Philosophical Inspirations for Violent Fiction and Drama:
Heinrich von Kleist and Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Submitted by Steven Mark Howe to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in June 2010.

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Abstract

Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) is renowned as an author who posed a radical challenge to the prevailing intellectual, aesthetic and ethical orthodoxies of his age. Recently, his elusive works have frequently been seen to represent a poetics of irony that relentlessly deconstructs the philosophical paradigms of Idealism and reflects a Romantic, even postmodern, view of the fundamental ambiguities of the world. For all that this contributes to our understanding of the famed plasticity and inexhaustibility of his texts, however, a limited reading along these lines effects a decided levelling of social, political and intellectual context, and fails to do full justice to the more complex manner in which Kleist articulates the tensions between the secure modalities of Enlightenment thought and the deep anxieties of the revolutionary age.

This study aims to offer a new angle on Kleist’s dialogue with the Enlightenment by reconsidering his investment in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Where previously critics have tended to conceptualise this from a biographical perspective as a temporary, personal interest borne of the strict antinomies of nature-civilisation and individual-society, an attempt will be made here to re-establish Rousseau’s specific importance as a political thinker whose theories remained a fertile source of creative inspiration and critical reflection for the violent constellations of Kleist’s fiction and drama. Focusing on a cross-section of his work, particular focus will be placed on his explorations of the links between religion and fanaticism (Das Erdbeben in Chili), the legitimacy of revolutionary violence (Die Verlobung in St. Domingo), the performance of nationhood (Die Herrmannsschlacht), and the relationship between patriotism and liberty (Prinz Friedrich von Homburg). Set in the historical context of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, a mode of discourse will be located which sheds new, important, and at times unexpected, light on the political and ethical issues at play in Kleist’s work.
Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations for primary sources are used throughout, in each case followed by volume (where applicable) and then page number:

DKV  Heinrich von Kleist, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, 4 vols, ed. by Klaus Müller-Salget et al. (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987-97)


AA  *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, 23 vols, ed. by Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Reimer/de Gruyter, 1905-56)


ES  Adam Müller, *Elemente der Staatskunst*, ed. by Jakob Baxa (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1922)

OMR  *Oeuvres complètes de Maximilien Robespierre*, 10 vols, ed. by Marc Bouloiseau et al. (Paris: Aux bureaux de la revue historique de la révolution française, 1910-67)

PAP  *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 10 vols, ed. by John Butt et al. (London: Methuen, 1938-68)


The following abbreviations are used throughout for the titles of frequently referenced journals:

\begin{align*}
BzKf & \quad \textit{Beiträge zur Kleistforschung} \\
DVjs & \quad \textit{Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift} \\
GLL & \quad \textit{German Life and Letters} \\
HKB & \quad \textit{Heilbronner Kleist-Blätter} \\
JbdSG & \quad \textit{Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft} \\
KJb & \quad \textit{Kleist Jahrbuch} \\
MLN & \quad \textit{Modern Language Notes} \\
MLR & \quad \textit{Modern Language Review} \\
OGS & \quad \textit{Oxford German Studies} \\
PEGS & \quad \textit{Publications of the English Goethe Society} \\
PMLA & \quad \textit{Publications of the Modern Languages Association of America} \\
ZfdPh & \quad \textit{Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie}
\end{align*}

The following abbreviations are also used to refer to frequently referenced secondary sources:

\begin{align*}
\textit{Lebensspuren} & \quad \text{Helmut Sembdner (ed.), \textit{Heinrich von Kleists Lebensspuren: Dokumente und Berichte der Zeitgenossen} (Bremen: Schünemann, 1957)} \\
\textit{Nachruhm} & \quad \text{Helmut Sembdner (ed.), \textit{Heinrich von Kleists Nachruhm: eine Wirkungsgeschichte in Dokumenten} (Bremen: Schünemann, 1967)}
\end{align*}
CHAPTER ONE

Interpreting Kleist’s Paradoxes

Heinrich von Kleist is without doubt one of the most challenging figures in German literary history. In a career lasting a little under a decade, from 1802 through to his premature death in 1811, he produced a remarkable body of narrative and dramatic work that radically called into question the prevailing intellectual, aesthetic and ethical orthodoxies of the age. At a time when Goethe and Schiller were embarking on a period of classicist writing promoting harmony of substance and form, Kleist’s world is, by contrast, one of chaos and conflict, of dislocation and instability. His works raise fundamental questions concerning the possibilities of knowledge and limitations of language, and are filled with characters bereft of certainty and orientation. They mark the trauma of social and political upheaval, and plumb the extreme depths of human psychology. Above all, they are characterised by scenes of brutality and eruptions of violence that in many ways anticipate late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century modernism, and which continue to shock and fascinate to the present day. To borrow a phrase from the organisers of a recent conference, this is an oeuvre which is both ‘scandalously profound’ and ‘profoundly scandalous’.

It is little wonder, then, that Kleist has, from the very beginning, posed such a problem for the literary world. Whilst Wieland may have been thrown into raptures upon hearing a reading from Robert Guiskard, Goethe, whose approval Kleist so desperately sought, was dismissive of Amphitryon and reacted with strong aversion to Penthesilea. In a review of Tieck’s Dramaturgische Blätter from 1826, he would later write that Kleist filled him with ‘Schauder’ and ‘Abscheu’; at the time, he asserted that the young author had written for a theatre ‘welches da kommen soll’. Performance history suggests that others shared this view – only three of Kleist’s seven completed dramas ever saw the stage during his own lifetime, and only one, Das Käthchen von Heilbronn, met with anything like

2 Cf. Lebensspuren, No. 89.
3 Cf. Lebensspuren, No. 181 and No. 185.
4 Cf. Lebensspuren, No. 224.
5 Nachruhm, No. 274.
6 Lebensspuren, No. 224.
popular acclaim. His other works, it seems, were considered just too far out of kilter with dominant aesthetic and ethical modes to be suitable for performance.

This image of Kleist as an outsider at odds with contemporary currents has played a central role in shaping critical opinion over the past 200 years. In terms of literary history and ideas, he has come to be recognised as a writer who, along with Jean Paul and Friedrich Hölderlin, stands apart from traditional period concepts around 1800, in an indeterminate region between the fronts of Classicism and Romanticism. For much of the twentieth century, this premise of marginality was extended to the broader lines of Zeitgeschichte – in an influential essay from 1936, Georg Lukács argued that Kleist’s intellectual and social alienation led him, in his fictional works, to sever the link between the individual and the social-historical context and to centre on the solipsistic isolation of human passions; whilst in the post-war period in the west, right the way through to the 1970s, Kleist continued to be seen as something of a ‘Dichter ohne Gesellschaft’, with commentators focusing attention on his treatment of existential antinomies and questions of subjectivity and identity. More recently, this question has re-opened in a new horizon of deconstructionist readings which emphasise how Kleist’s texts undermine and subvert the aesthetic and philosophical assumptions of German Classicism and Idealism, and how details of their verbal structure defy hermeneutical mastery. As a corollary to this shift, there has also been a tendency to regard Kleist as having anticipated modern constructions of gender, body and race; the result being that certain of his works have, over the past twenty years or so, become favoured objects for a range of modern and postmodern theoretical paradigms.

The other dramas to be (unsuccessfully) performed were Die Familie Schroffenstein at Graz in January 1804, and Der zerbrochne Krug – ironically under Goethe’s direction – at Weimar in March 1808.


To name just a few examples, see Friedrich Koch, Heinrich von Kleist: Bewußtsein und Wirklichkeit (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1958), Günter Blöcker, Heinrich von Kleist oder das absolute Ich (Berlin: Argon, 1960), and Hermann Reske, Traum und Wirklichkeit im Werk Heinrich von Kleists (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1969). The most important and influential study in this tradition is Walter Müller-Seidel’s Versuchen und Erkennen: eine Studie über Heinrich von Kleist (Cologne: Böhlau, 1961), which remains a valuable source of insight and guidance.

That Kleist has been drawn so enthusiastically into the fold of poststructuralist and deconstructionist criticism is hardly surprising. For it has long been commonplace that his works bristle with paradoxes, ambiguities and tensions, and that these are, in fact, very much a hallmark of his poetics. In a 1975 essay on the motif of ‘Doppeldeutigkeit’ in the novellas, for example, Klaus Müller-Salget writes that it is the ‘prinzipielle Mehrdeutigkeit des Menschen und der “Welt”’ which is ‘das Hauptthema dieser Dichtungen’, whilst more recently, Bernhard Greiner has made the point that ‘das Paradoxon ist offenbar die zentrale Figur des Denkens, des künstlerischen Schaffens wie der Lebenserfahrung dieses Autors’. As formal structuring principles, these elements open up plural interpretive possibilities, and this, coupled with Kleist’s penchant for ironic undercutting of philosophical and linguistic paradigms, provides fertile ground for critical approaches that stress the instability of signification and make play of such concepts as ‘substitution’, ‘doubleness’, ‘dialogism’ and ‘polyphony’. Viewed under a biographical aspect – and here we think above all of the apparent epistemological breakdown of 1801 (the so-called ‘Kant-Krise’) – these features might, moreover, be linked to a sense of despair concerning absolute or fixed notions of truth and meaning, all of which lends ready support to a view of his works as a series of open-ended reflections on the chaotic structures of the world which both foreshadow and foretell the existential crises of modernity, and refuse the possibility of any stable interpretative position.

