The Drama of Language

Burckhardt, Sigurd

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Burckhardt, Sigurd. 
The Drama of Language: Essays on Goethe and Kleist. 

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/70847

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2427525
HERE IS no need to labor the point that Goethe's *Egmont* must have been very present to Kleist's mind when he wrote his last testamentary play. The parallels, both in general conception and in details, are many and manifest. My purpose is, rather, to understand *Homburg* as Kleist's specific and conscious answer to Goethe, his way of saying: This is my *Egmont*, or even perhaps: This is the real *Egmont*. Duelist that he was at heart, Kleist here chose the proper weapons and the only meaningful arena for a decisive trial by combat with his great rival; he joined the issue on the stage and in dramatic action and language. As in his story "Der Zweikampf," the true verdict was slow in coming, but I think that there can be no doubt any longer who the victor is.

How minutely conscious Kleist was of his opponent is evident from his formulation of the death sentence. In *Egmont* the sentence is read in full—except for one seemingly inconsequential point, to which Goethe calls our attention by an odd stage direction: "Datum und Jahreszahl werden undeutlich gelesen, so, dass die Zuhörer nicht verstehen [Day and year are read indistinctly, so that the listener does not understand them]." When Homburg writes his reply to the Elector—which is to say, his death sentence, since the Elector has just made him supreme judge of his own case—Kleist withholds from us what Goethe supplies—the text of the sentence—but gives us what Goethe withholds—the date: "Homburg; gegeben, Fehrbellin, am zwölften [Homburg; signed at Fehrbellin, *on this twelfth day*]." It would seem that Kleist saw this event—and with it the whole play which pivots on it—as an inversion of Goethe's point. The accused is judge rather than mere victim; the sentence is implicit rather than explicit; the time, instead of being left indeterminate, is specified.

At issue in both plays is the role of the exceptional man—the man who believes he can and must follow the promptings of his genius—within the social order. And there can be little doubt that Schiller—and Kleist also, as I shall try to show—were right in judging that Goethe's solution, or rather dissolution, of the issue was operatic. Klärchen, appearing through dissolving prison walls as the goddess of liberty, is
literally a dea ex machina; her comfort and promises do not spring from the inner necessities of the plot, but are a divine dispensation by the omnipotent playwright. Goethe turns the tragedy into a kind of “Märtyrerspiel,” removes the hero from a wicked world into a higher, supramundane jurisdiction, a realm of the spirit in which the positive judgments of the existing order can be morally rescinded.

Throughout the play, Egmont does not act; he is, and suffers for being as he is. He refuses to plan, to calculate, to take steps which, to secure him a measure of freedom, would compromise that absolute liberty to be himself which he considers his essential being. In other words, he is a radically un-dramatic figure—not necessarily in the sense that he makes a poor hero for a drama, but rather that he is lacking in precisely those qualities which a dramatist must possess. A dramatist must be a statesman, must manoeuvre, make binding choices; he must deny himself direct self-expression in order to achieve it more truly through the grand design. He must acknowledge that he progressively binds himself with each word he writes; his sole chance of creative freedom lies in the conscious acceptance of this fact. By refusing this knowledge, Egmont ends in prison walls so massive that only “Bühnenzauber” can penetrate them.

For it is in good part his doing that the world about him turns monolithic; he is one of Alba’s summoners. Because he prefers love idyls with Klärchen to the austere demands Margaret of Parma would make on him, the state’s authority stiffens. The possibility of a saving interchange between the individual and the order, between feeling and form, recedes to the point where the dialogue between the two is merely a trap and an illusion. The meaning of the great scene between Egmont and Alba lies not in what they say, but in the fact that what they say is to no purpose; the scene is dramatically sterile. We know from the start what Egmont discovers too late: “Umsonst hab ich so viel gesprochen, die Luft hab ich erschüttert, weiter nichts gewonnen. [I have spoken so much to no purpose, I have disturbed the air, achieved nothing else].” Effective action—that is, drama—now takes place in extraverbal silence.

