7. Kleist’s *Hermannsschlacht*: The Lock and the Key

ISTORY sometimes seems to do the work of interpreting for us. Since World War II we can hardly help accepting Hitler and Goebbels as authoritative interpreters of Kleist’s *Hermannsschlacht* and the events of 1933 to 1945 as its gruesomely faithful translation into fact. The play has become the “unbewältigte Vergangenheit” of Kleist criticism, something we would avoid rather than contemplate. How, we wonder, could it ever have been talked about as Gundolf talked about it some forty years ago?

Comparatively speaking, the least convulsed.... of his plays to date.... Controlled, firm, with a goal kept tenaciously in sight.... the unrestrained ecstasies of sheer impulse and somnambulistic escapes from self are almost completely lacking in it.... The language is more alert, purer, sturdier, pithier [than up to now].... He had finally found an area outside of himself which he did not have to compress into himself first, but in which he could extend himself with some freedom—an answering element that he found responsive even before he shouted at it.¹

Gundolf writes without embarrassment, almost innocently, as though he were dealing with a work of literature. We “Nachgeborenen” cannot be so untroubled; for us it is not a play so much as an issue.

In this feeling we are, I think, partly right—which is to say, we react as Kleist meant us, initially, to react. Whatever its precise meaning may turn out to be, the play is first of all an act of calculated violence, an assault on our moral convictions. But if we think it worth knowing what Kleist had in mind with this piece of “Schrecklichkeit,” we must do more than react; we must look. For Gundolf also is partly right: Kleist here is “controlled, firm, with a goal kept tentatively in sight . . .”—exactly like his protagonist Hermann. We are wrong in describing the play as an “eruption” or “fit,” a “running berserk” of irrational hatred; it is no such thing. It is what it represents: a coldly planned and executed ambush. Like all drama worth talking about, *Die Hermannsschlacht* constitutes a careful design both moral and metaphoric, though a design of a strange and shocking sort. I shall try to read it accordingly.
I

The reading must begin with the distich—often quoted and almost as often misunderstood—which serves as the play’s motto:

Wehe, mein Vaterland, dir! Die Leier, zum Ruhm dir, zu schlagen
Ist, getreu dir im Schoss, mir, deinem Dichter, verwehrt.

[Woe unto thee, my Fatherland! Faithful to thee in my heart, I as thy poet am debarred from striking my lyre in thy praise.]²

To read the critics, one would think that Kleist had written “Wehe, mein Vaterland, mir! [Woe unto me, my Fatherland!]”; the distich is commonly taken to be the poet’s bitter plaint that his work has been spurned by the very nation it was meant to glorify. But it says nothing of the sort—almost the contrary. It employs the formula of the scourging prophet’s curse; Woe unto thee! In what follows, the fatherland will be sung; but we are not to expect that the song will redound to its glory. We will not leave the performance as though we had listened to one of Klopstock’s “Bardiete” or Ayrenhoff’s Hermann und Thusnelda: with a heightened sense of our worth as bearers of so proud a “Volkstum.” We will not be invited to see ourselves as the heirs of a race of nature’s noblemen, whose purity of soul and greatness of spirit puts to flight and shame a corrupt and decadent enemy. We will not find ourselves consoled for our manifest inferiorities by a flattering contrast between “echtes Deutschtum” and “falsches Weltentum.” Rather, the song will issue “aus tiefster Erniedrigung”—from abject degradation. We will be whipped into a redoubt of self-assertion so final as to be worse almost than none—the den of the wild beast. The noble speeches, generous acts and grand exits will be given to the “villains,” while the “heroes,” more often than not, will be without manliness or dignity, as fulsome in their remorse as they are cruel in their enmity. By the time Kleist concludes his demonstration of what it means to be “getreu im Schoss” of such a fatherland, every patriotic stereotype will have been called into question.

Kleist knew that he was working within a well-established literary tradition; the meaning of Die Hermannsschlacht lies in good part in the jarring contrast between that tradition and what he does to it. There are the studiedly irregular, often grating lines, the frequent passage of prosiness, the sheer ugliness of the sounds:

Phiffikon! Iphikon!—Was das, beim Jupiter!
Für eine Sprache ist! Als schlig ein Stecken
An einen alten, rostzerfressnen Helm!
Ein Greulsystem von Worten, nicht geschickt,
Zwei solche Ding wie Tag and Nacht
Durch einen eignen Laut zu unterscheiden.
Ich glaub, ein Tauber wars, der das Geheul erfunden.
Und an den Mäulern sehen sie sichs ab. (ll. 1897–1904)

[Pfiffikon! Iphikon!—What language that is, by Jove! As though a stick were beating an old, corroded helmet! An abominable system of words, ill-suited to tell apart by sounds of their own two such things as day and night. I think the man who invented their caterwauling was deaf. And they read it on each other’s coarse lips.]

True, the speaker is a Roman; but throughout the play, Kleist insists on reminding us that these Germans are savages in every sense:

Wie wollt ihr doch, ihr Herrn, mit diesem Heer des Varus
Euch messen—an eines Haufens Spitze,
Zusammen aus den Waldungen gelaufen,
Mit der Kohorte, der gegliederten,
Die, wo sie geht and steht, des Geistes sich erfreut? (ll. 286–90)

[My, lords, just how do you propose to rival this army of Varus’—at the head of a swarm that has come together from the woodlands, to rival the well-ranked cohort that rejoices in morale wherever it may be?]

Kleist himself drives the point home, in his stage directions: “Im Hintergrund sieht man die Wohnungen der Horde [In the background are seen the dwellings of the horde].” Surely a patriot might have it on the word “Stamm” rather than “Horde.”

But to cite a more more telling and significant instance: the death of the unfortunate Hally, who, violated by Roman soldiers, is killed by her own father and then cut up into fifteen pieces, to be sent into all parts of Germany (IV, vi). The motif, of course, is a grandly tragic one; it traces its descent from Appius and Virginia and the Rape of Lucrece; a recent forebear was Lessing’s Emilia Galotti. The tradition called for the victim nobly to kill herself or to demand her own death. To underscore Roman villainy, the motif had already been employed by Lohenstein, whose lecherous Varus drives a German princess to suicide. Wieland, in his fragmentary Arminius epic, took it over; and though there is no external evidence that Kleist knew the fragment,3 it is instructive to see how the episode was handled in the pre-Kleistian tradition. Hulda, Wieland’s violated princess, speaks—in hexameters, of course:

Grausamer Varus!
Welch eine Unschuld, o was vor Hoffnungen hast du zernichtet!
Götter! ihr sehet mein Unglück, und rüstet den strafenden Donner,
Ja, dis hoff' ich, und seelig! wenn mein unbeweinbarer Jammer
Dich, gleich leidendes Vaterland, heilt! Wie gern will ich sterben
Wenn aus meinem zu frühen Grab und der kläglichen Asche
Deine Freyheit, o mütterlich Land, schnell sprossend emporsteigt.

O weinet nicht, Liebste,
Lasst mich dahingehn im süssen Bewusstseyn der göttlichen Tugend,
Die zwar leiden kann, aber im Leiden nur herrlicher glänzet.

[Cruel Varus, what innocence, O what hopes you have destroyed! O Gods,
ye see my misfortune and are preparing the avenging thunder!—verily,
this is my hope, and bliss it will be if my unlamentable despair heals thee,
O equally suffering Fatherland! How gladly will I die, if thy freedom,
O land maternal, shall rise quickly blooming from my premature grave and
pitiful remains.... O do not weep, dearest ones, let me depart in the
sweet consciousness of heavenly virtue, that can suffer to be sure, but in
suffering shines only the more gloriously.]

She speaks—for another 33 lines—and dies:

Bleich, wie sterbende Lilien, sank sie, mit welkenden Gliedern
In die Arme der winselnden Mutter; die schönen Augen
Schlossen sich dämmernd, den Lippen entwich der reizende Purpur,
Noch im Sterben voll Anmuth, entschlief der erkalzende Körper,
Und die Seele verliess, mit stillen Seufzern, ihr Wohnhaus.
Würdiges Kind!

[Pale, like dying lilies, she sank with wilting limbs into the arms of her
wailing mother; her lovely eyes faded and closed, the charming crimson
vanished from her lips; still full of grace in death, her body growing cold
breathed its last, and the soul departed its abode with quiet sighs. Noble
child!]

But what used to be matter for pathos and tragedy, Kleist makes into
the stuff of butchery: a passive, helpless, wordless female is brutally
grabbed and stabbled, without the speech or even the posture that might
redeem the savagery of the act. Into the very stage direction Kleist pur­sues himself and us, hunting down the last furtive trace of tragic
response:

(Sie fällt, mit einem kurzen Laut, übern Haufen.)

[(With a short cry, she falls headlong.)]

The poor creature is not even granted a “sinkt nieder” or “bricht
zusammen”; in the vile “übern Haufen” she suffers the unkindest cut
of all.

This is a hunting play; there is open season not only on bison and
Romans but on all kinds of sentimentality, more particularly on patriotic sentimentality. Are we to suppose that Kleist was insensitive to the pawing intimacy of Hermann’s “Kosenamen” for Thusnelda—Thuschen? If we are tempted to honor the renegade Fust for his (very belated) desertion of the Romans and contrite return to the German cause, the manner of it promptly reawakens our disgust:

\[
\text{Das hab ich heut, das musst du wissen,} \\
\text{Gestreckt am Boden heulend, mir,} \\
\text{Als mir dein Brief kam, Göttlicher, gelobt. (ll. 2498–2500)}
\]

[This you must know: when your letter reached me, excellent one, I took this vow, howling outstretched on the ground.]

Spoken like—Caliban. Varus and Septimius are noblemen next to these German princes, the “best” of whom, in his resolute reserve, is the unregenerate and unforgiven Aristan. (Of the Greek meaning of Arist-an Kleist was assuredly not unaware.) It would be only further sentimentality to think that the manner does not matter—that Teutonic feeling, however revolting, is better than Roman posturing, however noble. A dramatic poet above others knows that manner is matter; Hermann responds to the slavering of Fust and his kind exactly as we do (cf. ll. 2527–38). The Germans are far from being of Tacitean cast—outwardly or inwardly.

II

To the play’s insistent aesthetic inversions there corresponds the upside-down morality. The point needs no spelling out; Hermann himself is quite explicit:

\[
\text{Die Guten mit den Schlechten!—Was! Die Guten!} \\
\text{Das sind die Schlechtesten! Der Rache Keil} \\
\text{Soll sie zuerst vor allen andern, treffen! (ll. 1697–99)}
\]

[The good with the bad—How so, the good! They are the worst! The spearhead of revenge must strike them first, before all others!]

Most critics have assumed that there is, for Kleist, a value so absolute and ultimate that it can transform all other values. It does not much matter whether we identify this value as nationality, national independence or the inviolability of the “Volksseele”; the meaning is pretty much the same and reasonably clear. And the implication is equally clear: if
we accept Kleist’s absolute as our own, we will also accept the inverted morality as being a true one.

H. A. Korff’s judgment is representative of this mode of reading the play—and of its consequences for the normal reader:

Hier ist der Punkt, wo der Dichter Kleist überall versagt. . . . Hier ist der Punkt, wo jeder gesund fühllende Mensch dem Dichter entgegenrufen muss: “Verwirre das Gefühl uns nicht!” Versuche nicht, uns etwas als absolut verehrungswürdig und gross einzureden, was in Wahrheit als etwas höchst Fragwürdiges und bestenfalls als eine tragische Notwendigkeit, ein düsteres Mahnmal an die Unvollkommenheit der Welt zu betrachten ist. . . . Weil [Die Hermannsschlacht] uns vorbehaltlos begeistern will für die vernunftlose Verabsolutierung eines Gefühls und sei es des höchsten . . . darum ist [sie]als Dichtung ein tief fragwürdiges Gebilde.