Yet inasmuch as any reader must be sensitive to the manner in which Kleist employs paradox and ambiguity to confound expectations and undermine secure vantage points, there is, I feel, something unsatisfactory about the assumption that these tropes necessarily represent an inbuilt, and insurmountable, impediment to interpretation, and that they thus mark the author as something of a deconstructionist avant la lettre. For as a number of critics have recently pointed out, this kind of aporetic reading, in deferring all questions of meaning to the ‘Unlesbarkeit’ of narrative and dramatic structures, effects a decided levelling of social, political and intellectual context, and, in doing so, reifies both textual and discursive complexities. In part this stems from a familiar tendency to limit attention to the ways in which Kleist’s paradoxes embody the philosophical and aesthetic ironies of Romanticism that imply a fundamental ambiguity in the world, both in terms of the undecidability of reality and the poetic nature of language and reflexivity. No doubt, this is an important aspect of his works – one which does much to account for their famed plasticity and inexhaustibility. To extrapolate from this to an anticipatory postmodern rejection of meaning and identity amounts, however, amongst all else, to ignoring the broader imaginative and critical possibilities of paradox as a literary form, and I suggest we might find an alternative point of entry to Kleist’s texts if we consider them in relation to a richer tradition of paradoxical discourse.

To do full justice to this subject would in itself require a book-length study, and I am necessarily confined here to drawing out a few important details. At root, the term paradoxon suggests an assertion that runs counter to conventional understanding and common belief (‘para’ (against) + ‘doxē’ (belief)), and is thought to have originated in Greek antiquity as a means of engaging the logical dualisms that provide the eschatological basis for metaphysical philosophy. For the purposes of this inquiry, however, I should

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18 Greiner (‘Kleists Paradoxe’) provides a useful overview of the diverse forms of paradox in Kleist’s work, and the various ways in which they can be – and have been – interpreted.

19 A number of insightful historical and theoretical discussions of the paradox can be found in the following volumes: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (eds), Paradoxi, Dissonanzen, Zusammenbrüche: Situationen offener Epistemologie (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), Paul Geyer and Roland Hagenbüchle (eds), Das Paradox: eine Herausforderung des abendländischen Denkens (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1992),
like to take initial bearing from Cicero’s definition, in the preface to his Paradoxa Stoicorum, of the paradox as a proposition which is not only ‘contrary to universal opinion’ (contraque opinionem omnium), but also ‘surprising’ or ‘shocking’ (admirabilia) and ‘absolutely true’ (longeque verissima). Two elements make this a particularly apt starting point. The one is that Cicero undertakes one of the earliest attempts to reformulate classical paradoxes in a popular literary mode, and so his presentation provides an important historical placing for the tradition of paradox in literature. The other is that the definition he renders offers a crucial insight into the cognitive potential of the form – Cicero treats the paradox as a rhetorical topos, one which has the ability to arrest attention and provoke fresh thought, and which is, in this sense, didactic.

This latter aspect has particular interest in the context of this study, all the more so as it can be traced through later periods of European culture. During the Renaissance, for example, there was, as Rosalie L. Colie has shown, a major revival of the paradox as a critical discursive form – in the works of Erasmus, More, Rabelais and Lando, for example, and in Montaigne, Cervantes and Shakespeare, the three of whom, as we know, exerted a not inconsiderable influence on Kleist. In a wide-ranging analysis of paradoxical situations and structures, Colie details a number of diverse critical and creative functions, four of which we might explore as being of especial relevance and value for a reading of Kleist. The first of these, following Cicero, is the capacity of paradox to move contrary to received opinion and belief and to elicit a response of startlement and wonder. The second, closely related, is that it is always somehow involved in a dialectic that challenges an established orthodoxy – the paradox is, Colie submits, ‘oblique criticism of absolute judgement or absolute conviction’. The third is that the paradoxical maxim might embody an apparent contradiction which, when probed, is in fact shown to enclose and illuminate a hidden truth that enables the reader to arrive at a stable cognitive insight. The fourth point, meanwhile, is essentially the reverse of the same coin – the paradox might just as well

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23 Colie, Paradoxa Epidemica, p. 10.
describe an antinomy that is insoluble, one which requires the reader to acknowledge its simultaneous truth and falsity, and to accept the possible co-existence of contradictions, contrarieties and polarities of thought and principle.

Taken together, these four characteristic modes of functioning provide a useful conceptual framework with which to approach and address the issue of Kleist’s paradoxes. We might, however, extend the historical plane of reference into high Enlightenment culture, where patterns of paradox likewise enjoyed a special prominence, particularly in the French context. Turning first to the *Encyclopédie*, considered the great textual symbol of the Enlightenment, we find a definition that essentially recaps Cicero’s – the paradox is a proposition which appears absurd ‘parce qu’elle est contraire aux opinions reçues’ but which is nonetheless ‘vraie au fond, ou du moins peut recevoir un air de vérité’. Among the *lumières* of the mid- to late-eighteenth century, it emerges as a privileged trope of thought, not so much as a figure of obstruction but rather of enlightenment and emancipation, operating as a rhetorical mode that, in the words of one recent critic, ‘promises an exhilarating slide towards new comprehension, and the exchange of an old prejudice for a new truth’. Perhaps the name most frequently associated with this Enlightenment taste for paradox is Diderot, not least on the basis of his own dialogue *Paradoxe sur le comédien*. The specific point at issue in this work – the question of aesthetic distance and emotional experience in theatre – is of no great significance here. What does bear on the matter in hand, however, is the fact that Diderot makes the paradox something of a founding stone for a form of moralistic thinking that engages both dialectically and dialogically with opposing value systems, and that this, in turn, leads to a conscious sharpening of the paradoxical form. Charting this, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe offers the following summary:

The paradox is [for Diderot] not only a contradicting or surprising opinion (out of the ordinary and shocking). It implies a passing to the extreme, a sort of ‘maximization’, as is said in logic nowadays. It is in reality a hyperbolic movement by which the equivalence of contraries is established (probably

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without ever establishing itself) – the contraries themselves pushed to the extreme [...] of contrariety. This is why the formula for the paradox is always that of the double superlative: the more mad it is, the more wise it is; the maddest is the wisest.\footnote{Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, \textit{Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics}, ed. by Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 252.}

In a next step, Lacoue-Labarthe goes on to argue that this ‘paradoxical logic’ is not only ‘hyperbological’ but also ‘properly abyssal’ and extendable to infinity – a view that I do not personally share and which at any rate falls outside the remit of interest here. That notwithstanding, his diagnosis of Diderot’s tendency to work the paradox to its limits identifies a further element of the tradition that might be productively applied in the case of Kleist, and the formula of the ‘double superlative’ would certainly seem attested to by characters such as Michael Kohlhaas (‘einer der rechtschaffensten zugleich und entsetzlichsten Menschen seiner Zeit’ (DKV: III, 13)) and the ‘Engel’-‘Teufel’ Graf F. in \textit{Die Marquise von O}..., and by the dialectical reversals of action that recur throughout, and which likewise drive situational paradoxes to an extreme point.

Seen in the fuller context of these Renaissance and Enlightenment associations, we thus find the way open for an alternative perspective on the oppositions and contrarieties that so often provide the fictional matrix for Kleist’s work – one which accounts for their presence not solely in terms of ironic ambiguity, experimentation or a sense of ludic play, but which also locates them within a moral and epistemological framework as ‘positive’ tools of comprehension. This is not to suggest that the Kleistian paradox can always be interpreted with thematic or discursive consistency, and there are countless examples across his works that resist any definitive resolution, whether on the level of language, selfhood, culture or ideology. To one attuned to the tradition of paradox, however, these need not appear as a deliberate obstacle to any attempt at a moral or stable reading of his fiction. For the rhetoric of paradox tends not to pursue truth through closure, but rather through a continuing process of reflection and self-reflection – it is a mode that, by means of reversal and surprise, reconfigures and reframes common truths and which thus forces the reader/listener to look afresh at underlying issues and reconsider accepted norms. This, in my view, is the customary Kleistian experience, as the open-ended, elusive character of his work does not so much negate or cancel meaning \textit{per se}, but rather sends the reader back to the beginning in search of further insight and so stimulates new experiences of reflection.
and interpretation. It is in this way that Kleist embodies what Greiner refers to as a ‘Poetik des Paradoxons’ – a poetics that scandalises and irritates, but which does so productively in a moral and didactic framework, and which can thus be accessed most precisely when placed in its historical and discursive context. Working from a similar perspective, Hans-Jochen Marquardt has delivered a particularly convincing riposte to deconstructionist readings:

[...] bei aller Verführung, bei aller Ambivalenz, bei aller Vielfalt der Perspektiven, bei aller inhärenten Hermetik, bei aller gehörig schönen Anstrengung, die dem Leser Kleists abverlangt wird, kann man wohl nicht umhin, folgende Prämissen kleistischer Dichtung, durch Leben und Werk vielfach bezeugt, anzuerkennen: Erstens, Kleist suchte nach Wahrheit; zweitens, er wollte verstanden werden; drittens, er wollte wirken; viertens, er wollte verstanden werden und wirken in seiner Zeit. Auch die raffinierteste Spitzfindigkeit im Aufspüren eingeschriebener Rezeptionsverhinderungen der fünften Ordnung wird dies nicht aus der Welt schaffen können. Täuschung und Enttäuschung des Lesers sind bei Kleist niemals Selbstzweck, sondern Voraussetzung von dessen Selbstfindung, mithin emanzipatorisch motiviert und in diesem Sinne aufklärerisch.