It is fitting, therefore, that in the end we hear Egmont as an ineffective voice beating vainly against impenetrable masonry and its verbal equivalent: the sentence of death. With this wholly impersonal order, discourse is impossible; when it speaks, it has spoken—dixit—and whatever is said to it or against it is futile expostulation rather than reply. Goethe supplies Ferdinand and the vision of Klärchen to soften the rigor of the final impasse; but Klärchen is dead and Ferdinand illegitimate and helpless. No solution is possible, only dissolution, as Egmont
himself knows: "Süßer Schlaf! ... Du löset die Knoten der strengen Gedanken, vermischest alle Bilder der Freude und des Schmerzes; ... eingehüllt in gefälligen Wahnsinn, versinken wir und hören auf, zu sein. [Sweet sleep! ... You unravel the knots of tense thoughts, and mingle all images of joy and pain; ... wrapped in pleasant delusion, we submerge and cease to be]."

I suggest that this is, very roughly, the interpretation of Goethe's play implicit in Homburg. Kleist reverses the play as he does the sentence; he makes the action move from the deadlock of counterposed absolutes to their dramatic interaction. What with Goethe is a sentence of death, both for the hero and ultimately for the petrified order, Kleist turns into a true sentence, genuine speech. In contrast to Egmont, who learns nothing (not even that Klärchen is dead; he dies deluded), the Prince learns how to become a dramatic poet.

To this end Kleist grants him Egmont's final vision at the very outset, as though to say: this is not a consolation prize but a task, the dream of a play that still demands to be written. The very structure of Homburg is Kleist's programmatic announcement that he intends to give reality, dramatic validity to Egmont's illusory triumph. To this end he makes a significant change in the vision itself: the state, embodied in the Elector, plays a significant role in it. When Schiller prepared Egmont for the Weimar stage in 1796, he eliminated the dream vision and instead brought Alba into the prison, concealed in a cloak which Egmont finally tears off. Though the change violates the essentially undramatic logic of the play, it shows Schiller's keen sense of what true drama demands. Goethe's ending is operatic because an essential partner to the transaction—the state—is lacking, has been dissolved into an illusory non-existence. Egmont's triumph—quite unlike that of, say, Maria Stuart—remains essentially private, essentially lyrical. Kleist, like Schiller, brings the state back into the action—not as a villain to be exposed, however, but as a genuine, fully implicated partner.

Through this re-entry, the plot develops the complex urgency which genuine drama shares with political reality. There is no purely private sphere for Kleist, nor a purely public one, though the Elector mistakenly thinks so. Even love, the most private of feelings, has public consequences. Unlike the blissfully and later pathetically inconsequential love of Egmont and Klärchen, that of Homburg and Natalie propels the action at crucial points, creates confusions and dilemmas, forces vitally necessary confrontations. Goethe's play moves toward a simplicity which is as undramatic as it is unpolitical. As Oranien and Margaret disappear, meaningful choice and interaction become impossible. And as the pos-
sibility of action recedes, rhetoric inevitably takes over; language which cannot act within the play has no one to address except the feelings of the chairbound audience. In Homburg the movement is opposite: from a relative and illusory simplicity toward increasing complexity and involvement. What the characters say and write becomes ever more decisive, until at the climactic moment the fate not only of the hero but of the state hangs on one utterance, one sentence.

That sentence, of course, is the one Homburg composes in reply to the Elector. I use the word “compose” advisedly. The entire and still inconclusive debate over the meaning of Kleist’s play centers ultimately on one question: What does the Prince say in his answer? If, instead of speculating about the “what,” critics had paid closer attention to the “how,” the dispute might be nearer a solution, because here, as in all true poetry, it is through the “how” that we discover the “what,” through the form that we discover the meaning. Again, a glance at Egmont proves helpful. Egmont cannot be bothered with the drudgery of writing, will not bend his spontaneous genius to the chore of careful and definitive formulation. He makes his feelings known and leaves the rest to his secretary, so that—by a justice truly poetic—in the end his writing is done for him, by Alba. A comparable impatience with writing down the battle plan is in part responsible for the as yet unsigned death sentence that hangs over Homburg’s head; but now, given the opportunity to write a sentence of his own, he buckles down to the hard labor of composition.