[This is the point at which the poet Kleist fails everywhere. . . . This is the point at which every human being with normal instincts must confront the poet with: ‘Do not confuse our feelings!’ Do not attempt to convince us that something is absolutely venerable and great, that is really to be regarded as something most questionable and at best as a tragic necessity, a sad reminder of the imperfection of the world. . . . Just because [Die Hermannsschlacht] is intended to fill us with unconditional enthusiasm for the irrational autonomization of a single emotion and be it the highest . . . it is, as poetry, a deeply questionable creation.]

But surely something is wrong here. Korff’s vocabulary—“verehrungswürdig und gross,” “Verherrlichung,” and “und sei es des höchsten”—sorts oddly with “fällt übers Haufen” and “ Horde,” and even more oddly with the title of the distich that serves as the play’s motto: “Die tiefste Erniedrigung.” The argument proceeds a priori: since Kleist justifies lying and cruelty by their service to the national cause, therefore he “must have” felt—and meant us to feel—that the national cause is a value higher and more venerable than truth, kindness, justice and all the other virtues. But while this might pass for sound reasoning, it is poor reading. Kleist refuses to embody the national cause in figures, actions and words which will persuade us of its moral supremacy. What he makes us see is pelt-clad savages rejoicing in the kill; what he makes us hear is the disheveled fury of Thusnelda shouting fiendish witticisms at the man she is tearing to pieces. Again and again we witness mean stratagems and hideous vindictiveness; the mere invocation of the word “Vaterland” is quite inadequate to restore the moral balance.

To put it differently: the common view of the play implies a putative “ideal” audience—one that, having learned fully to accept Kleist’s absolute, would no longer feel horrified and violated by what it sees on the
stage. But this is clearly not the audience Kleist wanted, for he does nothing to persuade us of the overriding grandeur and splendor of the national cause. On the contrary, the play relies for its effects precisely on the brutal shocks it administers to our normal moral responses (including those of normal patriotism). Only an audience of totally brainwashed SS functionaries could watch Die Hermannsschlacht with simple assent.

In fact, not even they. The grisly rhetoric of heroic self-abnegation which Himmler employed to buck up the morale of his exterminators is the exact opposite of Kleist's technique. Even an SS man—unless he is a psychopathic sadist and needs only to be let loose—must be persuaded that acts which humanity has agreed to call evil are in fact good; and for that the rhetoric of high moral purpose, the constant glorification of the "Cause" are absolutely essential. But this is just what Kleist denies his Germans, himself and us. Even in his soliloquy Hermann does not seize the opportunity to tell us how hard he finds it to have to act as he does, how he has had to conquer his naturally "good" self for the greater good of German freedom. Nor, for that matter, does he break out into a hymn of hatred and furor Teutonicus. He speaks with the detachment of a commercial traveler:

Nun wär ich fertig, wie ein Reisender.  
Cheruska, wie es steht und liegt,  
Kommt mir, wie eingepackt in eine Kiste, vor:  
Um einen Wechsel könnt ich es verkaufen. (ll. 1656–59)

[I am ready now, like a traveler. Cheruska, just as it stands, looks to me like something packed in a chest: I could sell it for a bill of exchange.]

And elsewhere his attitude toward his scheme comes close to being one of relish; he is a man who enjoys his work.

Hermann, it is true, does try to whip his audience, the Germans, into a fury so savage that they reject all distinctions but one: Roman or German? But we are not Hermann's audience, we are Kleist's. Kleist takes pains to make us see; he manipulates our feelings not to deceive us but on the contrary to make us discover certain truths about ourselves as moral and political beings. These truths are not arrived at by logical deduction; they are defined by the play itself. Clearly we are asked to accept Hermann's conduct as justified and necessary; but it is justified only within the framework of circumstances—factual and formal, moral and metaphoric—which the play establishes. In the face of the play's paradoxical inversions, the question remains: what are these circumstances?
The place to look for an answer, then, is still the text—more particularly the Thusnelda plot. For Thusnelda is the “problem” character, the only one who significantly develops, who moves from error to truth.

But merely to say this of her is to underscore once again how radically and pointedly Kleist inverts all traditional patterns. Flaw or error, insight and subsequent atonement and purification—that is the tragic mold. But Thusnelda’s flaw is that she shows self-respect and generosity; her insight consists in the realization that by showing these she has become “unworthy” of her husband: “Arminius’ muss ich wieder würdig werden [I must again become worthy of Arminius].” And her purification is her turning into a beast. Her development is rigorously anti-tragic.

Nor is this all. Into the bear’s den Thusnelda carries a burden which we can be sure was precious to her author: Penthesilea and “Die Verlobung in St. Domingo.” She is not merely an anti-tragic heroine, in impersonal contrast to an impersonal aesthetic type; she is an anti-Penthesilea and anti-Toni. To become worthy of Arminius, she tears not just a false Roman but two of the noblest creatures of Kleist’s imagination.

The use of the Penthesilea motif need not be labored. What Penthesilea did in a trance and a delusion, Thusnelda does knowingly and by design. What in Penthesilea we experienced through the merciful and even ennobling medium of tragic poetry, we are now made to witness with brutal directness and to the accompaniment of vile sarcasms. The horror which in the earlier play had to be, and was, atoned for is now itself the “atonement.” If Penthesilea contained “den ganzen Schmutz zugleich und Glanz” of Kleist’s soul, here the motif appears stripped of all its splendor; nothing remains but the filth. Perhaps no poet has pushed so close to the precipice where terror falls into shock and awe into revulsion as Kleist did at the high point of his tragedy:

So war es ein Versehen. Küsse, Bisse,
Das reimt sich, und wer recht von Herzen liebt,
Kann schon das eine für das andre greifen. . . .
Du Aermster aller Menschen, du vergibst mir!
Ich hab mich, bei Diana, nur versprochen,
Doch jetzt sag ich dir deutlich, wie ichs meinte:
Weil ich der raschen Lippe Herr nicht bin;
Dies, du Geliebter, wars, und weiter nichts. (Sie küsst ihn.) (ll. 2981–88)

[It was a mistake then. Kissing delights, bites, these rhyme, and if one loves most fondly, he can easily take the one for the other. . . . Poorest of all humankind, you will forgive me! By Diana, it was only a slip of the
Incredibly, he managed to stop short and thereby gained for tragedy a realm of experience and a dimension of feeling it had not included before him. But now he shoves us over the edge with ghastly glee:

Ah, dearest one, how becoming the black, stiff bristles will be to Livia, your empress, when they fall about her shoulders! "I hail you Governor of Cheruska!"—that is the least reward that will await you for your obliging-ness, O faithful servant!

Psychologically, of course, this change—this transmogrification, rather—of the motif may be accounted for by Ventidius' perfidy; but symbolically it is much harder to explain. What we need to see, and feel, is not the difference in motivation so much as the sameness of the event itself; how could Kleist have sacrificed this of all his metaphors to such a purpose? It is as though Shakespeare, in *Troilus and Cressida*, had made Thersites smother the faithless heroine in a parodistic re-enactment of the scene in which Othello kills Desdemona. If we have no sense of what it must have cost Kleist to use the Penthesilea motif in this manner, we lack the first prerequisite for understanding him.

The reappearance of the "Verlobung" motif—that of the love tryst as a device to ensnare and destroy the lover—adds greatly to the cost. Gustav von der Ried, the hero of "Die Verlobung," made the fatal error of interpreting Toni's actions in the light of a prefigurative story he himself had told: that of the negress who lures her former master to her bed and infects him with the plague:

The luckless man ... came and took her ... in his arms; but hardly had he passed half an hour in her bed amid caresses and sweet words, when
she suddenly rose up with an expression of wild and cold rage and said: “You have kissed one stricken with the plague, who bears death in her bosom: go and give the yellow fever to all those like you!”

On which Gustav’s judgment had been:

dass nach dem Gefühl seiner Seele keine Tyrannei, die die Weissen je verübt, einen Verrat, so niederträchtig und abscheulich, rechtfertigen könne. Die Rache des Himmels . . . würde dadurch entwaffnet: die Engel selbst, dadurch empört, stellten sich auf Seiten derer, die Unrecht hätten, und nähmen, zur Aufrechterhaltung menschlicher und göttlicher Ordnung, ihre Sache.

[that according to the feeling of his soul, no tyranny that the whites had ever perpetrated could justify a betrayal so base and horrible. The vengeance of heaven . . . was disarmed by it: the angels themselves, outraged by it, would place themselves on the side of those who were in the wrong and would espouse their cause for the sake of supporting human and divine order.]

This judgment applies with full force to Thusnelda.

The parallel between “Die Verlobung” and Die Hermannsschlacht is still more pervasive and telling. For as the negress is the prototype of Thusnelda, so Congo Hoango is Hermann’s: the merciless leader of an enslaved people, who, to avenge his race and destroy the enslavers, avails himself of any means, even that of using the women of his family as love-bait. The parallel needs insisting on because it shows not only how the play’s moral configuration appears once it is divested of its German garb, but also that it had already so appeared in Kleist’s own imagination and work. The moral accents—so perverse and intolerable to our feelings—have been placed by Kleist himself with the most deliberate care, in a manner which shows that he found them as intolerable as we do. More so, in fact, because for him it was not just a matter of presenting the morally repugnant as somehow justified and even admirable, but of sacrificing Toni, and Penthesilea, in the process.

IV

If, aware of these antecedents, we ask what they have in common, the answer is evident. Penthesilea and “Die Verlobung” are tragic commentaries on the faith that lovers can join across all the barriers which society has erected. Achilles and Penthesilea, Gustav and Toni are “meant for each other”; they seem destined to prove that men can form a natural community—or could, if external, artificial divisions did not
separate them in enmity and distrust; that, in Schiller's hyperbole, it should be possible to unite "was die Mode streng geteilt," to embrace and kiss all of humanity.

But, unlike Schiller, Kleist permits himself no hymnic exaltation; he does not brush off the things that keep men apart as "Mode." Stubbornly matter-of-fact, he observes how these differences penetrate into the very tissue of our bodies: Toni is yellow-skinned and Penthesilea is one-breasted. The happy union, if it is to be achieved, must have withstood the severest tests of reality; Kleist is one of those poets whose works are acid tests rather than "expressions" of cherished feelings and beliefs. Again and again it turns out that the bond of pure humanity cannot withstand the strain of opposed social claims. At first—in "Das Erdbeben in Chile" and Die Familie Schroffenstein—the failure is due not to a weakness in the bond but to the malign force of outward circumstance. But as Kleist confronts the fact that "natural" and "social" man is an inseparable amalgam—as he becomes aware how deeply the social invades man's very being—he inevitably discovers that it is the bond of trust itself which is flawed. Ottokar and Agnes, once they have bound themselves each to the other, hold firm; they are destroyed from without, as are Jeronimo and Josephe. But Penthesilea and Achilles, Toni and Gustav are, in the last resort, destroyed by themselves—not because they trust less but because a much greater trust is demanded of them. Their natural being is so inextricably intertwined with their social being that it is far too ambiguous for simple trust. True, Toni's dying words are: "Du hätttest mir nicht misstrauen sollen! [You should not have mistrusted me!]"; but Kleist has seen to it that the demand is well-nigh unfulfillable. And in Penthesilea tragic guilt is so ineluctable that we cannot assess blame at all.

The vision of union beyond all social orders and barriers remains the informing principle of both these works; they end tragically because the vision is not realized. But especially Penthesilea does not just end tragically; the failure issues in a fearful backlash. Once man breaks free of the confines of social order, he is in danger of becoming a beast. Society "restrains"—in the ambiguous sense which Kleist feels repeatedly compelled to probe: it restrains man both from the sweet fulfillment of utterly free, direct, personal union—and from the animal within. So that the vision, benign in Kleist's earliest work, is later seen to harbor threats and even horrors. Man outside society is still a noble savage, perhaps, but the accent has shifted from the adjective to the noun.