In re-opening the question of the contextualisation of Kleist’s work in this way, Marquardt presents an avenue of inquiry which is, I feel, far more conducive to an understanding of textual structures. For as much as Kleist may, in certain regards, be seen as having been far ahead of his time, he was nonetheless a true son of the age. Brought up in a Prussia still shaped by the cultural reforms of Friedrich II, he was, during his early years, deeply immersed in the ideology of the Spätaufklärung, both German and French. Following his reading of Kant in 1801, he famously disavowed the rationalist creed documented in his early ‘Lebensplan’, but this did not signal a terminal break with all auspices of

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28 Evidence that Kleist conceived of paradox in this way might be adduced both from the essay ‘Über das Marionettentheater’, which in terms of content and form conveys a parallel to the discourse of paradox as one of progressive enlightenment (cf. Heselhaus, ‘Das Kleistische Paradox’), and his ‘Allerneuester Erziehungsplan’ which is founded on a law of opposition and which, as Walter Hinderer has shown, might be linked with the moral-didactic forms of Kant’s ‘Begriff der negativen Grössen’ and Adam Müller’s ‘Lehre vom Gegensatz’ (cf. Hinderer, ‘Kleists Ästhetik der Negation’).

29 Greiner, ‘Kleists Paradoxe’, p. 44.


31 See the two recent biographies by Jens Bisky and Gerhard Schulz, both of which draw close attention to Kleist’s grounding in Enlightenment thought and philosophy (cf. Jens Bisky, Kleist: eine Biographie (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2007), and Gerhard Schulz, Kleist: eine Biographie (Munich: Beck, 2007)). A particularly clear account is also provided by Schmidt, Die Dramen und Erzählungen, pp. 17-22.
Enlightenment thought – he remained sufficiently attached to the emancipatory ideals that had dominated his upbringing never to revoke them completely. Recent scholarship has, indeed, witnessed a revival of interest in Kleist’s position as an Enlightenment figure, with a number of commentators suggesting that his entire literary oeuvre might be read as a critical reckoning with the Aufklärung in general, and Kant in particular. That this engagement is permeated by scepticism is clear enough, but this does not, as Tim Mehigan has shown, necessarily indicate denial or agonality, and can instead be seen as a reflection and continuation of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century dialogue on the limitations attached to the ideal of rationality. Like many authors of the late Enlightenment, Kleist takes up the paradigms of Idealism and puts them to the test in the arena of human action – an arena marked by instinct, contingency and violence. The conflict between rationality and (uncontrollable) nature is then pressed to psychological extremes, and it is herein that the peculiar modernism of his work lies. An insightful angle on this is provided by Dirk Grathoff’s attempt to position the issue in the broader intellectual context of the ‘Querelle des anciens et des modernes’. From Die Familie Schroffenstein onwards, Grathoff sees in the structures of Kleist’s literary works the expression of a counterposition to Schiller’s Über naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung, in the form of a Shakespeare-influenced (and in this sense modern) concern with the socialisation of nature. The contrast with the view of antiquity of Weimar Classicism is, of course, most dramatically evident in the transgressive excess of Penthesilea, so opposed in spirit to Goethe’s Iphigenie auf Tauris. The violent dislocation of self experienced by the Amazon queen is not, however, merely an aesthetic matter but also highly political – as Grathoff points out, a second key aspect to Kleist’s poetic vision is the ‘Fortführung der modernen Auffassung von der Vergesellschaftung von Natur hin zu einem dediziert sich

entfaltenden Begriff des Politischen’. Behind this, both in the specific context of *Penthesilea* and beyond, lies the experience of the violent course of the French Revolution and its impact on contemporary discourses of reason, freedom and agency; and it is against this ideological background that Kleist subjects the ideals of Enlightenment thought to questioning, evolving a string of paradoxical constellations which at once draw attention to both the promise and limits of the tradition. Rather than necessarily signalling ironic subversion or any kind of ‘deconstructive fury’, the Kleistian paradox can in this regard be seen as a discursive construct which reflects not only on the fragile aesthetic order of the world but also the most pressing political, cultural and moral issues of the age – a marker of Kleist’s position in the ‘Verwerfungszone’ between Classicism and Romanticism, and an articulation of the tensions between the secure modalities of Enlightenment thought and the deep anxieties of the revolutionary era.

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CHAPTER TWO

Nature, Society, Self:
Kleist, Rousseau and the Paradoxes of Enlightenment

The present study is written with the above perspectives in mind. Its aim is to offer a new angle on Kleist’s complex dialogue with the Enlightenment by re-examining his investment in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Alongside the likes of Montesquieu, Hume, Smith and Kant, Rousseau stands as a truly pivotal figure in eighteenth-century European thought. Though perhaps best known today as a social theorist and author of controversial political treatises (Discours sur les sciences et les arts, Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes, Du contrat social), his intellectual scope was vast – few, if any, of his luminous contemporaries could match the range of his interests and achievements. His epistolary novel Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse was a literary sensation which electrified the reading public and became an international bestseller. Émile, ou de l’éducation was arguably the most significant and influential pedagogical text of the century. His Confessions created the terms for modern autobiographical writing, whilst his Rêveries du promeneur solitaire prompted a surge in Romantic naturalism across Europe. He was also a musicologist of some repute, publishing a comprehensive dictionary of music in 1767, and a successful composer – his comic opera Le Devin du village was performed in 1752 at the court of Louis XV at Versailles, whilst his ‘lyric scene’ Pygmalion almost single-handedly launched the new genre of the melodrama and was praised by Goethe in Dichtung und Wahrheit as a ‘kleine[s], aber merkwürdig Epoche machende[s] Werk[,]’.¹ He wrote a series of plays of varying merit and interest, many of which set classical or mythological stories on a new footing (Narcisse, ou L’Amant de Lui-Même; La Mort de Lucrèce), and a number of discursive pieces on drama, theatre and fiction (Lettre à M. d’Alembert sur les spectacles, De l’Imitation Théâtrale, the Seconde Préface to La Nouvelle Héloïse). In addition, he also produced a whole range of intellectually intricate and challenging theoretical texts on subjects as diverse as anthropology, sociology, war, religion and language. Taken in its entirety, this corpus of

writing bears testimony to Rousseau’s standing as one of the most original, profound and influential thinkers of the age.

Amongst the German-speaking intelligentsia, this influence was particularly pervasive. Kant famously saw Rousseau as the Newton of the moral world and his doctrine bears an indelible mark of intellectual debt. Lessing, Mendelssohn and Wieland grappled with the radical social critique of the early discourses, whilst Fichte and Hegel later did the same with the ideas of *Du contrat social*. Hamann and Herder both drew widely on and critically engaged with his philosophy of language. In pedagogy, Basedow, Campe and Pestalozzi were all avowed disciples of *Émile*, whilst from the late 1760s onwards, Rousseau also emerges, principally by way of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (and later the *Confessions*), as a powerful stimulus for the emotional radicalism and intense subjectivity of the *Stürmer und Drängen* and early Romantics, and as an inspiring paragon for a whole generation of writers, including the young Goethe and Schiller, Lenz and Klinger, Jean Paul and Hölderlin. Add to this the popular ‘cult of nature’ for which he came to stand, and the brisance of ongoing debate in literary journals and circles, and we can get some sense of how, from first being brought to public attention by Lessing’s review of the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* in April 1751, Rousseau came to occupy a uniquely important and influential position within the landscape of mid- to late-eighteenth century German thought and culture.

2.1 ‘Auf diesen Nebenbuhler werde ich nie zürnen’: Kleist reads Rousseau

It is against the backdrop of this intellectual and emotional climate that we must consider Kleist’s engagement with Rousseau. As for so many of his contemporaries this was, in his

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3 The *Confessions* were first published post-humously, along with a whole range of other writings, in the early 1780s.
formative years, intense and enthusiastic, fired at least in part by a sense of personal identification and spiritual kinship, as is evident from a series of references in his early correspondence. Two particular elements merit attention in this context. The first centres on the ideal of ‘Bildung’ and Kleist’s concerted efforts, between late 1800 and early 1801, to direct a programme of education for his then fiancée Wilhelmine von Zenge. The pattern is provided by the principles outlined in Book 5 of Émile, subtitled ‘Sophie, ou la femme’, where Rousseau devises a model, justly notorious amongst feminist critics, of a mutually-contingent happiness based on an assumption of sexual difference and a strictly gendered pedagogy – where the male is naturally ‘actif et fort’ (OC: IV, 693) and so to be educated as man and citizen, the female is, Rousseau insists, ‘passif et foible’ (OC: IV, 693) and thus only to be trained for domestic womanhood as obedient wife and virtuous mother. In detailing his plans for Wilhelmine, Kleist uncritically accepts this construction of gendered identity, and we observe in his writings a number of quite precise echoes which suggest an internalisation of Rousseau’s educational theories and a desire to live out the conditions of Émile and Sophie’s domestic idyll (cf. DKV: III, 534; IV, 143, 186, 204, 220, 245, 262). It comes as little surprise, then, that we find him three times during the spring and summer of 1801 stoking Wilhelmine’s enthusiasm for Rousseau: firstly in a letter of 22 March where he promises to present her with a collected edition and encourages her to finish Émile (cf. DKV: IV, 203), then on 14 April with the words, ‘Gewinne Deinen Rousseau so lieb wie es Dir immer möglich ist, auf diesen Nebenbuhler werde ich nie zürnen’ (DKV: IV, 220), and finally, and most telling, in early June, where he writes:


The second aspect to note here relates to what Gerhard Schulz terms Kleist’s ‘topographische Philosophie’, founded on the stark opposition of nature and society in the Würzburg, Berlin and especially the Paris letters of 1801. Whilst in the Prussian capital, Kleist had already given voice to his dissatisfaction with the inauthenticity of social life, particularly in the rarefied atmosphere of the salons – in a letter to Ulrike of 5 February 1801, for instance, he writes of his discomfort with the constant role-playing and posturing,

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in terms which, incidentally, recall a passage from Book 3 of the *Confessions*. Once in Paris, however, these misgivings develop into a full-blown cultural and social critique, the chord of which is struck in a first letter to Karoline von Schlieben written shortly after arrival in July 1801:


The echo of Rousseau is easily caught, both in terms of content and rhetorical style. In particular, Kleist draws on the condemnation of false appearances, anonymity and corruption delivered in both the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*, and – with particular reference to the Parisian world – in the *Lettre à d’Alembert*. One senses too that the pastoral ideals of *Émile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse* remain very much at the forefront of his mind as a counter-example – the terms of his critique may, for example, be read as being set in conscious opposition to those used to describe the famous grape harvest in the latter text:

‘Tout vit dans la plus grande familiarité; tout le monde est égal, et personne ne s’oublie’ (OC: II, 607). In a further move, Kleist extends the line of criticism to the recent

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5 Cf. ‘Indessen wenn ich mich in Gesellschaften nicht wohl befinde, so geschieht dies weniger, weil Andere, als vielmehr weil ich mich selbst nicht zeige, wie ich es wünsche. Die Nothwendigkeit, eine Rolle zu spielen, und ein innerer Widerwillen dagegen machen mir jede Gesellschaft lästig, u froh kann ich nur in meiner eignen Gesellschaft sein, weil ich da ganz wahr sein darf’ (DKV: IV, 199). The corresponding passage in the *Confessions* reads: ‘Si peu maître de mon esprit seul avec moi-même, qu’on juge de ce que je dois être dans la conversation, où, pour parler à propos, il faut penser à la fois et sur le champ à mille choses. La seule idée de tant de convenances dont je suis sur d’oublier au moins quelqu’une suffit pour m’intimider. Je ne comprends pas même comment on ose parler dans un cercle: car à chaque mot il faudroit passer en revue tous les gens qui sont là: il faudroit connoître tous leurs caractères, savoir leurs histoires pour être sûr de ne rien dire qui puisse offenser quelqu’un’ (OC: I, 115).

6 Where this becomes perhaps most pointed is in the penetrating sketch offered in a later letter of the mocked-up natural idyll at the ‘Hameau de Chantilly’ on the outskirts of Paris, where wealthy citizens pay 20 sous to spend a day in ‘patriarchalischer Simplicität’ (DKV: IV, 269) under the guise of simple peasant folk. With withering contempt, Kleist lays bare the perverse artificiality of this whole scenario – the disguises, the role-
celebrations organised to commemorate both the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille and the signature of the peace treaty at Lunéville:

Ich habe dem 14. Juli, dem Jahrestag der Zerstörung der Bastille beigewohnt, an welchem zugleich das Fest der wiedererrungenen Freiheit und das Friedensfest gefeiert ward. Wie solche Tage würdig begangen werden könnten, weiß ich nicht bestimmt; doch dies weiß ich, daß sie fast nicht unwürdiger begangen werden können, als dieser. Nicht als ob es an Obelisken u Triumphbogen u Dekorationen, u Illuminationen, u Feuerwerken u Luftbällen u Canonaden gefehlt hätte, o behüte. Aber keine von allen Anstalten erinnerte an die Hauptgedanken, die Absicht, den Geist des Volkes durch eine bis zum Ekel gehäufte Menge von Vergnügen zu zerstreuen, war überall herrschend, und wenn die Regierung einem Manne von Ehre hätte zumuthen wollen, durch die mäts de cocagne, u die jeux de caroussels, u die theatres forains u die escamoteurs, u die danseurs de corde mit Heiligkeit an die Göttergaben Freiheit u Frieden erinnert zu werden, so wäre dies beleidigender, als ein Faustschlag in sein Antlitz. (DKV: IV, 240-41)

Here again the focus falls on superficiality and falsity, this time in opposition to the original ‘Hauptgedanken’ of the Revolution. Twelve years earlier, Paris may have been the cradle of liberty, equality and fraternity, but what Kleist observes in 1801 is a modern-day Babylon, ‘reifer zum Untergange als irgend eine andere europäische Nation’ (DKV: IV, 259). All trace of the noble ideals of Rousseau, Helvétius and Voltaire has been lost amidst a tide of frivolity, self-indulgence and debauchery (cf. DKV: IV, 259-60), and it is clear that Kleist considers this an affront to the legacy of these thinkers – he closes his account with the words: ‘Rousseau ist immer das 4. Wort der Franzosen; und wie würde er sich schämen, wenn man ihm sagte, daß dies sein Werk sei?’ (DKV: IV, 241). Whether any narrowly political implications might be drawn from this is hard to judge, though it is notable that he picks up, in contrast to many of his contemporaries, on the deliberate propagandistic purpose behind the spectacles as a means of distracting the people from current aggressive French policy. What is clear, however, is that this forms part of a broader critique of civilisation that follows the contours and spirit of Rousseau’s early playing, even the serving of fine food and wines in wooden bowls and earthenware cups. Again, a parallel might be drawn to La Nouvelle Héloïse, for in the same letter in which Saint-Preux describes the activities of the grape harvest, he earlier complains of how Parisian city-dwellers, when going into the country, ‘portent Paris avec eux’ (OC: II, 602), bringing with them their sensual urban tastes and customs – a juxtaposition that casts the true idyllism of the later scene into clearer relief. In his vignette of the ‘Hameau de Chantilly’, Kleist does something similar, closing with an impassioned hymn of praise to the true sublimity of nature which, at the same time, also figures to sharpen and amplify his attack on the degradations of social artifice (cf. DKV: IV, 269).

discourses – one that links the pursuit of technological and scientific advancement to greed and moral turpitude (cf. DKV: IV, 259-61) and which expresses a correspondingly marked antinomy of nature and society. Coupled with Kleist’s longer-standing identification with the doctrine of Émile, there can likewise be little doubt that his experiences in the French capital played a significant contributing role in his alighting on the plan, just a short while later, to experiment with the simple life in the idyllic natural surrounds of the Delossee Island in Lake Thun in early 1802.8

2.2 Zur Forschungslage: Conceptualisations of the Kleist-Rousseau Relationship

Given the frequency and clarity of reference in these early letters, it is perhaps surprising to note that Rousseau’s relevance for Kleist, whether biographical or textual, was largely ignored in the first waves of critical writing and scholarship in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. Earliest mention of the subject appears to have occurred in Erich Schmidt’s 1875 study Richardson, Rousseau, Goethe, where an account is given of the now famous parallel between the reconciliation scene in Die Marquise von O… and a corresponding episode in the sixty-third letter of Part 1 of La Nouvelle Héloïse.9 In the years that followed, casual reference to a possible affinity was made by both Theophil Zolling10 and Wilhelm Scherer,11 but it was not until Otto Brahm’s monograph of 1884 that a more careful attempt was made to explore the fuller implications of this link.12 Since then, the issue has become an ever-present theme in Kleist studies, albeit one which has, as one might expect, seen a considerable ebb and flow in the level of interest over time. Broadly speaking, we can, I suggest, distinguish four clusters or groupings of studies, through which we might trace the evolution of different perspectives and concerns. The starting point is formed by those

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8 A further example of Kleist modelling his own behaviour on ideas or actions of Rousseau might be seen in his playful rearranging of his surname into the anagrammatic ‘Klingstedt’ for his registration at Leipzig University in September 1800 – a parallel to which can be found in Book 4 of the Confessions where Rousseau tells how, in July 1730, he undertook to present himself in Lausanne as a Parisian music teacher under the name Villeneuve de Vaussore (cf. OC: I, 148). That Kleist was by this time familiar with the Confessions can be seen from an earlier passing allusion, in a letter to half-sister Ulrike from 12 November 1799 (cf. DKV: IV, 49), to an episode from Book 7 of the work, where Rousseau recounts his terror and embarrassment at the prospect of being presented before the king following the successful performance of Le Devin du Village.


works that appeared in the half-century or so through to the late 1930s, the majority of which, taking cue from Brahm, are organised along remarkably similar premises. Firstly, their ‘Rousseau-Bild’ is, almost without exception,\(^{13}\) that of the pre-Romantic irrationalist – the man who champions unfettered liberty, Promethean individualism and the natural ‘right of the heart’ against the restrictive rational collectivism of Enlightenment. Secondly, their point of departure is invariably biographical, leading, on account of the distribution of explicit references, to almost unanimous agreement that Kleist’s interest in Rousseau was little more than a passing attraction borne of the shattering disillusionment wrought by the ‘Kant-Krise’. These tendencies recur in Gerhard Fricke’s influential 1929 monograph *Gefühl und Schicksal bei Heinrich von Kleist*,\(^{14}\) and in many of the more detailed discussions of the Rousseau question to emerge during the period – French Germanist Roger Ayrault, for example, limits Rousseau’s influence to the time of the Würzburg trip and the months between March and August 1801,\(^{15}\) whilst Rudolf Buck, though acknowledging certain of Kleist’s texts to be structured on Rousseauian dichotomies, likewise restricts direct influence to the period prior to 1802, before Kleist found his calling as a writer.\(^{16}\)

A second grouping of studies can be seen to be formed by the work of two other critics of the period who, in different ways, at once both perpetuate and challenge aspects of the emerging orthodoxy. The first is Oskar von Xylander, whose *Heinrich von Kleist und J. J. Rousseau*, published in 1937, remains the most extensive dedicated study to date.\(^{17}\) Beginning from a biographical angle, Xylander continues a familiar theme by flagging up the ‘Kant-Krise’ as a vital formative experience which marked Kleist’s turn away from the rationalist creed of the Enlightenment and towards a supposedly Rousseauian faith in the dictates of personal sentiment and inner conscience. Where he makes a new departure, however, is by seeking to trace a line of continuity from this biographical constellation into the literary works, taking up the terms of Fricke’s existentialist account to provide a series of somewhat perfunctory readings intended to demonstrate how Kleist’s whole corpus is determined by the strict dualisms of nature-society and ‘Gefühl’-‘Verstand’, and how

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\(^{13}\) A noteworthy exception is Josef Körner who, in his 1926 study, reads *Michael Kohlhaas* as a fictional exploration of the conditions of Rousseau’s social contract (cf. Josef Körner, *Recht und Pflicht: eine Studie über Kleists Michael Kohlhaas und Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1926)).