The opportunity, we must note, is one he is invited from every side to ignore. The phrasing of the Elector’s note, Natalie, his own feelings urge him simply to seize upon ready-made formulas—whether of defiance or contrition—and to let the form shift for itself, as something purely external. In Natalie’s words:

Doch nun tu auch das deine du, und schreib
Wie er’s begehrt; du siehst, es ist der Vorwand,
Die äussre Form nur, deren es bedarf. (ll. 1346–48)

[But now, you do your part too, and write as he desires; you see, it is the excuse, simply the outer form, that is needed.]

But instead, and in the face of powerful temptations, the Prince composes with almost comical care: he begins to write, tears up what he has written, rereads the Elector’s note, starts to write anew, gets up to reconsider, tells Natalie that he is on the point of finding the satisfactory phrasing—“die Fassung eines Prinzen”—and finally does write. In short,
we see him bodily as a “Verfasser,” an author, with the author’s pain­staking concern over the “how”: “Gleich werd ich wissen, wie ich schreiben soll [I’ll know in a moment how I am to write].” Expostula­tion would have won him his life, though it would have ruined the state. But with a suicidal insistence on the perfect and perfectly expressive form, he would rather die than use “die Fassung eines Schuftes.”

Thus, in the effort of composition enacted before our eyes, Homburg “composes himself.” The play on the words “Fassung” and “sich fassen” is Kleist’s, not mine. The Prince, who, confronted by the deadly writ of the law, had become completely “fassungslos,” completely unresponsive to the Electress’ “Fasse dich!,” now assumes the fearful responsibility of composing his own, sovereign sentence; having been thrust into nothing­ness—“Ins Nichts mit dir zurück, Herr Pinz von Homburg, / Ins Nichts, ins Nichts! [Back to nothingness with you, Prince of Homburg, to nothingness, to nothingness!]”—he now composes himself out of that nothingness in a free creative act. His letter is not “self-expression” in the normal sense—expression of his feelings, thoughts, judgment or what not; it becomes himself and he it, so that he and it are, in the act of writing, self-composed.

Even in his final words, Egmont speaks disdainfully of “das hohle Wort des Herrschers” and rests his faith on “Gemüüt.” Homburg learns that the state’s word has the deadly solidity of chains and bullets. That is why at first he abjectly begs rather than nobly expostulates; death reduces rhetoric to irrelevancy. And that is why, when he sees a pos­sibility of replying, he accepts it as an absolute responsibility to find words equally solid. Again in sharp contrast to Egmont, who in his dealings with debtors, heretics and soldiers refuses to make his word the law, determines each case, by feeling, as an exception to the general principle which—except for this one case, of course,—is to govern such cases. Homburg replies in the awareness that he is sovereign, that his word is law. For this reason he concludes his letter with the sovereign word “gegeben,” which in Goethe’s play concludes Alba’s sentence. For this reason he can issue it, not “im Namen des Königs,” but in his own. For this reason his letter almost literally invests the half­dressed, half­divested Elector with the authority to deal with the manifold challenges to himself and the state. Homburg acts truly—i.e., sovereignly—not when he leads his cavalry into battle but when he puts pen to paper, because he comprehends writing as a fully political act, defined by and in turn defining the legal order in which it takes place.