In Die Hermannsschlacht the beast is loose. All Kleist's works abound with animal images and metaphors; but no other is as intensely bestial
as this play. The Cheruscans are not in the state of nature, to be sure, but they are very close to it. They are, we noted, a "Horde." Their social structure is primitive; it rests, as Kleist takes pains to make clear, on feeling and force rather than on law. When Varus condemns a disobedient Roman soldier, he can speak with the austere dignity of Homburg's Great Elector:

Den einen nur behalt ich mir bevor,  
Der, dem ausdrücklichen Ermahnungswort zuwider,  
Den ersten Schlag der Eiche zugefügt....  
Und das Gesetz verurteilt ihn des Kriegs,  
Das kein Gesuch entwaffnen kann, nicht ich.  
(I. 1156-62)

[I will reserve for myself only him who, contrary to my expressed word of admonition, gave the first blow to the oak.... And the articles of war that no petition can disarm condemn him, not I.]

When Hermann, on the other hand, is told that his men refuse to fight against the Suevians and with pretended wrath sets upon their spokesman, there is no law he can invoke, only force:

Hermann (indem er sich den Helm in die Augen drückt):  
Nun denn, bei Wotans erznem Donnerwagen,  
So soll ein grimmig Beispiel doch  
Solch eine schlechte Regung in dir strafen!  
(I. 2149-51)

[Hermann (while pressing his helmet down over his eyes): Well then, by Wotan's brazen thunder-chariot, a grim example shall yet punish so base an impulse in you!]

In this setting Thusnelda embodies what we may fairly call the cosmopolitan vision. She is realistic enough to accept intrigue and war as facts of life; but she believes that there is a personal sphere transcending the sordid arena of politics—a republic of the human spirit in which every gentle soul holds immediate citizenship. And this sphere she wants to keep out of Hermann's schemes—"aus dem Spiel," as she says, with what we shall presently recognize as a significant play on the double meaning of "Spiel":

Thurnelda: Lass mich mit diesem Römer aus dem Spiele.  
Warum? Weshalb?  
Thurnelda: Er tut mir leid, der Jüngling.  
(I. 511-13)
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[**Thusnelda:** Leave me and this Roman out of it.  
**Hermann:** You out of it? What do you mean? Are you crazy?  
Why? For what reason?  
**Thusnelda:** I am sorry for the youth.]

If she does not passionately lash out at the artificial divisions the political game creates, she does protest against Hermann’s refusal to make any distinction between the individual and the social group to which he happens to belong:

_Dich macht, ich seh, der Römerhass ganz blind._  
_Weil als dämonenartig dir_  
_Das Ganz’ erscheint, so kannst du dir_  
_Als sittlich nicht den Einzelnen gedenken._  

(II. 685–88)

[I see that hatred of the Romans completely blinds you. Because the whole race seems to you demon-like, you cannot imagine a decent individual.]

Her protests against her husband’s “Unmenschlichkeit,” her pleading for the lives of the good Romans are of a piece with Toni’s defense of Gustav:

_Zeigt nicht vielmehr alles, dass er der edelste und vortrefflichste Mensch ist und gewiss das Unrecht, das die Schwarzen seiner Gattung vorwerfen mögen, auf keine Weise teilt?_  

[Rather, does not everything show that he is the most noble and superior person and certainly has no share in the injustice with which the blacks may reproach his race?]  

Thusnelda’s trust is bitterly betrayed by Ventidius. And betrayal of trust, real or imagined, drives Kleistian characters into frenzies of vengeance, as old Piachi of “Der Findling” and Penthesilea show. It seems clear that, in part, Kleist scourges himself, through Thusnelda, for his earlier, mistaken faith in a transcendent community of men. Yet this explanation is inadequate; it does not account for the moral placing of Thusnelda’s vengeance. A trust, however misplaced, does not cease to be noble—least of all in Kleist, that fanatic of “Vertrauen”; yet Thusnelda feels polluted by hers. She lacerates her moral self—and ours—almost as much as she does Ventidius; it is not just the Roman whom she punishes for having betrayed what used to be Kleist’s highest value, but herself for having held it.

She subjects herself, we saw, to a purifying rite which is to make her “worthy again” of Arminius. These words imply an ascent from a lower
to a higher moral plane; but how can this be? Unless we are prepared (as I am not) to attribute the abnormality to Kleist himself—to think of him as morally so unstable and untrustworthy that he is coldly capable of condemning the good, the true and the beautiful and, in the name of nationalism, of enthroning evil, falsehood and ugliness—we must believe that he saw, and meant us to see, this purification as a descent, unredeemed and unrevoked, into bestiality.

V

Having traced the thematic antecedents of the Thusnelda plot and their implications, we must now look at that plot itself and its function within the play. It may seem that I attach undue importance to what is, after all, only a secondary element; but I think it is demonstrable that the subplot is in fact the key element. Not merely because in it the moral question is more harshly put than in the main plot, nor because it furnishes the play's emotional climax, nor because in it Kleist undertakes some strange reckoning with his earlier work—though all these are substantial reasons. My best warrant for taking the subplot to be the key element is that Kleist himself literally points to it as such, by the almost obsessive verbal iteration he often employs in similar cases:

CHILDERICH: Wo ist der Schlüssel, Gertrud?
GERTRUD: Der Schlüssel, Gott des Himmels, steckt er nicht?
CHILDERICH: Der Schlüssel, nein!
GERTRUD: Er wird am Boden liegen.
—Das Ungeheur! Sie hält ihn in der Hand. . . .
Reiss ihr das Werkzeug weg! . . .
CHILDERICH: (da Thusnelda den Schlüssel verbirgt):
Wo ist der Schlüssel, Gertrud?
GERTRUD: Wie, meine Königin?
CHILDERICH: Reiss ihr das Werkzeug, Childerich, hinweg!
( )
GERTRUD: Ach! O des Jammers! Weh mir! O Thusnelda!
VENTIDIUS: Sag ihr, dass du sie liebst, Ventidius,
CHILDERICH: So hält sie still und schenkt die Locken dir!
( )
GERTRUD: Sag, dass du sie liebst, Ventidius,
Ventidius: So hält sie still und schenkt die Locken dir!
( )
GERTRUD: Reiss ihr das Werkzeug weg! . . .
CHILDERICH: ( )
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**GERTRUD:** Childerich, snatch the tool away from her!
*(They endeavor to wrest the key from her.)*

**VENTIDIUS:** Alas! O the misery! Woe unto me! O Thusnelda!

**THUSNELDA:** Tell her you love her, Ventidius, and she will hold still and
give you her locks as a present!
*(She throws away the key and falls in a faint.)*

Clearly here, if anywhere, the key must be looked for.  

But as soon as we do, we are baffled by the realization that the
Thusnelda plot has no causal connection with the main action. What
Thusnelda says and does has no effect on Hermann’s schemes; it neither
furthers nor impedes them. Her dealings with Ventidius, which so
cruelly lash our feelings, remain entirely without issue; for all the bearing
they have on the title action, they might as well have been omitted.

This is odd—especially since Thusnelda begs at the outset “aus dem
Spiele gelassen zu werden.” We are told, it is true, that in the past
Thusnelda’s complaisance toward Ventidius has been part of Hermann’s
strategy. But Kleist has placed his scenes with meticulous care to show
us that by the time Thusnelda asks to be left out of the play, she has
fully served her political purpose. Nothing would have been simpler
than to place II.v-vii—by virtue of the “rape of the lock” the begin­
ning of the subplot proper—before rather than after II.i, where Hermann
agrees to let Varus march into Cheruska. Had Kleist done so, the sub­
plot would have had a clear though still slender connection with the
main action, since its crucial complication would then have occurred in
the course, and as a result, of Hermann’s deceptive stalling. But with the
“Einmarscherlaubnis” all these maneuvers have served their purpose; in
II.iii there is no further reason why Hermann should not grant his wife’s
wish.

In fact, Kleist goes to perverse length to keep Thusnelda out of the
main action, even as he keeps her in the play. In II.vi, to shield herself
from Ventidius’ importunities, she calls for her children; here is the
scene in full:

*(Gertrud und Bertha treten auf. Die Vorigen.)*

**THUSNELDA:** Gertrud, wo bleibst du? Ich rief nach meinen Kindern.

**GERTRUD:** Sie sind im Vorgemach.

*(Sie wollen beide gehen.)*

**THUSNELDA:** Wart! Einen Augenblick!

**GERTRUD:** Gertrud, du bleibst!—Du, Bertha, kannst sie holen!

*(Bertha ab.)*

*(Enter Gertrud and Bertha. Thusnelda and Ventidius.)*

**THUSNELDA:** Gertrud, where have you been? I called for my children.
GERTRUD: They are in the anteroom.
   (Both start to leave.)
THUSNELDA: Wait a moment! Gertrud, you stay! —You, Bertha, can
   fetch them!
   (Exit Bertha.)

But, for reasons never explained, the children fail to appear; nor does
Thusnelda, throughout the rest of the play, so much as mention the fact
that she has children. Yet these are the very children—Rinold and Adel­
hart—whom four scenes later Hermann orders to be delivered into
Marbod's hands as hostages of his, Hermann's good faith—the very
children, that is, whose lives are risked as stakes in a dangerous political
gamble. Of Hermann such a measure does not surprise us; but what of
their mother? Surely here was the occasion to involve her in the main
action; surely the woman who is so moved by a Roman centurion's
generous courage—

Der junge Held, der, mit Gefahr des Lebens,
Das Kind, auf seiner Mutter Ruf,
Dem Tod der Flammen mutig jüngst entrissen—

([The young hero who, risking his life, not long ago at the mother's cry
courageously snatched her child from a flaming death—]

would have something to say about her own children being staked on
the cast of the political die. (Implausibly, she does not even notice their
being gone.) If she did, her protest—quite unlike her politically inconse­
quential affair with Ventidius—would have the most direct bearing on
Hermann's plans, to which the children are essential. Moreover, Kleist
was practical dramatist enough to know a good scene when he saw one:
Thusnelda passionately disputing her husband's right to gamble with
their boys' lives would have been not only much better dramaturgy but
effective theatre. And if, after such a scene, she had learned to under­
stand the greatness of her husband's cause and hence of the sacrifices he
must make and demand, how different, how much more comprehensible
and noble would she sound saying: "Arminius' muss ich wieder würdig
werden! [I must again become worthy of Armenius!]

It is treacherous, and often presumptuous, for the interpreter to use
the subjunctive mode, to speculate what the poet "could" or even
"should" have done. But here, I submit, Kleist himself demands of us
just this kind of speculation. I do not see how the abortive scene I have
quoted can be explained except as a pointer intentionally placed to
direct our expectations along a road which then is not taken. Kleist
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sacrifices legitimate dramatic effects, creates implausibilities, writes a puzzling and pointless scene—to what end? To make sure that his subplot will be effectually cut off from his main plot? Clearly we are asked to speculate.

She-bears are proverbial, not for their black bristles but for the ferocity with which they defend their young. Let us imagine another subplot:

At the beginning of Act II, we see Ventidius passionately declaring his love to Thusnelda; she rebukes him and has her children brought in, for whom she shows tender concern.—Ventidius and Hermann negotiate; Ventidius demands the children as hostages of Hermann’s good faith; Hermann sees no choice but to agree. [This would be in keeping with the Arminius tradition, in which just this cruel dilemma was a major motif.]