Rousseau thus served not only as an important motor but also a lasting support for what he sees as a relentless fight against rationalism.

A different note is struck by the second of these critics, Hans M. Wolff, in a series of studies published between the late-1930s and mid-1950s. In a first essay of 1938, he presents a sustained reading of Penthesilea not in the light of Rousseau’s epistemology of sentiment, but rather in terms of the political precepts of *Du contrat social*.18 Through close comparative analysis, Wolff identifies a number of important thematic similarities and verbal echoes, linking, for example, the lines in Scene 15 where Penthesilea recalls the founding principles of the Amazonian state – ‘Ein Staat, ein mündiger, sei aufgestellt, / […] Der das Gesetz sich würdig selber gebe, / Sich selbst gehorche, selber auch beschütze’ (DKV: II, 214-15) – to the terms of inquiry set out in Book 1, Chapter VI of Rousseau’s text (cf. OC: III, 360), noting in particular the direct replication of ‘obéir’ and ‘protéger’ through ‘gehorchen’ and ‘beschützen’.19 Detailing how the super-rational Amazon state violates the sanctity of human feeling, Wolff proceeds to argue that what Kleist offers is a sharp and radical critique of the doctrine of *Du contrat social* and, by extension, of the rationalist programme of the French Revolution.20 In two later studies, published in 1947 and 1954 respectively, 21 he develops these arguments rather less convincingly in connection with the political aspect of Kleist’s oeuvre as a whole, tracing a clear-cut development of interest that sees a striking irrationalist influence in the early works, particularly *Die Familie Schroffenstein* and *Das Erdbeben in Chili*, followed by a gradual critical and political distancing through to *Penthesilea*, and a terminal split with the nation-and state-oriented *Die Herrmannsschlacht* and *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*, both of which, he argues, point in entirely new directions that run counter to the rational and irrational sides of Rousseau’s doctrine.22

This re-focusing of attention on social and political issues in many ways prepares the ground for a next spate of studies published by Marxist scholars in the early 1960s to mark

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22 A similar argument on this latter point is provided by Marcel Krings, who in his 2005 essay (‘Naturunschuld und Rechtsgesellschaft: Kleists romanische Rousseau-Modifikationen’, *Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik*, 37 (2005), 13-27) likewise suggests that where Kleist seeks a resolution for the individual versus state dilemma via ‘die Ergänzung reiner Vernunftgesetze durch das präreflexive Gefühl’ (p. 27), Rousseau’s response to the problem is strictly dualistic, thus ruling out the possibility of any such final synthesis.
the 150th anniversary of Kleist’s death. Encouraged through official channels, the commemoration became a focal point for attempts to revise the orthodox GDR position established by Lukács in the 1930s. An important initial contribution was Ernst Fischer’s long essay published in Sinn und Form in which he argues that far from being the reactionary ‘altpreußische Junker’ Lukács claims, Kleist was in the first instance a ‘Rebell’ and ‘Fremdling’ who turned his back on his aristocratic roots but also despised the emerging bourgeois-capitalist society. The primary theme of his work is thus, in Fischer’s eyes, ‘die Problematik der Existenz in einer entfremdeten Welt’, and in this he sees Rousseau as an important ‘Wegbegleiter’, particularly in the early works written under the sway of his critique of the social condition as organ of alienation, though less so, if at all, in the later ones which lead away from an individualist standpoint towards a new recognition of social interest. A similar line is followed by Hans Mayer in his short but insightful Heinrich von Kleist: Der geschichtliche Augenblick. Like Fischer, he too underscores the extent to which Kleist exposes the social conflicts of his time but alters the frame of inquiry by setting this in the context of the bourgeois Enlightenment tradition of the eighteenth century. Once more tracing Rousseau’s importance as a source of solace after Kant, Mayer develops this in a novel direction by positing a link to political Jacobinism, on the basis that ‘[w]er nunmehr [1801] Rousseau sagt, meint gleichzeitig Robespierre’. Working from this angle, he locates in the bitter experience of Paris the germ of Kleist’s later patriotism, which emerges, in the form of a fierce hatred for all things French, as a ‘Negation der Negation’ – a position which, according to Mayer, signals a definite turn away from the spirit of Enlightenment humanism, and from the philosophical idealism of Rousseau.

A third contribution of lasting value from this period comes in the form of Siegfried Streller’s 1962 essay ‘Heinrich von Kleist und Jean-Jacques Rousseau’. Again focus falls here above all on the tension between nature and society and the competing demands of the individual and collective, and Streller succeeds, in a brief compass, in teasing out a number

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27 Mayer, Der geschichtliche Augenblick, p. 24.
28 Mayer, Der geschichtliche Augenblick, p. 45.
29 Cf. Mayer, Der geschichtliche Augenblick, p. 45.
of parallels across the range of Kleist’s dramatic work. Like Fischer and Wolff he too sees a notable shift in political outlook from 1807/8 and considers the ruthless amorality of the title figure in *Die Herrmannsschlacht* to contradict the Rousseauian ethics of the earlier dramas, though he does draw attention to possible ongoing connections to *Du contrat social* in the basic constellations of both the political dramas.\(^{31}\) That notwithstanding, he nonetheless follows Fischer’s lead in placing emphasis on Kleist’s social pessimism and alienated position as an individualist between classes, and so concludes on the point that he never advanced beyond an individual revolt against all social standards, adding that his Rousseauism was, above all else, an expression of despair in a climate in which ‘die Rousseauschen Ideen bereits von der Wirklichkeit überholt und korrigiert waren’.\(^{32}\)

Following this burst of renewed interest, studies of Kleist’s relationship to Rousseau went through something of a critical lull – in both East and West – lasting up to the early 1980s. In the interim, scholarship on both figures experienced something of a paradigm shift in relation to dominant existentialist modes of reading. With regards to Kleist, this was first prompted by Walter Müller-Seidel’s 1961 book *Versehen und Erkennen: eine Studie über Heinrich von Kleist* which sets out to show how in the author’s fictional worlds, intuition is no less subject to illusion and error than reason, and how the misapprehensions that plague human relations are not solely attributable to the workings of fate but are also rooted in the psychological make-up of the characters themselves.\(^{33}\) A parallel development in Rousseau studies was set in chain by Jean Starobinski’s path-breaking *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: la transparence et l’obstacle*, first published as a 1957 doctoral thesis from the University of Geneva.\(^{34}\) Taking the autobiographical writings as a point of departure, this study elucidates Rousseau’s thought through the unifying theme (as the title suggests) of his quest for ‘transparence’ and his struggle against ‘obstacle’. The fall from the state of nature, Starobinski argues, spells for Rousseau the loss of transparency, as social and cultural artifice comes to obstruct immediate experience. The rupture between reality and appearance, truth and falsehood, thus emerges, he shows, as the dominant motif of Rousseau’s work, reflecting a personal longing for a utopian form of transparency which, in

a world shrouded by mistrust and deceit (‘obstacle’), remains an impossible dream. Thus Starobinski is able to correct a misleading picture by demonstrating how, although Rousseau cites inner conscience as an important site of moral guidance, he by no means considers it infallible. Instead, what we now have is a new perspective on Rousseau’s existential vision that reveals the groundwork for a social and psychological critique of identity and authenticity that goes far beyond any exclusive privileging of ‘sentiment’ over ‘raison’, and rather puts the ontological value of intuition and feeling to the strictest test.

The first fruits of this shift for our theme here appeared in Bernhard Böschenstein’s 1982 essay, ‘Kleist und Rousseau’. Taking leave of the familiar theoretical works, he focuses his inquiry on the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, and particularly the motif of the ‘totale Verlassenheit des von der feindlichen Umwelt Verfolgten […]’, dem jedes Wort, jeder Blick eine neue Quelle des Mißtrauens, des Verdachts eröffnen’. Orienting his approach along the axis of Rousseau’s dialectic of transparency and opacity, Böschenstein sees in this autobiographical constellation a parallel to much of Kleist’s writing, particularly in the *Erzählungen*, where characters time and again find themselves confronted with a world in which ‘Trug’, ‘Verschlagenheit’ and ‘schauspielerische[r] Geltungsdrang’ prevail. From this he convincingly extrapolates a structuring principle that recurs throughout Kleist’s work, namely the abrupt reversal ‘von globalem Vertrauen zu globalem Mißtrauen, vom “Himmel” der brüderlichen Allverbundenheit zur “Hölle” der universalen Feindschaft’. It is this absolutising structure, Böschenstein argues, that accounts for the tragic outcomes in *Penthesilea* and *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*, and for the Marquise’s experience of Graf F. as both ‘Engel’ and ‘Teufel’ in *Die Marquise von O…*.

