag” and “Nacht” contain the same vowel, they lose their way and get lost.⁷ As the Romans have no command of the German language, their ability to understand, where they are and where they are going to, is put at risk, not only in the literal sense of their way but even more in the metaphorical sense of the way as their destiny. Competence in sign interpretation and its use is an essential condition for all kinds of projects.

The second condition which will impare Varus' decisions is visibility, a condition that works even more basically and fundamentally than language. In the dark forest and under “Nacht, Donner und Blitz” (H 74) [night, thunder and lightning] the Romans literally lose their senses. Those who have lost their senses are easy to defeat.

The third condition is the opposite of the senses: the wits and their weakening by transcendental and unreal forces. Unsure what to do, Varus turns to a Cheruskean witch to hear her answer to three questions: Where do I come from? Where am I? Where am I going to? (“Wo komm ich her? Wo bin ich? Wohin wandr' ich?”; Kleist, 2001: 77) and of course the answers are far from comforting: Where do I come from? From nothing. Where do I go to? To nothing. And where am I? Two steps from the grave, right between nothing and nothing.

7 “Pfiffikon! Iphikon! Was das, beim Jupiter! / Für eine Sprache ist! Als schlüg' ein Stecken / An einen alten, rostzerfress'nen Helm! / Ein Gräulsystem von Worten, nicht geschickt, / Zwei solche Ding', wie Tag und Nacht, / Durch einen eignen Laut zu unterscheiden. / Ich glaub', ein Tauber war's, der das Geheul erfunden, / Und an den Mäulern sehen sie sich's ab” (Kleist, 2001: 123).

In Brentano's text on Friedrich's picture mentioned above, visitors fall into a similar misunderstanding: “Erste Dame. Hast du gehört, Luise? Das ist Ossian. / Zweite Dame. Ach nein, du miß verstehst ihn, es ist der Ozean” (Brentano, 1963: 1034).

The answers given by the Cheruskean witch are meaningful in a threefold way. Firstly, they show that transcendence does not respond to human needs. Secondly, when it does respond the answer is nothing. And thirdly: this answer then has a devastating effect on human performance. Discussing this experience with his officers who seem not to have even seen the witch at all, Varus confesses that the witch lamed his life's wing through the sharp steel of her tongue. Transcendentally convulsed, Varus lost the condition for fighting and self determination.

Herrmann will take advantage of such conditions: the linguistic incompetence of his adversary, the loss of visibility and his superstitious belief in transcendence. Herrmann of course is active in the construction of meaning, visibility and belief. He does not wait for answers, clarity and advice, but willingly constructs them, builds them up as if life were a script to be written by his own hand. In a drastic scene, a German father kills his daughter who had been violated by a Roman. Herrmann cuts her body into fifteen pieces to send them to each of the fifteen German clans and peoples (Kleist, 2011: 106). The meaning of the body transformed into a national sign is clear and evident: to restore the body's wholeness, German clans and peoples will have to fight together. While Varus is the victim of the obscurity of signs, Herrmann turns out to be the master in designing meaning. When Thusnelda asks him whether he would give pardon at least to those who revealed themselves to be good men among the Romans, Herrmann has no doubt that even goodness has to be judged against the absolute aim of German freedom. There is no goodness that could deflect him from his project: the good together with the bad. The good, they are the worst. And thus they are the first to fall victim to Herrmann's revenge (Kleist, 2001: 110).

Herrmann's attitude is radical and absolute. Beyond the contemporary effect on the fight against Napoleon, this absolute radicalism seems to include a poetic and a theoretical message that could be useful for the understanding of national epics in general. In this sense we should not try to see Herrmann as better than he is. He is not sacrificing his humanity for the benefit of truth (as suggested in the commentary to a standard edition of the text; Kleist, 1987: 1109), but he simply longs for victory. There is no other, no deeper reason for him than the reason of his own self-proclaimed ambition. He is not in service of any transcendent truth but only of his own definition of what seems worthy and achievable to himself. In this sense, he is the representative of a radical constructivism. As such, he commands language, setting and transcendence – just like a poet.

Herrmann's attitude is as much a poetic one as Kleist's decision to represent Herrmann as the poetic answer to the political challenges of his time. In this sense, Herrmann not only confirms the power of resistance but he also proves the power of poetry itself. The national interest and the poetic conception fall together.

When poetry and nationalism come together in all their radicalism, then there is no truth, no beauty behind which justifies this radicalism. That is what we can learn from Kleist's *Herrmannsschlacht*, an early example of a moment when modernity could be frightened by itself. The lesson came as early as the beginning of the nationalistic nineteenth century and a long time before Nazism. But history has shown us, finally, that no such radicalism could ever be strong enough to avoid its own repetition.

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