—Thusnelda complains bitterly to Hermann about the demeaning role he makes her play; Hermann pleads necessity and tells her that they must surrender their boys as hostages; she, distracted, accuses him of unfatherliness and inhumanity; he remains firm.—Thusnelda seeks out Ventidius to beg her children of him; he pretends sympathy and, amid renewed professions of love, promises that instead of sending the boys to Rome as he is ordered, he will restore them to her at the earliest possible moment (perhaps as soon as Varus and the Roman army have left Teutoburg).—Thusnelda confronts Hermann with the rumor that the Romans are to be massacred; she violently denounces him, contrasting his treacherous cruelty with Roman (Ventidius’) humanity; when he refuses to yield, she begs that at least Ventidius be spared and the children, if possible, saved; Hermann agrees—and only then calls in the children, whom Ventidius, contrary to his promise, had sent off to Rome but who have been recaptured by Hermann’s men; Thusnelda is shattered by the discovery not only of Ventidius’ perfidy but more of her own blindness and inner betrayal of Hermann; saying: “Arminius’ muss ich wieder würdig werden,” she resolves on a fearful revenge.—The she-bear scene.

I do not claim any sort of textual actuality—in some putative “Ur-Hermann”—for this speculative construct. It rests entirely on one principle: the substitution—or restitution—of the children for the lock of hair. And it has only one object: to make more concrete the possibilities Kleist rejected when he chose the subplot as we have it. But I do claim this: (a) some such plot was considered and rejected by Kleist; (b) he thought the very rejection so essential a part of the play’s meaning that he left clear traces of it in the play.

The substitute, then (and thus the metaphorical equivalent) for the children is—a lock of hair! This noble German heroine, this bearer of the heritage of Penthesilea and Toni, this mother robbed of her children turns into a beast over losing a snippet of her abundant tresses! I know that I exaggerate; of course, the loss of hair stands for something that
Wildroot cannot cure. But with metaphors, especially with Kleistian metaphors, it is never safe to leap too quickly to what they “stand for”; witness Kohlhaas’ horses, who indeed “stand for” justice but who bring justice only after they have been suffered in their absolute, non-interchangeable and disreputable particularity and “an-sich”-ness. The lock of hair is as insistent and as crucial to the Thusnelda plot as the blacks are to Michael Kohlhaas; it introduces the complication, causes the peripety, and furnishes the controlling image for the catastrophe. I exaggerate to drive home the point that if we want to plumb Kleist’s full meaning, we must be alive to the enormous disparity between physical cause and moral effect—and more still between what Kleist does and what he could, indeed “should,” have done but deliberately chose not to do.

VI

What does it matter, we ask, whether the poet chooses this symbol or that, a trivial or a less trivial one, as long as we know and care about what it stands for. As Kleist writes of Kohlhaas:

Kohlhaas, dem es nicht um die Pferde zu tun war—er hätte gleichen Schmerz empfunden, wenn es ein paar Hunde gegolten hätte—Kohlhaas schäumte vor Wut.

[Kohlhaas, who was not concerned with the horses—he would have felt as hurt if a pair of dogs had been at stake—Kohlhaas foamed with rage.]

Justice is justice, trust is trust, betrayal is betrayal, whether the object at issue is a child or a strand of hair.

But of course it isn’t so; the object does make a difference. A pact can be signed in ink as validly as in blood, but the devil knows that “Blut ist ein ganz besonderer Saft [blood is a very special juice].” People for whom “it’s not the thing, it’s the principle involved” surrender (as Kohlhaas does for a time) one half of their humanity. Humanity means, among other things, the knowledge that things must never be treated as mere signs. The metaphor which man himself is and which the world becomes in the very act of his knowing it—the embodiment of the spirit in the flesh, of the abstract in the concrete—is intricate and inextricable; the sign defines its meaning as much as the meaning defines its sign. These are truisms; but they have implications which we easily ignore or forget. From the chaotic multiplicity of particulars we must rise to the ordering purity of universals by laborious steps; if we leap, we are in
danger of plunging universals, ourselves, and the world back into chaos. The ordering of experience which we call abstraction is safe, and true, only if we carry upwards with us as great a burden of concreteness as we can manage—which is to say, if we earn our abstractions. If there is one thing that characterizes Kleist—makes him unmistakably “Kleistian,” as it were—it is his obsessive need and will to create orders which leave the particularity of things intact. His typical prose sentence is the syntactic analogue of his mature stories: a bitterly fought, hard-won battle between the multifarious, “incidental” elements of experience that demand recognition and the periodic syntax that must shape them into an intelligible, ordered whole. I know of no writer who felt the opposed pulls of concreteness and abstraction—i.e., of individuality and order, of reality and truth—as keenly as Kleist did.

We are all intuitively agreed that certain things are exempt from the process of ordering by abstraction: the things we love. Of these, our children are the most signal, the archetypal instances. What distinguishes God from a chief magistrate of the world is that He in His omniscience is able, and in His paternal goodness willing, to see each one of us in full, unique individuality—as His child—and does not need to classify us in order not to lose sight of us altogether. But in the human, the social sphere this—our intuitive agreement—creates an unhappy split between the public and the private sectors of our lives. Love (ideally at least) rules the private sector, while order—the law—rules the public one; private means personal, particular, concrete, while public means impersonal, generic, abstract.

From the unease that necessarily attends this split there springs the ideal image of the “family of man,” the all-embracing community in which men live together in spontaneous harmony, under the “law of love” (which is not a law, of course, but an oxymoron). And though this ideal is far from realization in political fact, we can realize it in spirit and sing “Odes to Joy” by employing its great metaphor:

Brüder, unterm Sternenzelt
Muss ein guter Vater wohnen!

[There must be a good Father, brothers, beneath the canopy of stars!]

In this way—as always when we dream paradisal dreams—we set up, in the very effort to escape the curse and cost of abstraction, the most impersonal, featureless abstraction of all: MAN. Nor only that: we drive the actually existing social orders—the state and all that Schiller calls “Mode”—even farther into impersonality, because we withdraw from
them all particularizing love so as to invest it in a shapeless ideal. The “family of man” is too often a ready device by which we give our retreat into privacy the appearance of social principle; it is a blind leap from the most particular to the most universal—a leap for which the metaphor, with all its vague but intense feeling, serves as a spring board.

I have been leading up to Wilhelm Tell, a play which I feel sure was very much in Kleist’s mind when for his part he decided to write about the founding of a free state. What downs Schiller’s tyrant beyond all mercy, what draws the apolitical Tell into the main action, what prompts Bertha and Rudenz to side openly with the oppressed—what, in short, stands at the play’s dramatic, spatial and emotional center—is Gessler’s inhuman demand that a father stake his son’s life on a desperate gamble. There, on a pole, hangs the hat—symbol of an order that is utterly disembodied, divested of all human content and particularity, the pure, empty, arbitrary sign of authority as such. Here stands Walter, the beloved son, on his head an apple—

Aus diesem Haupte, wo der Apfel lag,
Wird euch die neue, bessre Freiheit grünen

[A new, better freedom will blossom for you from this head on which the apple lay]—

embodiment of all that is organic, concrete, harmoniously held together by the bond of love. The dichotomy is as complete as Schiller’s genius knows how to make it; so that we “know,” by intuitive assent, that true order, though perhaps not identical with nature, must spring from it and is justified only to the degree that it approximates the natural, uncompelled harmony which binds father to child and brother to brother.

Schiller misses no opportunity to drive home the point that the family is the archetype of just social order. The Austrians’ crimes—the blinding of Melchtal, the attempted violation of Baumgarten’s wife—are presented, dramatically, as crimes against the family: the “one great happy family” (to use a cliché not altogether unjust here) which the Swiss are, or would be if they were left alone. Gessler is inhuman because he is not a father:

Herr, ihr habt keine Kinder—wisset nicht,
Was sich bewegt in eines Vaters Herzen

[My lord, you have no children—you do not know the stirrings of a father’s heart];
In this way the family serves Schiller to evade the specifically political problem he is ostensibly dealing with. Even if we assume that families cohere in natural concord, we have said and settled nothing yet about the law and the state. Schiller's patriotic idyll about the invaded and restored family not only lacks relevance for the divided and endangered Germany of 1804 (let alone of 1808); it lacks genuine political relevance altogether. His Swiss are, without exception, nature's noblemen: not all equally brave, wise, and enterprising, but all in their various degrees acting on impulses which, if they could be assumed to govern all men, would make laws and governments practically superfluous. Class distinctions, aristocratic privilege, and serfdom are glanced at, to be sure; but they dissolve in the warmth of fraternal feeling.

Questions that have plagued political theorists for centuries, Schiller glides over with sublime reliance on the rhetoric of human solidarity. Within fifty lines Stauffacher says, on the one hand:

Denn herrenlos ist auch der Freiste nicht.
Ein Oberhaupt muss sein, ein höchster Richter,
Wo man das Recht mag schöpfen in dem Streit.
Drum haben unsre Väter . . .
Die Ehr gegönnt dem Kaiser . . .

[For even the most free is not without master. There must be a head, a highest judge, from whom one can obtain justice in a dispute. For that reason our fathers . . . granted the Emperor the honor. . . .]

(how odd that this absolutely essential supreme authority should then be described as no more than an "Ehre," a ceremonial dignity which the Swiss were content to bestow on the emperor!)—but exclaims, on the other hand:

Nein, eine Grenze hat Tyrannennacht.
Wenn der Gedrückte nirgends Recht kann finden,
Wenn unerträglich wird die Last—greift er
Hinauf getrostten Mutes in den Himmel,
Und holt herunter seine ewgen Rechte,
Die droben hangen unverässerlich
Und unzerbrechlich wie die Sterne selbst—
Der alte Urstand der Natur kehrt wieder,
Wo Mensch dem Menschen gegenübersteht—

[Nay, tyranny has a limit. When the man oppressed can find justice nowhere, when the burden becomes unbearable—he reaches confidently into the heavens and fetches down his eternal rights, which hang there on high inalienable and indestructible as the stars themselves—the primordial state of nature returns in which man is confronted with man—]

“Welcher Mensch welchem Menschen?,” we might interrupt to ask, if we were not swept along by the magnificent flow of language. Gessler and Parricida? Robespierre and Danton? Or perhaps only Stauffacher and Attinghausen? And if the former, just what is the state of nature like? What would Tell answer Parricida if the latter, instead of groveling for compassion, asked him to define, in precise terms, the point “wenn unerträglich wird die Last”—a point Parricida evidently thought he had reached? That is the question the inalienable stars need to answer; but they are silent. Schiller’s answer is always the same:

Wir stehn für unsre Weiber, unsre Kinder!

[We are responsible for our wives and children!]

or:

Hast du der Kinder liebes Haupt verteidigt?
Des Herdes Heiligtum beschützt? das Schrecklichste,
Das Letzte von den Deinen abgewendet?

[Have you defended precious children? Protected the sanctuary of your hearth? Turned aside what is most frightful and final from your own ones?]

Thus the genuinely political question—of law and the last court of appeal—is persistently begged; in placing the rulers outside all human fellowship and the subjects within the sacred and harmonious precincts of the family, Schiller solves the problem of order—of the destruction of an old legitimacy and the founding of a new one—by circular definition.

Schiller took pains, we know, to provide his play with an authentically Swiss setting. But the fact is that the fatherland which his Swiss love and defend is every true man’s fatherland; it appeals not to those indissoluble ties into which, for good or ill, we happen to be born, but to moral sentiments we all approve of. This “Volk von Brüdern” is not the
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ordinary kind of family—the kind one is stuck with. Except that (or rather *because*) it lives in the mountains by hunting, herding and fishing, untainted by the vices of civilization, it is the family of MAN. The prodigious leap—

Tell, Tell, ein sichtbar Wunder hat der Herr
An euch getan, kaum glaub ich meinen Sinnen—

[Tell, Tell, the Lord performed a visible miracle upon you, I hardly believe my senses—]

has been taken; beneath the guise of specificity and particularity we discover the grand abstraction. Indeed, we discover that the leap was hardly necessary; for properly considered, the most particular and the most universal are one and the same. The stars inalienably suspended in the heavens and the flame of my hearth are identical, ultimate referents of justice. The true patriot is also the true citizen of the world.