It figures, moreover – to a greater or lesser extent – throughout Kleist’s entire oeuvre; and thus Böschenstein invokes a distinction between the largely biographical influence of Rousseau’s social critique, and a lasting existential influence that penetrates deeper to the core of Kleist’s literary works.

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36 Böschenstein, ‘Kleist und Rousseau’, p. 147.


39 In a more recent essay, Walburga Hülk has picked up on similar themes in her analysis of how Kleist follows Rousseau in projecting emotional states onto landscape and employing nature as a communicative
Böschenstein’s intelligent application of Starobinski’s insights puts his essay on a new plane of sophistication in Kleist-Rousseau literature, and points the way for two subsequent critics with whom we might round off this overview. The first is Anthony Stephens who, in a series of incisive studies on Kleist, has thrown new light on a number of important contact points with Rousseauian ideas. In a 1984 essay on modes of expression in the Erzählungen, for example, he explores how Kleist’s narrative technique plays on the linguistic theory outlined in Rousseau’s Essai sur l’origine des langues, confirming the negative relation between language and emotion, but qualifying other convictions regarding the power of public discourse and the status of the written document as symbol of authority. In a later study of 1988, he suggests a link between the frequent metaphors of birth and rebirth in Kleist’s work (which to his mind function as an ironic countermotif to Enlightenment notions of continuity) and the Rêveries du promeneur solitaire, and convincingly argues that the recurring motif of fainting as signal of existential crisis is likewise adopted from Rousseau. Turning attention to an analysis of Kleist’s ‘Familienmodelle’, he also sees in the narrative of Der Findling a parodic reference to Rousseau’s account of pity as a constructive foundation for human relations, whilst in his 1994 monograph Heinrich von Kleist: The Dramas and the Stories, he offers a range of further insights, including a particularly acute analysis of Kleist’s intertextual working of La Nouvelle Héloïse in Die Marquise von O. Drawing these parallels together under the banner of his central contention that Kleist’s literary practice is to quote, with varying degrees of scepticism or irony, the doctrines of Enlightenment, Stephens thus concludes – quite rightly, to my mind – that Rousseau’s views are subjected to a similar critical and experimental treatment throughout Kleist’s creative oeuvre.


the first extended treatment of the subject since Xylander’s of 1937. Taking initial bearing from the works of Müller-Seidel, Kreutzer and Schmidt in the 1960s and 1970s, Moser once again turns the spotlight on the ontological status of ‘Gefühl’ in Kleist’s works. His thesis is grounded on the assertion that although these studies have succeeded in showing how private intuition is enmeshed in the complexities of error and guilt, they have not been able to address the question as to why. As a result, the polarity between guilt and innocence has, he argues, replaced ‘Gefühl und Schicksal’ as an accepted regulative schema for interpretation. In reaction to this, Moser sets out to demonstrate how Kleist presents the concept of innocence not as a utopian escape from aberrance but rather as ‘ein integrales Moment des Komplexes von Irrtum und Schuld’, and thus as operating in an agonal sphere. Focalising this inquiry through the categories of ‘Wissen’, ‘Begehren’ and ‘Darstellen’, he perceives their function in Kleist in analogy to Rousseau’s approach to moral experience as a cognitive instance, and on this basis proceeds to look at how Kleist’s radical ‘Erkenntnis-‘ and ‘Gefühlskritik’ both draws on and develops Rousseauian models of innocence and truth.

2.3 History, Politics, Culture: Rousseau’s Critique of Modernity

To broach the question of Kleist and Rousseau is thus clearly to work with well-tilled soil, and in view of this one might well ask whether there is any reason for further inquiry on the subject. Yet despite the substantial literature that has accumulated over the past 130 to 140 years, there is one particular complex of problems which has never been satisfactorily resolved and which, to my mind, continues to inhibit a full appreciation of Rousseau’s relevance for Kleist’s fiction and drama. This relates, in the first instance, to the biographical orientation typical of much of the older research, and later taken issue with by Böschenstein. Traced from the early letters, this kind of approach leads, as we have seen, to

47 Moser recaps this argument in his stimulating essay ‘Prüfungen der Unschuld: Zeuge und Zeugnis bei Kleist und Rousseau’, in Heinrich von Kleist und die Aufklärung, ed. by Tim Mehigan (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), pp. 92-112. Taking the Dialogues as his point of departure here, he analyses the role of moral ‘Selbstzeugnis’ in Rousseau’s autobiographical works, and then proceeds, via a series of close readings, to show how, in Kleist’s fictional texts, innocence is a category of representation rather than being, and thus becomes the ‘Objekt eines zerstörerischen Begehrens und eines sich obstruierenden Erkenntnisdrangs’ (p. 107).
an inevitable focusing of attention on an apparent privileging of nature over society and ‘Gefühl’ over ‘Verstand’, the result being a restrictive view of Kleist’s engagement with Rousseau either as an ongoing protest against rationalism and society (Xylander), or else – and more commonly – as a short-lived interest abandoned in maturity and thus of no bearing to the later works that take an obviously different view of the individual versus state dilemma (Brahm, Ayrault, Buck, Fischer, Mayer). In recent years this chronological method has been largely overcome by the likes of Böschenstein, Stephens and Moser, though this has not so much been achieved by a re-examination on these points as by a marked shift in emphasis towards other elements of Rousseau’s thought, notably his ideas on language, gesture and communication, and associated questions of trust, truth and innocence. Thus although these later studies have led to a valuable and much-needed reappraisal on aspects of the Kleist-Rousseau parallel, they have not done all that much to alter long-held views on core political and ethical issues, and there remains in the scholarship an implicit consensus that on this point at least Kleist’s relationship to Rousseau can be characterised in terms of early acceptance followed by later rejection – a pattern that manifests itself either by way of a deliberate move away from Rousseauian concerns around 1808 or, as Stephens submits, by an increasingly ironic or parodic treatment of his doctrine.

With this study I want to demonstrate that a detailed reconsideration of this question is long overdue. The premise underlying this is essentially twofold. On the one hand, the prevailing view of Rousseau as a committed anti-rationalist is one that has been subjected to sustained challenge by specialists over many decades, and shown to do a considerable disservice to the fuller complexities of his ideas, both in a modern and historical context. On the other, the tendency to focalise Kleist’s involvement with Rousseau’s ethics through the strict antinomies of the early letters is, I believe, unduly restrictive, and fails to accommodate the more interesting possibility that he may, as he developed as an intellectual and writer, have followed this up with critical reflection. To some extent this is characteristic of a broader tradition, recently exemplified by Günter Blamberger, of seeing Kleist as having been ‘kein theoretischer Kopf’\textsuperscript{48} and so playing down the philosophical content of his texts. Although it may be ill-judged to attribute any single system of thought

to his work, there are nonetheless clear traces in his dramas and stories of a well-informed interest in a range of contemporary philosophical outlooks; and with this in mind, I aim to show in what follows how a historical and discursive re-contextualisation of Kleist’s engagement with Rousseauian politics and ethics opens up the terms of a more involved critical interest, and so presents a new perspective on the subject that puts into question a good deal of orthodox opinion.

Central to this is a reassessment of the importance of Rousseau’s later political writings, especially *Du contrat social*. For it is a tendency to overlook or misread this aspect of his thought that underpins both the limiting factors outlined above. An example of this in the context of Kleist research can be seen in Jochen Schmidt’s recent study where, in discussing Rousseau’s influence, he dismisses *Du contrat social* as having held only marginal interest for Kleist, the upshot being a sketch that never goes beyond the traditional terms signalled by the subheading to the section: ‘Naturkult und Zivilisationskritik’.  

Looking more broadly to the field of critical literature on late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German culture, this appears to be a common trait – there is, it seems, a customary trend towards magnifying Rousseau’s extreme subjectivity and his stinging attacks on civilisation and society, and neglecting the crucial counterpoint to this set up by the political doctrine of his prognostic writings. Reception history no doubt lends some legitimacy to this weighting, in the sense that Rousseau’s reputation was principally established – both in France and the German-speaking lands – through the early discourses, *Émile,* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse.* That said, as Roger Barny and R. A. Leigh have shown, *Du contrat social* was nonetheless far more widely read than is often suggested during this period, particularly in the crucial decade leading up to the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789, and from this point on there was an acknowledged surge of interest – both at home and abroad – in a text commonly seen, by both supporters and critics alike, as a handbook

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49 On this point see Peter Ensberg’s critique of Bernhard Greiner’s methodology in ‘Das Gefäß des Inhalts: Zum Verhältnis von Philosophie und Literatur am Beispiel der ‘Kantkrise’ Heinrich von Kleists’, *BzKF*, 13 (1999), 61-123.
for revolutionary ideology. The same is true, to a lesser extent, of the Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne which, though often relegate by modern critics to the rank of ‘minor’ work, likewise became popular in the revolutionary context on account of its appeals to patriotic sentiment and prescriptions for national education. In these works, Rousseau develops a quite different take on the relation between individual and society, evincing an ideal – founded on concepts of civic virtue, national identity and the existence of a ‘general will’ (volonté générale) – that directs towards emancipation through state- and nationhood and which continued to act as a stimulus and point of reference for German writers, thinkers and theorists throughout the revolutionary era and beyond, including (as I shall argue presently) Kleist. Only by giving due consideration to these issues can we hope to arrive at a suitably balanced understanding of the ideological status of Rousseau’s doctrine in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and so it will be a principal aim of this study to attempt to re-establish his specific importance as a political thinker by re-inserting his work into contemporary debates concerning culture and civilisation, morality and reason, freedom and coercion.