My criticism of Goethe’s play has been severe—as severe, I believe, as Kleist’s implicitly is. But I have left out of consideration one crucial fact,
which I rather suspect Kleist ignored. Homburg is Kleist’s last drama, not merely in the sense that he wrote no more plays after it, but that it was final for that moment. There is nothing final about Egmont; when Goethe finished it in 1787, he had already completed what we must call a later play: Iphigenie. This is not the occasion to show how the problems which are evaded, the questions which are begged in Egmont are confronted—and solved—in Iphigenie; I must confine myself to asserting that Egmont was not, even at the moment of its writing, Goethe’s last dramatic word. Rather it was a funeral elegy, a final tribute to the beauty and grace of a past and imperfect incarnation. Ultimately it was Goethe himself who condemned the play, as surely as Alba condemns its hero; the play is an instance of the axiom: Nemo contra Deum nisi Deus ipse. Goethe, with his incomparable piety toward himself, his deep reverence for all organic development, however incomplete it might seem in retrospect, could not help seeing, and sorrowing over, the lyrical splendor he had to bury, because it was inadequate to the demands of true drama, which is to say, of a truly social poetry. His sorrow was gentle rather than bitter, because in Iphigenie he already had assurance of a metamorphic resurrection. Later, in Die natürliche Tochter, his grief was to be vastly more bitter and unrelieved, for then he knew that he was compelled to bury the dramatic form altogether. Moving rhetoric no longer provided adequate consolation against so final a loss; Goethe took refuge in enigmatic irony. But in 1787, something better, something harder and purer was already waiting in the wings to take over the stage left vacant by Egmont.

This, I believe, is the secret of the withheld date. Because Goethe was so supremely scrupulous a poet, he had to betray, at least to the attentive reader, the fact that this play was not, as it were, contemporary to itself, not a present enactment of present problems. Egmont’s sentence is not what the later sentence of arrest is for Tasso or the sentence of exile for Eugenie, or the death sentence for Homburg: an incomprehensible catastrophe which leaves the poet’s world in fragments and demands a reconstruction from chaos. Egmont never loses composure; the words “Fasse dich” are not addressed to him, but by him to the disconsolate Ferdinand. The dramatic present is, in truth, no present; nothing of absolute consequence, nothing that cannot be managed by the rhetoric of splendid defiance and unshaken self-assurance, is transacted.

True drama is a life-and-death trial. In it a mode of speech, a conception of language in action, is tested; and a conception of language means, for the poet, a conception of himself and his social function.
This is what happens in *Iphigenie*, which is genuinely political, because it asks the question which *Egmont* never really asks: How must men speak in order to make true communion, and hence true communities, possible? When *Iphigenia* says:

> Ich werde grossem Vorwurf nicht entgehn
> Noch schwerem Übel, wenn es mir misslingt;
> Allein Euch leg ich's auf die Kniee! Wenn
> Ihr wahrhaft seid, wie Ihr gepriesen werdet,
> So zeigt's durch Euren Beistand und verherrlicht
> Durch mich die Wahrheit. (ll. 1914–19)

[I shall not escape great reproach nor serious harm, if I do not succeed; however, I lay it on your knees! If you truly are as you are extolled for being, demonstrate it by your support and exalt truth through me.]

in that moment she transforms language into action. This is *dramatic* speech, very different from Homburg’s, but forged by the same pressure of unsecured risk, unqualified reply. Goethe said of himself that he could never have written a real tragedy; it would have killed him. He called *Egmont* a “Trauerspiel,” but I think we can take him at his word and conclude that he himself did not think of it as a real tragedy. The decisive risk had already been taken, and won, elsewhere; so that *Egmont* is an expression rather than an enactment.

While *Egmont* expresses his being, Homburg defines himself in action. His reply to the state, as expression implicit, is fully explicit as act, fully enmeshed in circumstance and tied to the moment. And when he is finally crowned victor by Natalie von Oranien, who, “gedrängt von Spaniens Tyrannenheeren,” had to seek refuge and protection in Brandenburg, the victory is not only over the Swedes, over himself, or even the more complicated one over the Elector, but also the victory over the appealing and eloquent Netherlander, who only dreamed of laurels and should have started where he left off. Homburg, like Yeats, discovers that responsibilities do not end in the pleasing madness of dreams but rather begin there; and that they are discharged, not in expostulation but by reply.