It was, of course, no accident that Schiller chose Switzerland for his locale and the “Eidgenossen” for his nation. Switzerland had become the living embodiment of what I will call the Tell illusion. Small, pastoral, federative, republican and sturdily independent, it was the pièce de résistance of those who felt the need to find an actuality answering to the seductive dream of a “natural society.” Rousseau had been a great shaper of the illusion; and the famous Johannes von Müller (whose *Geschichten schweizerischer Eidgenossenschaft* was Schiller’s main source) had put it on what was considered a sound historical basis. This was the illusion that drew the young Kleist to Switzerland; for there, it seemed, one could not only lead the simple, natural life but also be a citizen without having to be political. The reality, though not quite so idyllic, still looked attractive enough at first; on January 12, 1802, Kleist, having decided to invest his remaining fortune in a Swiss farm, writes Ulrike:

Die Güter sind jetzt im Durchschnitt alle im Preise ein wenig gesunken, weil mancher, seiner politischen Meinungen wegen, entweder verdrängt wird oder freiwillig weicht. Ich selbst aber, der ich gar keine politischen Meinungen habe, brauche nichts zu fürchten und nichts zu fliehen.

[On an average, farms have all dropped a bit in price now, since many a person, because of his political opinions, is either being ousted or is withdrawing voluntarily. I myself, however, having no political opinions, do not need to fear or flee anything.]
But within a month the prospect was clouding over:

Wenn du [das Geld] noch nicht abgeschickt hast, so schicke es nicht ab . . . Es hatte allen Anschein, dass die Schweiz sowie Cisalpinien französisch werden wird, und mich ekelt vor dem blossen Gedanken.—So leicht indessen wird es dem Allerwelts-Konsul mit der Schweiz nicht gelingen . . . . Wenn er sich deutlich erklärt, vereinigt sich alles gegen den allgemeinen Wolf. (to Ulrike, Feb. 19)

[If you have not sent off [the money], then do not forward it . . . . There is every indication that Switzerland as well as the Cisalpine Republic will become French, and the very thought disgusts me.—In the meantime, this busybody of a Consul will not succeed so easily with Switzerland . . . . If he makes a clear declaration, everybody will unite against the universal wolf.]

And by March 2, the dream was ended; Switzerland was becoming, de facto if not de jure, a province of the “Allerwelts-Konsul”:

Mich erschreckt die blosse Möglichkeit, statt eines Schweizer Bürgers durch einen Taschenspielerkunstgriff ein Franzose zu werden . . . . Es sind bereits Franzosen hier eingerückt, und nicht ohne Bitterkeit habe ich ihrem Einzuge beigewohnt . . . . Unter diesen Umständen denke ich nicht einmal daran, mich in der Schweiz anzusiedeln. (to Zschokke)

[I am frightened by the mere possibility of becoming a Frenchman, instead of a Swiss citizen, by sleight-of-hand . . . . French have already moved in here, and I attended their entry not without bitterness . . . . In these circumstances I would not so much as think of settling in Switzerland.]

Kleist, then, had had direct experience of the Tell illusion; he had, moreover, experience of its proponents. As for Schiller, there were the two “Xenien” (nos. 85 and 86) entitled “Das deutsche Reich” and “Deutscher Nationalcharakter”:

Deutschland? Aber wo liegt es? Ich weiss das Land nicht zu finden.
Wö das gelehrte beginnt, hört das politische auf.
Zur Nation euch zu bilden, ihr hoffet es, Deutsche, vergebens;
Bildet, ihr könnt es, dafür freier zu Menschen euch aus.

[Germany? But where is it located? I am not able to find the country. Where learned Germany begins, political Germany stops. Germans, you hope in vain to constitute a nation; instead, develop yourselves— you can— into human beings with greater freedom.]
To this view, *Die Hermannsschlacht* was the bitter and specific reply:

Ich weiss, Aristan. Diese Denkart kenn ich
Du bist imstand und treibst mich in die Enge,
Fragst, wo und wann Germanien gewesen? . . .
Doch jetzo, ich versichre dich, jetzt wirst du
Mich schnell begreifen, wie ich es gemeint:
Führt ihn hinweg and werft das Haupt ihm nieder. }

[I know, Aristan. I am familiar with this mode of thinking. You are in a position to press me hard, asking where and when there has been a Germany .... But now, I assure you, now you will understand right away what I meant: lead him away and strike off his head!]

If Schiller was (in Kleist’s eyes) criminally wrong, Johannes von Müller must have seemed contemptible. Until the collapse of Prussia, the great historian (who was living in Berlin on a handsome stipend from Frederick William III) was a passionate anti-Bonapartist; as of February 28, 1806, these were the Swiss sentiments:


[The times are now disgraceful, but a phoenix seems to be rising from the decay. I am expecting a great deal from the awakening of Austria. . . . An alliance [against the French] for certain principles must necessarily be agreed upon, and all like-minded persons must be called upon to work toward it in word and writing. A time will come, perhaps quickly: Let it not find [us?] unprepared to break the yoke that the sinister tyrant is so cynically imposing on the degenerate powers, and to restore that independence, the feeling for which has been lost, he has dumped into a stinking pool.]

Though the syntax is already opaque and the rhetoric strained, the resolve seems unambiguous. But on November 20, 1806, J. von Müller met with the “finstere Tyrann” himself, the first to be so summoned in Napoleon’s effort to court the intellectual leaders of Germany. (Goethe’s turn came on October 2, 1808, in Erfurt: “Voilà un homme!”) Within
ninety minutes, the historian's independence melted in the illustrious presence, readily dissolving into what half a year earlier he had called a stinking pool. Adam Müller cites J. von Müller as writing to Boettiger:

Er habe anderthalb Stunden mit dem grossen Mann gesprochen, über alle grossen Stellen in der Politik . . . , er habe ihn in allem so stark, tief and unergründlich gefunden, dass er unter allen Gesprächen, die er je abgehalten, nur das mit Friedrich II. mit diesem vergleichen könne: indes habe an Schärfe des Blickes und Umfang der genialischen Idee der gegenwärtige Held den der Jahre 1760–70 weit übertroffen. . . . Was aus Preussen werden würde, sei nicht zu sagen: er, Johannes, sei über das Schicksal dieser Monarchie . . . zu seiner Tagesordnung übergegangen. . . . Die an das morsch gewordene Alte nutzlos verschwendeten Kräfte müssten auf das Neue übertragen werden: Gott sei es ja, der die Regierungen einsetze. Man müsse sich umdenken . . . .

[He said he talked with the great man an hour and a half, about all important political topics, . . . and had found him so well informed, profound and unfathomable in every respect that he could compare with this conversation, among all the other conversations he had ever held, only that with Frederick II: for all that, the present hero surpassed by far the one of the years 1760–70 in sharpness of vision and in breadth of inspired thought. . . . What would become of Prussia could not be said: he, Johannes, had passed by way of the fate of this monarchy . . . to his own agenda. . . . The energies vainly wasted on the old become rotten would have to be transferred to the new: after all, it was God who constituted governments. One would have to change one's views. . . .]

Which he promptly did. He transferred his energies to the divinely instituted puppet kingdom of Westphalia, which he served as minister of education until he died (1809). His new appointment was not hindered, we may assume, by an address he gave in French to commemorate, in French-occupied Berlin, the anniversary of the Great Frederick's birth. The title of the address was "La gloire de Frédéric," and Goethe translated and published it with hearty approval. Here is a sample:

Ein solcher Mann [Frederick] gehört, wie die unsterblichen Götter, nicht einem gewissen Lande, einem gewissen Volke—diese können veränderliche Schicksale haben—, der ganzen Menschheit gehört er an, die so edler Vorbilder bedarf, um ihre Würde aufrecht zu erhalten.

[Such a man [Frederick] belongs, like the immortal gods, not to a certain country, a certain people—these can have changeable fortunes—he is a
member of all mankind, which has need of such noble examples in order to maintain its dignity."

"Der ganzen Menschheit!" In its name the great historian of Swiss independence—his dignity sustained by so great a "Vorbild" and his position by the still greater protection of his new paymaster—severed his connection with "a certain country" which had proved to have so "changeable" a fate. God evidently meant him to belong where Frederick also belonged, the whole of mankind being presently embodied in King Jerome. If Kleist needed a case history of what, concretely, the Swiss metaphor could be made to mean, Johannes von Müller furnished it nicely.12

VII

My implicit argument has been that Kleist avoided—or rather throttled—the family metaphor because it offered an altogether specious escape from the problems it was meant to solve. Under the guise of particularity it concealed an image of man, and of the nation, featureless in its universality; on the fluid of natural affection and harmony it pretended to construct a firm social order. And perhaps worst of all: by its easy perfection it invited an equally easy devotion—an allegiance that could hardly withstand the shock of reality. Who would not be a patriot if his fatherland were Schiller's Switzerland? But who would be a patriot if his fatherland was Prussia after Jena or the Germany of the Rheinbund?

Those who know how to read Kleist will have noticed, in the "key" passage quoted above, a significant because seemingly odd and wilful substitution for the term "Schlüssel":

Reiss ihr das Werkzeug weg!
[Snatch the tool away from her!]

and again:

Reiss ihr das Werkzeug, Childerich, hinweg!
[Childerich, snatch the tool away from her!]

This is not the first time "Werkzeug" is used in the play; it occurs twice before, once when Thusnelda tells Hermann of Ventidius' theft:

\[\ldots\] löst er

Mit welchem Werkzeug weiss ich nicht, bis jetzt, Mir eine Locke heimlich von der Scheitel  
(ll. 631–33)
[... he secretly removed a lock of hair from the top of my head, with what tool I don't know even now.]

and again when Hermann tells her of other such Roman outrages:

Nun ja! Und ihr nicht blass, vom Haupt hinweg,
Das Haar, das goldene, die Zähne auch,
Die elfenbeinernen, mit einem Werkzeug
Auf offner Strasse aus dem Mund genommen. (ll. 1026–29)

[Indeed so! And not just the golden hair from her head, but took also with a tool her ivorylike teeth from her mouth, on the public road.]

The Romans possess tools of which the primitive Germans do not even know the names; and those tools are in the most literal sense tools of abstraction and extraction. By their means the most personal and seemingly “inalienable” things can be removed from their organic context, be turned into bits of mere, transferable stuff—ornamental matter that will adorn whoever has the power to obtain it. It turns out that man are not “brothers under the skin”; the barriers between men go deeper—witness Toni. Our bodies, our hair and teeth, the noises we make when we speak, are constitutively ours; but they are alienable. Our very selves, it seems, can be expropriated by the sleight-of-hand of abstraction.

But one tool is available to the Germans: the key, the tool not of abstraction but of inclusion, of locking in, of trapping the abstractors into the most fearful of confrontations. We now begin to see the honesty of Kleist’s dramatic scheme—that is to say, the merciless rigor with which he locks his characters, his play, himself and us into the sheer corporeality of his “key” metaphor. No one is left free to abstract himself, to stand aside or above; as Thusnelda is locked in with Ventidius, as her plot is locked in with the main plot, so is Hermann with Varus and the legions, so are we with this frightful drame à clef. Do we want to know what it means to be a poet, more specifically a German poet in the year of disgrace 1808? It means to be so utterly responsible for the physicality of one’s metaphors that if one is compelled to write à clef, one must do so in the most literal and corporeal sense. It means that one has to pay the bitter price of one’s necessity.