What is at issue in this question is a critical assessment that does full justice to the complex sweep of Rousseau’s philosophy. For it is an unfortunate fact that his ideas are all too frequently subjected to a crude reductionism that converts precise, often paradoxical, insights into mere proverbs or slogans. The result is an almost mythical image of Rousseau that obscures, and at times seriously distorts, the true contours of his position. This tendency is inscribed in the historical reception of his writings – in Voltaire’s crass literalisation of the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité as a call for a return to simian primitivism, for instance, and in the ideological currents of the 1790s that saw Rousseau


\[53^{53}\] Cf. Barny, Rousseau dans la Révolution, pp. 176-79.

\[54^{54}\] In a letter to Rousseau from 30 August 1755, Voltaire acknowledges receipt of the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité with the words: ‘J’ay reçu, Monsieur, votre nouveau livre contre le genre-humain; je vous en remercie; vous plairez aux hommes à qui vous dites Leurs véritéz, et vous ne les corrigerez pas. Vous peignez avec des couleurs bien vrayes les horreurs de la société humaine dont l’ignorance et la faiblesse se promettent tant de douceurs. On n’a jamais tant employé d’esprit à vouloir nous rendre Bêtes. Il prende envie de marcher à quatre pattes quand on lit votre ouvrage. Cependant comme il y a plus de soixante ans que j’en ay perdu l’habitude, je sens malheureusement qu’il m’est impossible de le reprendre’ (CC: III, 259).
identified on all sides as the ‘père de la Révolution’. It is owing in no small part to his unrivalled ability to excite and disturb public imagination, both through his writing and his personality. Each of his major works, with the possible exception of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, sparked controversy and polarised opinion. The two early discourses, for example, triggered a violent quarrel with the *philosophes*, whilst *Émile* and *Du contrat social* were both banned and burned in his native Geneva. Personal attacks followed – he was accused of blasphemy and hypocrisy (on account of abandoning his own children to a foundling home), and even of being mad. For enthusiastic readers of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, however, his name became synonymous with integrity, authenticity and virtue, and following the posthumous publication of his autobiographical works in 1781 and 1782, a veritable ‘cult of Rousseau’ arose which, in terms of breadth and intensity, far outstripped the adulation reserved for any other eighteenth-century writer. Later, this cult was to be politicised in the revolutionary arena, crystallising in the rhetoric of the Jacobins (and Robespierre in particular) and peaking in 1794 when his body was ceremoniously transferred to the Panthéon in Paris. Yet with conservative opponents of the Revolution equally willing to posit a causal link back to Rousseau, the polarity of opinion remained – witness, for example, Burke’s branding of him as ‘the insane Socrates of the National Assembly’.55 Ideological and emotional stakes have remained high ever since, with critical fixation on Rousseau’s legacy as alleged progenitor of certain ideas, attitudes or events continuing to encourage a taking of sides either for or against him and a less than useful conflation of author and work, of persona and personality.

One of the crucial effects of such personal and political involvement is to make it peculiarly difficult, from a historical perspective, to separate the lines of sentimental response and intellectual effect, and to distinguish between the impact of specific ideas and the diffusion of a more general, vaguely-strewn ‘Rousseauism’. This, in turn, means we often lose an accurate sense of Rousseau’s position within the tradition of eighteenth-century intellectual history. For some, he was a central player in the French Enlightenment and one of its most representative thinkers: he collaborated with Diderot and d’Alembert on the *Encyclopédie*, for instance, and led the *philosophes* in the fierce debate over the respective qualities of Italian and French music, whilst in his political writings he emerges

as a radical democrat implacably opposed to oppression and tyranny and a champion of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*. For others, however, the subversive arguments of the *Discourses* and the *Lettre à d’Alembert* mark Rousseau as an opponent of the Enlightenment tradition, and so he comes to stand in several accounts either as an important precursor to Romanticism (supplemented by the celebration of nature in the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* and the experiential subjectivity of the *Confessions*), or, as has more recently been the case, as a central figure in the emergence of a ‘counter-Enlightenment’ movement that confronted the implications of an overarching faith in secular rationalism and progress.

The co-existence of such contrasting opinions suggests in itself the more complex nature of Rousseau’s thought, and reflects in particular one of the perennial controversies that attends discussion of his work, namely the question of overall systematicity. For as contemporary readers, especially those hostile to his message, were quick to note, Rousseau’s corpus is riven with paradoxical and seemingly contradictory affirmations, both within single texts and across one or more of his writings. Critical accounts on this subject fall into two general camps. On the one hand, there are those who accept the points of contradiction as just that and so look to a biographical or pathological explanation, whether it be in terms of a shift in attitude over time, an overriding lack of philosophical rigour, or an unresolved inner tension in his character. On the other hand, there are those who

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57 Perhaps the most famous version of this argument is to be found in Irving Babbitt’s *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), where Rousseau is presented as an unmitigated pre-Romantic primitivist. For a more objective take on Rousseau’s legacy in Romanticism, see S. S. B. Taylor, ‘Rousseau’s Romanticism’ in *Reappraisals of Rousseau*, ed. by S. Harvey et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), pp. 2-23, and Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Heritage of Rousseau* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).


61 Judith N. Shklar, for instance, makes the case that the apparent tension between solitude and citizenship reflects Rousseau’s need for both independence and authority (cf. Judith N. Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969)).
seek to resolve the ambiguous patterns of his thought intrinsically into a single coherent philosophical system. With the first group, we can agree that one would be hard pressed to make a case for Rousseau as a meticulous and exact thinker – even a sympathetic reader like Ernst Cassirer is moved to admit that Rousseau ‘does not analyse ideas precisely’ and that ‘he never learned to speak the language of clear and distinct ideas’. At times, Rousseau appears to concede as much – in Émile he writes that he is neither a ‘savant’ nor a ‘philosophe’ but rather ‘un homme simple [...] sans sistème’ (OC: IV, 348), whilst his self-presentation in the Dialogues evinces the image of an effective polemicist but not a logical and systematic philosopher. He also twice acknowledges that he is an ‘homme à paradoxes’, firstly in the Lettre à M. Philopolis (cf. OC: III, 231), and then again in Book 2 of Émile (cf. OC: IV, 323). And yet despite all this, he continually asserts the fundamental unity and consistency of his œuvre – in the Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont, for example, where he writes, ‘J’ai écrit sur divers sujets, mais toujours dans les mêmes principes: toujours la même morale, la même croyance, les mêmes maximes, et, si l’on veut, les mêmes opinions’ (OC: IV, 928), and again in the Dialogues, where the fictitious voice of ‘le François’ likewise confirms the underlying cohesion of ‘Jean-Jacques’s’ writings, stating that he sees throughout the development of his ‘grand principe’ that ‘la nature a fait l’homme heureux et bon mais que la société le déprave et le rend miserable’, as well as the vital complement, ‘la nature humaine ne retrograde pas’ (OC: I, 934-35). According to Rousseau’s own testimony, then, charges of self-contradiction must be attributed to a lack of care and clarity on the reader’s part, or else to the malign plotting of enemies determined to discredit him. Whilst it goes without saying, of course, that such self-exculpatory comments must be viewed with strict caution, there is nonetheless some considerable validity in this claim to a general integrity and cohesion, and certain of the central inconsistencies ascribed to his doctrine can undoubtedly be unpicked by paying greater attention to his own terms and focus.


Ernst Cassirer, ‘Kant and Rousseau’, in Rousseau, Kant, Goethe, trans. by James Gutman et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1945), pp. 1-60 (p. 59). The original German version of the essay was not published until 1991 (cf. Ernst Cassirer, Rousseau, Kant, Goethe, ed. by Rainer A. Bast (Hamburg: Meiner, 1991)).

Rousseau was himself aware of possible difficulties in reading his works. On more than one occasion he calls for attentive readers (OC: III, 174, 395), whilst in a letter to Mme. d’Epinay he warns that if she is to
This is particularly true of the fundamental polarity between nature and society which stands at the core of Rousseau’s diagnosis of mankind’s ills, and which must be considered in some detail before we proceed further. Of first importance here is the contextual relation between his writings, especially the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité* and *Du contrat social*. The former, like the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, was written in response to a prize essay question set by the Dijon Academy – ‘Quelle est l’origine de l’inégalité parmi les hommes, et si elle est autorisée par la Loy naturelle?’ Rousseau opens his argument in the preface by declaring that in order to trace the origins of inequality amongst men, one must first begin by knowing mankind in its essential nakedness, stripped bare of all social accretions (cf. OC: III, 122). To this end, he sketches a conjectural history of man charting how human society has arrived at its present condition. In structure, this projection resembles the earlier natural histories of Grotius, Hobbes, Pufendorf and Locke, yet Rousseau feels he has one crucial new insight – namely, that each of these predecessors has undercut an understanding of the true foundations of society by imputing to natural man attributes which could only have emerged after the onset of civilisation. Thus rather than ‘nasty, brutish and short’, he suggests that the existence of natural man is, in fact, one of ignorant bliss and amoral independence (cf. OC: III, 134-5).