In Germany after 1806, patriotism was not the last refuge of scoundrels; there were many genuine patriots. But even genuine patriotism may be had on relatively easy terms. By a simple process of abstraction one can construe, as the object of one’s love and allegiance, the “true” nation, the “real” fatherland. Schiller again furnishes the best illustration of how the thing is done. In a fragment which Suphan later entitled “Deutsche Grösse,” we read:

[German Empire and German nation are two different things.... Isolated from the political, the German has established his peculiar worth.... German dignity is a moral quantity, it dwells in the culture of the nation and in its character which is independent of its political fortunes.... Sovereignty must at last come to him who cultivates and controls the mind, if the world has any plan and man’s life has in any way meaning; morality and reason must finally triumph, raw force succumb to form.... Our language will dominate the world. Language is the mirror of a nation; when we gaze into this mirror, a great, priceless image of ourselves confronts us.... (The German) has been chosen by the Weltgeist to work (during the struggle of the age) at the eternal structuring of mankind.... Every people has its day in history, but the day of the German is the harvest of time.]

These ideas are echoed over and over again by other patriots. They inform Fichte’s Reden an die deutsche Nation as well as Adam Müller’s Dresden lectures on German literature and thought (1806); we find them expressed by the men around Stein who were founding the “Tugenclbund” and working for Prussia’s and Germany’s regeneration. Of course there were differences—particularly in the degree of political activism, in the impatience with which the German’s accession to his rightful “world-historical” role was being awaited and prepared for. But common to much of this patriotic rhetoric is what we can only call cultural imperialism, not to say chauvinism: the conviction that Germany was somehow “chosen.” Her very deficiencies as a political entity were chalked up as assets; in contrast to the closed and “inorganic” perfection of France, she was “universal,” growing, many-sided. Her lack of definition was her strength.

In the absence of the normal defining characteristics of nationhood, it was inevitable that the patriots fell back on the German language as the essence of Germany’s national identity. Fichte rests his case for
German superiority largely on linguistic, philological grounds. Rahel Levin speaks of the language as
der eigentliche Rhein . . . , welcher jene vorstürmenden Tempelräuber zurückhält von dem heiligen Gebiet unserer geistigen, sittlichen und religiösen Besitztümer

[the true Rhine . . ., which holds back those charging desecrators of the temple from the holy territory of our spiritual, moral and religious possessions].

Carl Gustav von Brinckmann, a Swedish diplomat who spent the dark months of 1807 in Memel in intimate contact with the men around Stein, writes to Friedrich von Gentz:

Das edlere Denken, Sprechen und Schreiben sichert uns eine noch unbesiegte Sprache, die glücklicherweise, ihrer höheren Eigentümlichkeit nach, von den Fremdlingen nicht begriffen wird

[Our more noble thinking, speaking and writing assure us an as yet unconquered language, which fortunately, in its superior peculiarity, is not understood by outlanders].

The italics are Brinckmann's; he is also the source of the quote from Rahel.

The patriots’ party line (as we may almost call it) shares with Schiller also a reliance on a kind of historical or even metaphysical destiny which—“wenn anders die Welt einen Plan hat”—must inevitably provide for Germany’s ultimate, universal predominance. The passivism resulting from this faith is sometimes startling; even Brinckmann cites Schiller’s “herrliche Zeilen”:

Die fremden Eroberer kommen und gehen,
Wir gehorchen, aber wir bleiben stehen

[Foreign conquerors come and go, we obey but we remain].

And why not? If the “Weltgeist” in person guaranteed—if the very scheme of things depended on—the final triumph of German speech and thought, there was no occasion for undue alarm and desparate measures. Adam Müller states the true faith:

Kleist’s *Hermannsschlacht* 146

[Your . . . language flourishes more vigorously and purely amid all the convulsions of your soil: he who can perceive its intimate tones cannot help hearing . . . the fatherland coming. Let us preserve our belief in the future as this language can express it. . . . If you remain true to knowledge and science, it will become of itself [my italics] strength and action, which will subdue any one-sided power and tame in its time the wild tyranny that now crushes you.]

What sets Kleist off from these patriots is not greater fanaticism but his inability to share either their confidence or their “Kulturstolz.” For him Germany was not a metaphysical necessity; it was simply a nation, sadly perishable and—for lack of political definition—very much in danger of perishing utterly. This was his reply to the confident ones:

Was!

(O you who speak thus, you seem to me like a Greek from the age of Sulla, or an Israelite from that of Titus.
What! This mighty Jewish state is to perish? Jerusalem, this city of God, protected by its cherubim in person, should sink with its battlements and walls to ashes? . . . Death should snatch away the whole population, women and children should be led off in chains, and their offspring, scattered into every country of the world, throughout millennia . . . wretched, . . . lead the life of abject slaves?
Imagine!]

Nor is Germany uniquely endowed—worthy to be loved because she has a language, and thus a galaxy of “Dichter und Denker,” much superior to other nations. As to the language itself, Kleist’s comment might well have been: “Iphikon! Pfiffikon!” As to cultural superiority, he made his point in the “Katechismus der Deutschen”:

**FRAGE:**
Warum liebst du es?

**ANTWORT:**
Weil es mein Vaterland ist.

**FRAGE:**
Du meinst, weil Gott es gesegnet hat . . . , weil viele schöne Werke der Kunst es schmücken, weil Helden, Staatsmänner und Weise . . . es verherrlicht haben?

**ANTWORT:**
Nein, mein Vater, du verführst mich.
Ich verführe dich?
—Denn Rom und das ägyptische Delta sind, wie du mich gelehrt hast, mit Früchten und Werken der Kunst und allem, was gross und herrlich sein mag, weit mehr gesegnet als Deutschland....
Warum also liebst du Deutschland?
Weil es mein Vaterland ist. (SW II, 351)

Why do you love it?
Because it is my fatherland.
You mean, because God has blessed it...., because many fair works of art adorn it, because heroes, statesmen and sages.... have glorified it?
No, my father, you lead me astray.
I lead you astray?
For Rome and the Egyptian delta, as you have taught me, are far more blessed with the fruits and achievements of art and with everything great and splendid than is Germany....
Why, then, do you love Germany?
Because it is my fatherland.]

And if we go on to read the other material which Kleist was then preparing for publication in the projected Germania, we get the impression that a still better answer might have been: "obwohl es mein Vaterland ist [although it is my fatherland]." For—with one exception: "Was gilt es in diesem Kriege? [what is at stake in this war?]"—Kleist does not try to praise the Germans into patriotism; he tries to shame and whip them into the resolution of despair. He tries to persuade them that—materially, culturally, even morally—they have nothing to lose. Their officers are without honor (Satirical Letter No. 1), their women without shame (No. 2), their civil servants scoundrels (No. 3), their journalists servile liars (No. 4). Among his "Anekdoten" there are two which Kleist singles out, by subtitles, as exemplary: "wert in Erz gegraben zu werden [worthy of being engraved on metal]," and "das man nachahmen sollte [that should be imitated]." Both of them show the French as men of honor, courage and dignity; one of them is worthy quoting here:

Kleist's intention, here as in *Die Hermannsschlacht*, is unmistakable—and in deliberate contrast to the patriotic "party line." A German has shamefully small cause to be proud of his nation; he must learn to love it because he is *stuck* with it. Germans must be taught, not the disembodied patriotism of abstraction, but the patriotism of inclusion—of being locked in. It is not for nothing, nor a mere external misfortune, that Germany is a country in which the patriot has to lie or speak "verschliesselt"; it is a condition of her being, moral as well as political. The shifty stratagems—the flattery and servility real or pretended—of slaves are demeaning and repulsive. But they constitute the reality of slavery. Truth, dignity, and manly self-respect are the privileges of freedom. In an enslaved country, the true patriot is not he who tries to intoxicate himself and others with the rare essence, the "Geist" of idealized national virtues. The true patriot is he who immerses himself, a fermenting agent, in the ill-smelling brew of his country's political and moral realities—hoping that ultimately it can be distilled into a clear and noble liquor.

We are now in the position to understand fully the moral and aesthetic inversions we observed in *Die Hermannsschlacht*. The anecdote about General Hulin compresses them into capsule form. Down here crawls the servile German, while up there the victorious French general pronounces his contemptuous "Schurke!" Deserved? Of course it is deserved, but at the same time it is so hatefully and despicably *unearned*. That is the true meaning of "Die Guten! Das sind die schlechtesten!" For if they were truly good, they would have to feel a deep and personal shame at having a part in reducing other human beings to such meanness. Their moral superiority—displayed with such style, such pithy and devastating wit—who is furnishing them with the moral means for it if not that cringing creature at their feet? In morals as in economics, the labor theory of value applies; the crucial question is not: who has it? but: has he *earned* it? Take the "generosity" of Septimius:

**CHERUSKER:** Septimius Nerva kommt, den du gerufen....
**WINFRIED:** Wo war er?
**HERMANN:** Bei dem Brand in Arkon, nicht?
Beschaftiget zu retten und zu helfen?
CHERUSKER: In Arkon, ja, mein Fürst; bei einer Hütte,
Die durch den Römerzug in Feuer aufgegangen.
Er schüttete gerührt dem Eigner
Zwei volle Säckel Geldes aus! ...

HERMANN: Das gute Herz!

WINFRIED: Wo stahl er doch die Säckel?

HERMANN: Dem Nachbar auf der Rechten oder Linken?

(11. 2174-87)

CHERUSKER: Septimius Nerva is coming, whom you have summoned. . .

WINFRIED: Where was he?

HERMANN: Was he not at the fire in Arkon, busy rescuing and helping?

CHERUSKER: Yes, in Arkon, my liege, at a cottage that went up in flames
in consequence of the Roman advance. He was moved to
pour out two full purses of money for the owner! . . .

HERMANN: What a kind heart!

WINFRIED: But where did he steal the purses?

HERMANN: From the neighbor on the right or left?

To put it differently: the conqueror is able to throw his sword into the
*moral* balance; his being the representative of a powerful, proud and victorious nation gives him not only a physical but a moral advantage over the conquered. What is despicable is that he then proceeds to abstract this superiority from its very concrete physical base and to think, talk and act as though it were morally earned, as though his confrontation with the oppressed were, or ever could be, one of *MAN* to *MAN*. Not only this: he tries, and only too often manages, to persuade his victim of the truth and justice of this abstraction and thereby gains a still greater *physical* advantage; for he thus robs him of his inner defenses after previously having robbed him of his outer ones. The most insidious Roman weapon is this: that on the point of her sword Rome carries the doctrine of “universal” laws and “natural” rights and duties. This is the meaning of the final encounter between Hermann and Septimius:

SEPTIMIUS: Wie, du Barbar? Mein Blut? Das wirst du nicht—!

HERMANN: Warum nicht?

SEPTIMIUS (*mit Würde*): Weil ich dein Gefangner bin!
An deine Siegerpflicht erinnr’ ich dich!

HERMANN (*auf sein Schwert gestützt*):
An Pflicht und Recht! Sieh da, so wahr ich lebe!
Er hat das Buch vom Cicero gelesen.
Was müsst ich tun, sag an, nach diesem Werk?

SEPTIMIUS: Nach diesem Werk? Armes’ger Spötter, du!
Mein Haupt, das wehrlos vor dir steht,
Soll deiner Rache heilig sein;
Also gebeut dir das Gefühl des Rechts
In deines Busens Blättern aufgeschrieben!

HERMANN (indem er auf ihn einschreitet):
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 tot!!

(SEPTIMIUS: What, you barbarian? My blood? That you will not—!
HERMANN: Why not?
SEPTIMIUS (with dignity): Because I am your prisoner! I remind you of your obligation as victor!
HERMANN (leaning on his sword): Obligation and justice! Behold, verily he has read Cicero’s book! Tell me, what should I do according to this work?
SEPTIMIUS: According to this work? You miserable scoffer! My head, defenseless before you, should be sacred from your revenge; the feeling of justice, inscribed upon the pages of your heart, commands you thus!
HERMANN (stepping over to confront him): You know what justice is, you cursed villain, and came to Germany, without provocation, in order to oppress us? Take a club of double weight and strike him dead!)

The Roman abstraction—the sleight-of-hand by which, after the conquest, “man” is made to appear as the primary and essential constituent of both Ro-man and Ger-man—is in truth no more than a tool of rape. The Roman does not strip himself of his Roman-ness to confront the German nackedly; on the contrary, he comes to the encounter in full political and cultural panoply. Having taken the utmost advantage of his belonging to a powerful and self-aware state, he then makes light of that advantage so as to deny it to the people he enslaves. He is like the white supremacist (of the genteel sort), who—after centuries of depriving, exploiting and humiliating the Negro—stands proudly before the world and adopts the posture of human superiority. There is no hatred bitter enough for such pride—not because it is false, but on the contrary, because it has and employs the means to create its own intolerably unjust reality.

VIII

Kleist’s nationalism, then, amounts to this: that “German,” “Roman,” etc. are not composite nouns consisting of a common stem and readily abstractable prefixes, but are integral substantives. There is, of course, a
common substratum “man” which is prior to nationality, indeed to any
social grouping, but it is biological only; having no social content, it has
no moral force. As “man” in this sense I am no more than a member
of a certain animal species.

Nevertheless we misunderstand Kleist radically if we assume that for
him the nation is a non plus ultra absolute, a value transcending and
transvaluing all other values. For him the nation—clearly and strongly
defined as a political entity, a state—is a sine qua non. It represents no
absolute but a step in the process of abstraction and ordering—a step
which must not be skipped. Those who try to skip it will find themselves
not in the republic of MAN, but lapsed into slavish subjection to
nations who did not make so foolish a mistake.

Some of the commentators on Die Hermannsschlacht—particularly
Meyer-Benfey and H. M. Wolff—have been a good deal puzzled by a
speech in which Hermann holds out the vision of a future universal
monarchy:

**WOLF:** It seems you consider the people of blossoming Latium as a
race of superior nature, destined to rule us crude fellows?

**HERMANN:** Hm! In a certain sense I would say yes. I believe the German
enjoys the greater potential but the Latin has developed his
lesser potential more fully at this point. If the song of the
bards is fulfilled, and if all mankind is ever united under one
royal scepter, it is possible that a German will hold it, a Briton, a Gaul, or what you will; but never by heaven that Latin, who can understand and honor no other people’s character than just his own! Eventually it will even come to this; but until the peoples whom this earth cradles, now still lashed by the storm of time like a sea, find equilibrium, it can easily be that the hawk will pluck the brood of the eagle, which, not yet fledged, rests in the quiet top of an oak.]

H. M. Wolff, assuming with most critics that Kleist posits the nation as a *non plus ultra*, has no recourse but to discount these lines:

These lines can not contain the poet’s true meaning; for if the Britons or Gauls should really attempt to rule all mankind and thus Germany too, from the German point of view the same situation would result as vis-à-vis Rome... Only then would there be no impairment of the freedom of the Germans if they themselves were the ones who ruled the world... Here it is probably a question of a concession to visionary ideas of certain romanticists.19

But if Kleist had felt the need to make concessions of this sort, he had vastly more telling occasions for doing so; the entire play is, as we have seen, a slap in the face of Romantic notions. Moreover, Kleist evokes (and Wolff duly notes) exactly the same vision in “Was gilt es in diesem Kriege” as one of the peculiar glories of German thought:

Eine Gemeinschaft [gilt es], die, unbekannt mit dem Geist der Herrschsucht und der Eroberung, des Daseins und der Duldung so würdig ist wie irgendeine; die ihren Ruhm nicht einmal denken kann, sie müsste denn den Ruhm zugleich und das Heil aller übrigen denken, die den Erdkreis bewohnen; deren ausgelassenster und ungeheuerster Gedanke noch, von Dichtern und Weisen auf Flügeln der Einbildung erschwungen. Unterwerfung unter eine Weltregierung ist, die, in freier Wahl, von der Gesamtheit der Brüdernationen gesetzt wäre. (SW II, 378)

[(At stake is) a community which, unfamiliar with the spirit of domination and conquest, is as worthy of existence and of sufferance as any other; which cannot even imagine its own glory without imagining at the same time the glory and welfare of all others who inhabit the globe; whose most liberated and prodigious thought, reached by poets and philosophers on wings of the imagination, is subjection to a world government that would be voluntarily constituted by the totality of fraternal nations.]

Kleist and Hermann are thinking of a world government resting not on conquest (like that of Rome or France) but on the free and balanced consent of all “Brüdernationen.” The same federative principle would
operate by which, in fact, the various German tribes are to be united into a national state:

MARBOD:  
Das Vaterland muss einen Herrscher haben. . . .

HERMANN:  
Lass diese Sach, beim nächsten Mondlicht, uns. . . .
In der gesamten Fürsten Rat, entscheiden!

MARBOD:  
Es sei! Man soll im Rat die Stimmen sammeln.

(II. 2581-92)

[MARBOD:  
The fatherland has to have a ruler. . . .
HERMANN:  
Let us. . . . decide this matter, at the next moon, in the council of all the princes.
MARBOD:  
So be it! The votes shall be polled at the council.]

Unlike most nationalists, even of his day, Kleist realizes that the very logic and the very need that generate the demand for national unification—for a higher and more encompassing order—must ultimately lead to the still higher order of world government.

So we are back, after all, to Schiller's family of man? Not at all. Kleist speaks, with considered precision, of "Brüdernationen." He fears, not the abstraction as such (for without it there can be no order), but the leap. His nationalism is both more modest and more demanding than Schiller's. He does not foresee an "Ernte der Zeit" when German speech and "Geist" will rule the world; but he does demand statehood for Germany. Schiller's concept is sharply dualistic; it assumes that by sacrificing the body of political union and power, the Germans can liberate their spirit, so that in the end it will conquer the world. (To put it linguistically: Schiller's concept is anti-metaphoric; it seeks universality by dropping the ballast of corporeality.) Kleist has as little use for the imperialism of the spirit as for that of brute force. More precisely, he sees that the first is almost sure to become a victim and a tool of the second.

The nation, for Kleist, is necessary but not sufficient. Moreover, we need to be very careful even in defining his nationalism as "organic." As always when we deal with such abstractions, their meaning is defined by their metaphors. Goethe was an "organicist" surely; but just as surely he was, in this, poles removed from Kleist—as far removed, to be more precise, as plants are from beast. Both of these are "organic" and "natural"; but the social philosophies they embody may be as different as Rousseau's and Hobbes'. When we talk about Kleist, we must rid "organic" of all the vegetative connotations it usually carries. Order, for him, is something willed and imposed rather than a spontaneous growth; in his social philosophy, exactly as in his writing, he is no lyricist. (That his
one signal failure, the forcibly lyrical *Käthchen von Heilbronn*, has been such a favorite with German audiences testifies only to the invincible sentimentality of these audiences.)

The Germans of *Die Hermannsschlacht* are not an “organic” community rising in spontaneous solidarity against their oppressors. Their national—not to mention political—awareness is vestigial, quite unlike that of Schiller’s Swiss, whose sense of communal identity needs only to be given outward, institutional shape. Almost singly, Hermann must devise the means of forging a conglomerate of tribes into statehood; “Nationalgeist” is not something he can count on and enlist but something he must try to create. “Geist” is possessed by the Romans, by the “gegliederte Kohorte,”

Die, wo sie geht und steht, des Geistes sich erfreut.

[High morale is possessed by the Romans, by the well-ranked cohort that rejoices in morale wherever it may be.]

The “Haufen” whom he commands can be stirred to common outrage and fury; but that is a far cry still from the clear sense of unity and common purpose, the *esprit de corps*, which distinguishes a nation from a “horde.”

Here, as almost everywhere in Kleist, the body of act and fact must first exist to give birth to the spirit; the spirit is *ex post facto*. In *Wilhelm Tell* the Rüti scene takes place in Act II; in *Die Hermannsschlacht* the corresponding “Mondnacht” meeting, where the new state is to be formally constituted, is a promise on which the play ends. Nor is that state the product of a harmonious consensus; Kleist points with the utmost harshness to the fact that it is a legal structure and thus, like every new state or jurisdiction, caught in the paradox of *ex post facto* law. Its founding is signalized by an act of law—the execution of Aristan:

HERMANN: Woh mir! Womit muss ich mein Amt beginnen?

[HERMANN: Woe unto me! With what act must I begin my office?]

We may feel, as Aristan does, that this is not law but *ex post facto* violence, since obviously there can be no treason against a not yet existing state, no violation of not yet existing laws. But the very inception of a new state or jurisdiction is *ex post facto* (witness the Nuremberg trials); the first and most basic law, being constitutive of a new sovereignty, is an act of force, a naked assertion of authority.
Schiller touches on the same problem—but lightly. The first law
passed on the Rütli is a proscription:

**MELCHTAL:** So sei's. Wer von Ergebung spricht an Oestreich,
Soll rechtlos sein and aller Ehren bar,
Kein Landmann nehm ihn auf an seinem Feuer.

**ALLE:** Wir wollen es, das sei Gesetz!

[**MELCHTAL:** So be it. If someone speaks of capitulation to Austria, he
shall be outlawed and devoid of all honors; let no country-
man receive him at his hearth.

**ALLE:** We will it, let that be the law!]

"Alle" does not yet include Rudenz, who in the preceding scene (with
Attinghausen) has strongly urged submission to Austria and thus seems
destined to become the new law’s first victim. But Schiller does not
allow the issue to come to a point; instead, he dissolves it in lyrical
harmonies. Here as elsewhere, the family metaphor takes over; Rudenz
is won over by Bertha:

Da seh ich dich, du Krone aller Frauen,
In weiblich reizender Geschäftigkeit,
In meinem Haus den Himmel mir erbauen
Und, wie der Frühling seine Blumen streut,
Mit schöner Anmut mir das Leben schmücken
Und Alles rings beleben und beglücken!

[O glory of all women, I see you there in my house, in charming womanly
activity, creating heaven for me, and, like spring scattering its flowers,
adorning my life with lovely grace and quickening and blessing everything
round about!]

Where Kleist dismisses us with the bitter truth that a state is a structure
of laws claiming a capital jurisdiction, Schiller lulls us with rhymes.

One question raised by both plays is: What is the state of nature, and
how does the state of law arise from it? Schiller, we noticed, takes it up
explicitly:

Der alte Urstand der Natur kehrt wieder,
Wo Mensch dem Menschen gegenüber steht.

[The primordial state of nature returns in which man is pitted against
man.]

The return to the state of nature is symbolized in the first “Tell-Schuss,”
when the previously existing state of law is shattered by Gessler’s lawless
Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht* and cruel abuse of his authority. The inception of the new state of law is symbolized in the second “Tell-Schuss,” when Tell, claiming and exercising his inalienable human rights, rids himself and the Swiss of Gessler. The process is expressed in the metaphor of the hunt:

> Jetzt geht er einem andern Waidwerk nach. . . .
> Ich laure auf ein edles Wild. . . .
> Aber heute will ich
> Den *Meisterschuss* tun und das Beste mir
> Im ganzen Umkreis des Gebirgs gewinnen.

*[He now pursues another quarry. . . . I lie in wait for noble game. . . . But today I intend to make a *master-shot* and win the highest prize in all this mountain region.]*

Tell’s marksmanship remains undisputed—and has become legendary. He is acclaimed at the end as “der Schütze und Erretter”—the man who made the “saving shot.”

Now at the beginning of *Die Hermannsschlacht* there is a dispute over who made the saving shot, who is the true “Sieger des Urs.” *(And we will not be wrong, I believe, if we identify this “Ur” with the “Ur­stand” which Schiller thought he had returned to.)* Ventidius, with more gallantry than sincerity, pretends to yield the honor to Thusnelda, though he lets it be understood that the truly saving shot was his after all. But we and the Germans know that he is deluding himself; he has hit the beast only after it was already mortally wounded and could do no further harm.

Kleist’s point, I suggest, is this: Schiller had no conception of what the human animal is like in the “Ur-stand.” The animal *he* thinks he has vanquished has already lost most of its savage and destructive force. The state of law he founds presupposes man as a peaceable being, normally curbed by an “inner” or “higher” law, gentled by the milk of human kindness. It is Gessler and his crew who are bestial: “Wiitrich,” “Horden,” “Tiger” or, by insistent association, “Drachen,” “Bären” and “Wölfe.” Switzerland itself is “die sel’ge Insel,” “der Unschuld Land”; the threats to it, whether from untamed nature or from a species of animal called “böse Menschen,” are morally external to it.

In *Die Hermannsschlacht* it is generally the Germans who are linked to wild animals—most signally in Thusnelda’s metamorphosis into the “she-bear of Cherusca.” The fact is that “die deutschen Uren,” as Herman calls them, are very much closer to the “Ur-stand” than the Romans are, and that the Romans, in depriving them of what statehood they have and preventing their ascent to higher and more articulate
levels of it, reduce them to the state of nature—pre-social, pre-moral, ferocious.

IX

We have come back to the Thusnelda plot—with, I hope, the key to it and to the play as a whole. Thusnelda represents a concept of art and (for Kleist it is the same thing) of morality which has become false by living vastly beyond its social means—by unearned abstraction. (This is also a kind of betrayal, because abstraction is the enemy’s most powerful and insidious tool.) Her generous and humane feelings are not ignoble in themselves; they are “unworthy” because they are purchased at the expense of those who know themselves bound to far less noble realities, locked in by brutally concrete metaphors. What makes Thusnelda the ultimate heroine of the play—

Mein schönes Thuschen, Heldin grüß ich dich!

[My lovely Thuschen, I hail you heroine!]—

is her determination to start again at the very bottom, the real and literal state of nature.

For she does not just return to Hermann’s level; she plunges below it. Kleist knows, and tries to make us see, that even “Vaterland” is an abstraction (though a vitally necessary one). In man’s slow climb toward universal order, truth and justice, the nation-state is a step up from a more savage, tribal state. But even that state is already at a level where moral terms are available and meaningful. Hermann can appeal to values such as freedom; he operates in a moral space, however paradoxical. He can act “in the name of” something higher; and the “embrace” he plots is already metaphoric—given meaning as a step toward a greater order, a higher form of humanity. Thusnelda is made to re-enact man’s rise from the beginning. Nothing redeems her embrace from the horror of sheer physicality. She must earn her title as “Siegerin des Urs.”

As must Kleist himself. I have been critical of Wilhelm Tell, but I hope I have made clear, through the term “unearned,” the nature and limits of my criticism (which I believe is a reflection of Kleist’s). Kleist was as open as the most confirmed classicist to the powerful appeal of classical nobility, simplicity, universality—in short, beauty. His “Satz aus der höheren Kritik” might have issued from Weimar itself:

Es gehört mehr Genie dazu, ein mittelmässiges Kunstwerk zu würdigen als ein vortreffliches. Schönheit und Wahrheit leuchten der menschlichen
It takes more genius to evaluate a mediocre work of art than a superior one. Beauty and truth are immediately apparent to the human mind; and just as the most sublime principles are easiest to understand (only the detailed is hard to comprehend), so the beautiful pleases easily; only the imperfect and mannered can be enjoyed with difficulty. The beautiful is so purely contained in an excellent work of art that any healthy perceptive faculty, as such, immediately recognizes it. . . . If someone praises Schiller and Goethe therefore, by this he still doesn’t demonstrate to me at all an outstanding and extraordinary sense of beauty; but if he is occasionally satisfied with Gellert and Cronegk, he makes me . . . suppose that he possesses understanding and sensitivities, and indeed both to a rare degree.

Can we suppose that even for a moment of bitter hostility Kleist was not fully and painfully aware of the distance that separates Thusnelda the she-bear from Tell the noble marksman?

Komm du hervor, du Bringer bitter Schmerzen,
Mein teures Kleinod jetzt, mein höchster Schatz—
Ein Ziel will ich dir geben, das bis jetzt
Der frommen Bitte undurchdringlich war—
Doch dir soll es nicht widerstehn—Und du,
Vertraute Bogensehne, die so oft
Mir treu gedient hat in der Freude Spielen,
Verlass mich nicht im fürchterlichen Ernst!
Nur jetzt noch halte fest, du treuer Strang,
Der mir so oft den herben Pfeil beflügelt—
Entrann’ er jetzo kraftlos meinen Händen,
Ich habe keinen zweiten zu versenden.

[Come forth, bringer of bitter sorrows, now my dear jewel and my supreme treasure—I will give you a target that till now was impervious to any gentle plea—But you it shall not withstand—And you, familiar bow-string, who have served me faithfully in games of joy, do not desert me in this moment of terrible earnestness! Hold firm just once again, faithful cord, that gave wings so often to my bitter arrow—if it should now feebly leave my hands, I have no second to dispatch.]
“Wie die erhabensten Sätze leicht zu verstehen sind [just as the most sublime principles are easiest to understand]”—especially if we put them next to such as these:

Thusnelda, bist du klug, die Fürstin ists,
Von deren Haupt, der Livia zur Probe,
Du jüngst die seidne Locke abgelöst!
Lass den Moment, dir günstig, nicht entschlüpfen,
Und ganz die Stirn jetzt schmeichelnd scher ihr ab! (ll. 2393–97)

[If you are shrewd, it is Thusnelda, the princess, from whose head you removed of late a silken lock as a sample for Livia! Don’t let the moment favorable to you be lost—now with blandishment crop her whole brow!]

But have Schiller’s lines the right to be so nobly simple? Tell has just finished saying that his milk of human kindness has turned into “gährend Drachengift”; the difficulty is that neither his speech nor his feelings show any sign of the transformation. No sooner has he said it than the children are “brought in” to step between him and the monster within:

Die armen Kindlein, die unschuldigen,
Das treue Weib muss ich vor deiner Wut
Beschützen, Landvogt!

[Governor, I must protect these poor, innocent little children and this good woman from your fury!]

Repeatedly he calls his plan “Mord,” but it is a figure of speech only:

—Und doch an euch nur denkt er, liebe Kinder,
Auch jetzt—euch zu verteidigen, eure holde Unschuld
Zu schützen vor der Rache des Tyrannen,
Will er zum Morde jetzt den Bogen spannen.

[—And yet he is only thinking of you, dear children, even now—to defend you and protect your sweet innocence from the tyrant’s revenge, he intends to draw his bow now for murder.]

He is no murderer, only the executioner of a higher law: “Es lebt ein Gott, zu strafen und zu rächen. [A God exists, to punish and avenge.]” And in just the same way, Schiller here is no true “Stifter” or “Anstifter”; he is the authorized spokesman of a pre-established order and truth. By Kleist’s much more exacting measure, he has not earned the praise he claims:

Wo ist der Tell? Soll er allein uns fehlen,
Der unsern Freiheit Stifter ist? Das Grösste
Hat er getan, das Härteste erduldet.

[Where is our Tell? Shall he who is the author of our freedom be the only one missing? He did the most and suffered the most cruelly.]

There are depths of greatness undreamed of in Schiller’s noble philosophy and rhetoric.

W. B. Yeats, at a turning point in his development as a poet, felt the need his language had of the “baptism of the gutter.” The phrase describes Kleist’s need and intention more tellingly than all my pages of commentary. It is exactly this baptism which Thusnelda suffers: this purification and redemption by immersion—in mud. In fact, Kleist anticipates Yeats’ metaphor. Directly after Thusnelda’s call for her children—and in their place—we get a song:

Ein Knabe sah den Mondenschein
In eines Teiches Becken;
Er fasste mit der Hand hinein,
    Den Schimmer einzustecken;
Da trübte sich des Wassers Rand,
Das glänz’ge Mondesbild verschwand,
    Und seine Hand war——

[A boy saw the moonlight in the basin of a pond; he reached in with his hand to pocket the glimmering; the water’s rim clouded and the gleaming image of the moon disappeared, and his hand was——]

“Drecken” is, I suggest, the only conclusion that would fit the stanza’s sense, meter and rhyme scheme. It points to Ventidius’ final reward for his theft (which he commits during the singing); but more threateningly it points to Thusnelda herself. As this point everything still seems playful, manageable within the easy harmonies of the Age of Sensibility; but there is the first clear hint of what is to come. We may read the elision not only as standing for the throttled word “drecken,” but also as a gesture of attempted, terrified withdrawal—“Schrecken!”—from that word as soon as it rises muddily into view. But there is no withdrawing now; “Reimzwang” holds Thusnelda and Ventidius as inescapably locked in as the “Zwinger” will hold them at play’s end. The birth of a nation cannot be celebrated within the aesthetics of “schöner Schein”; a very different kind of baptism is required—a total immersion into the unredeemed physicality of man’s origins.

We may well wonder if Kleist did not concede too much to the sine qua non—if the cause of humanity, justice and truth is not better served by the celebration of its fragile hopes than the exposure of its “sullied”
beginnings (to borrow Shakespeare’s profound word-play: “Oh, that this too too sullied [solid] flesh would melt!”). Kleist himself must have wondered; as we have seen, the price he had to pay for not leaving his art out of this cruel play was bitter. It would have been so easy; he could have been a poet—and a patriot too. He could have conspired, written pamphlets and perhaps even a straight propaganda play—but kept his muse pure. Or he could have followed Weimar’s example and Friedrich Schlegel’s principle:


[Of course, it might here be maintained that in the event of war everyone must assume the defence of the fatherland. A principle to which one has often tried to give practical realization. . . . Yet as a general principle it is completely unacceptable. . . . Ecclesiastics, scholars, and artists have to pursue their great purpose in peace and quiet and be spared the turbulent, coarse trade of war.]

But of course Kleist had no real choice. His passion for integrity—for doing and being wholly whatever he did and was—forced him to make his art serve political ends when these ends seemed the most urgent; and his suspicion of disembodied and unearned beauty and truth forced him to the baptism of the gutter. He knew, far better than Schlegel, how rude and turbulent the craft of war is—in fact, how treacherous and cruel. But he did not think an art either beautiful or true which maintained its purity by parasitic reliance on the dirty work of others.

Kleist had perhaps more than his share of what Coleridge considered the main German failing: nimiety, “too-muchness.” As he knew only too well, nothing in him was naturally well-tempered. Like the unfortunate brothers in “Die Heilige Cäcilie,” he was condemned to howl his Gloria in Excelsis like a wolf. But he did not deceive himself that what came out was the music of the spheres. When he went down, he knew he was going down, and why; unlike too many nationalists of a later time, he did not try to persuade himself and others that down was up.

Korff calls Die Hermannsschlacht “ein tief fragwürdiges Gebilde.” It is truly that—provided we take “frag-würdig” literally (as Korff does
Kleist’s *Hermannsschlacht* not). Kleist compels us to ask questions—some seemingly minute and almost physical in their insistent textuality, other encompassing and of broad import. He compels us to *ask* them, not to beg them. If we do, we find that the questions very much need asking—not only of Kleist and of Germany in 1809, but of a much more recent past, in fact of the present and of ourselves.