From these happy if primitive beginnings, Rousseau maps out, step-by-step, the evolution of social relations and their accompanying effects. Central to this analysis is the key distinction drawn between the categories of *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*:

Il ne faut pas confondre l’Amour propre et l’Amour de soi-même; deux passions très différentes par leur nature et par leurs effets. L’Amour de soi-même est un sentiment naturel qui porte tout animal à veiller à sa propre conservation et qui, dirigé dans l’homme par la raison et modifié par la pitié, produit l’humanité et la vertu. L’Amour propre n’est qu’un sentiment relatif, factice et né dans la société, qui porte chaque individu à faire plus de cas de soi que de tout autre, qui inspire aux hommes tous les maux qu’ils se font mutuellement, et qui est la véritable source de l’honneur. (OC: III, 219)

Initially, man’s natural instinct for self-preservation expresses itself without reflection or self-awareness – being solitary and unsociable, he possesses neither foresight nor curiosity, grasp his ideas, she must learn his ‘dictionary’, as his terms rarely carry conventional meaning (cf. CC: III, 296).

and is wholly absorbed in the sentiment of present existence (cf. OC: III, 144). Contact with fellow humans is, at this stage, fleeting and of scant lasting consequence, limited largely to brief violent struggles, immediately forgotten (cf. OC: III, 219-20). Over time, however, increased social interaction generates ties of interdependency, leading to the supplanting of *amour de soi-même* by *amour-propre*. The matrix of this shift is the subject of the second part of the Discours. To begin with, Rousseau looks to the institution of private property as a possible causal factor, citing the first person who staked claim to a plot of land as ‘le vrai fondateur de la société civile’ (OC: III, 164). It soon becomes clear, however, that the root cause of the change in human relations lies elsewhere, for the idea of property itself depends, we are told, on a number of prior ideas which must have arisen successively. Thus Rousseau begins his account of the social evolution of the species – an account which, as Arthur Lovejoy notes, is couched in proto-Darwinian terms of vital competition.66 As numbers increase and food becomes scarce, man is cast into a fierce struggle for existence, the demands of which compel recourse to what Rousseau considers the specific defining character of the species – ‘la faculté de se perfectionner’ (OC: III, 142). Originally dormant, this attribute now begins to manifest itself, enabling man to craft tools and weapons, to learn the art of making fire, and to adapt to new environmental diversities. From this emerges an inchoate idea of the advantages of co-operation and mutual commitment which in turn sets in chain a process of increased association and commingling – initially in the form of small familial units, then in broader collectivities:

\[\text{A mesure que les idées et les sentiments se succèdent, que l’esprit et le cœur s’exercent, le Genre-humain continue à s’apprivoiser, les liasons s’étendent et les liens se resserrent. On s’accoutûma à s’assembler devant les Cabanes ou autour d’un grand Arbre: le chant et la danse, vrais enfants de l’amour et du loisir, devinrent l’amusement ou plutôt l’occupation des hommes et des femmes oisifs et attroupés. (OC: III, 169)}\]

This early form of community represents for Rousseau the ‘golden age’ of human history – the stage which is most beneficial to the species, and which must only have been left by some fatal chance happening that, for the common good, ought never to have occurred. Man is by this time positioned at some distance from his original animalistic condition – human faculties have been developed to an advantageous mid-point between the indolence

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of primitivism and the egocentrism of _amour-propre_, ensuring that this is the happiest and most durable epoch of nascent society (cf. OC: III, 170). Yet there is, however, a supremely ironic codicil here. For as much as these loose festive gatherings represent a social idyll, they also carry the seed for the subsequent progress that, in Rousseau’s eyes, has done so much to corrupt the species. Following the last excerpted passage above, he continues:

Chacun commença à regarder les autres et à vouloir être regardé soi-même, et l’estime publique eut un prix. Celui qui chantait ou dansait le mieux; le plus beau, le plus fort, le plus adroit ou le plus éloquent devint le plus considéré, et ce fut là le premier pas vers l’inégalité, et vers le vice en même temps: de ces premières préférences n’aurient d’un côté la vanité et le mépris, de l’autre la honte et l’envie; et la fermentation causée par ces nouveaux levains produisit enfin des composés funestes au bonheur et à l’innocence. (OC: III, 169-70)

In this communitarian setting, man begins to compare and judge, and to court preference and approval. A new form of self-understanding emerges which solicits esteem from others, alienating the individual from his true self. Social life comes to be driven by competition for ascendancy, and patterns of domination and subjection evolve. From this it follows that for Rousseau, inequality is, at root, structured by dependence – as George Armstrong Kelly smartly points out, ‘the syllables _aimez-moi_ and _aidez-moi_ are the first verbal links in man’s perennial chains’.  

Having thus identified the incipient point of inequality, Rousseau goes on to deduce the subsequent development of modern social forces and structures. The advent of metallurgy and agriculture, he argues, leads to the establishment of private property and the accumulation of capital. Relations of power and wealth become increasingly unequal, ushering in a period of consuming ambition, competition and rivalry. The resultant image is one of frightful disorder not dissimilar to Hobbes’s state of nature – indeed, Rousseau refers to emerging conditions as an ‘état de guerre’ (OC: III, 176). Under the pressures of such conflict, the rich conceive of a way to protect their material interests by persuading the poor to unite under the aegis of a social contract. This project, according to Rousseau ‘le plus réfléchi qui soit jamais entré dans l’esprit humain’ (OC: III, 177), is not, however, invented in good faith, but is rather a rhetorical trick perpetrated by the rich to extend their own power and to consecrate inequality in a binding political framework. The poor, we are

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told, fall for this deceit hook, line and sinker – ‘Tous coururent au devant de leurs fers croyant assûrer leur liberté’ (OC: III, 177). Here then, Rousseau postulates the origins of society and law in a fraudulent covenant which not only gives new fetters to the poor and power to the rich, but which also irrevocably destroys natural liberty, and condemns all but a few to a life of labour, servitude and misery (cf. OC: III, 178). From this point on, he proceeds to deliver a searing critique of all established forms of government and political organisation, and to brutally expose the trappings of civilisation, the artifice of social life, and the predicament of the modern self.

Given the black-and-white terms of this analysis, it is not difficult to see why the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité has come to be read as a primitivist statement on the virtue of nature and the evil of civilisation. Two vital aspects must, however, be spotlighted here in qualification. The first of these is to reiterate the point made earlier concerning the chronology of Rousseau’s theory of history, and the fact that the age identified as that ‘auquel l’homme individuel voudroit s’arrêter’ (OC: III, 133) is not the pure state of nature, but rather a later – though still pre-political – condition born of the process of perfectibility and the onset of social relations. The second, and arguably the more important, is to underscore the philosophical context in which this history is written – i.e. as a theoretical construct and heuristic device which Rousseau uses to expose the disjunction between man’s natural goodness and his corruption in society. At no point does he invite a return to pre-political forms of organisation. To be sure, he shows that man was happier then than he is now, but this falls some way short of a call for retrogression – he is very much of the conviction that the process of socialisation is irreversible, and that once perfectibility is set in motion, there can be no turning back. This is not, moreover, something that has to be inferred from without, for Rousseau expressly warns against such misinterpretation in an accompanying footnote:

Quoi donc? Faut-il détruire les Sociétés, anéantir le tien et le mien, et retourner vivre dans les forêts avec les Ours? Conséquence à la manière de mes adversaires, que j’aime autant prévenir que de leur laisser la honte de la tirer. O vous, à qui la voix céleste ne s’est point fait entendre, et qui ne reconnoissez pour vôtre espéce d’autre destination que d’achever en paix cette courte vie; vous qui pouvez laisser au milieu des Villes vos funestes acquisitions, vos esprits inquiets, vos coeurs corrompus et vos désirs effrénés; reprenez, puisqu’il dépend de vous, vôtre antique et première innocence; allez dans les bois perdre la vue et la mémoire des crimes de vos contemporains, et ne craignez point d’avilir vôtre espéce, en renonçant à ses lumières pour renoncer à ses vices.
Quant aux hommes semblables à moi dont les passions ont détruit pour toujours l’originelle simplicité, qui ne peuvent plus se nourrir d’herbe et de gland, ni se passer de Loix et de Chefs; Ceux qui furent honorez dans leur premier Père de leçons surnaturelles; ceux qui verront dans l’intention de donner d’abord aux actions humaines une moralité qu’elles n’eussent de longtems acquise, la raison d’un precepte indifférent par lui-même et inexplicable dans tout autre Système: Ceux, en un mot, qui sont convaincus que la voix divine appella tout le Genre-humain aux lumières et au bonheur des célestes Intelligences; tous ceux-là tâcheront, par l’exercice des vertus qu’ils s’obligent à pratiquer en apprenant à les connaître, à meriter le prix éternel qu’ils en doivent attendre; […] (OC: III, 207)

This emphatic disclaimer shows plainly enough that Rousseau considers a retreat to primitive simplicity neither possible nor desirable. Indeed, as one critic has recently noted, it is quite striking how readily he accepts the actuality of modern conditions. Caught in the relentless sweep of human history, man cannot aspire to re-capturing the lost freedom of egoistic individualism, but must instead look to a new form of political organisation which transforms natural into civic liberty. This marks the point of departure for *Du contrat social*, where Rousseau states his aim to be as follows:

Trouver une forme d’association qui défende et protège de toute la force commune la personne et les biens de chaque associé, et par laquelle chacun s’unissant à tous n’obéisse pourtant qu’à lui-même et reste aussi libre qu’auparavant. (OC: III, 360)

The solution he proposes in response is a communitarian society in which citizens selflessly bind themselves to the common good of all under the terms of a new and just social contract. The clauses of this contractual arrangement can, Rousseau says, be reduced to a single article – ‘l’aliénation totale de chaque associé avec tous ses droits à toute la communauté’ (OC: III, 360), or, as it is re-stated a few lines later:

Si donc on écarte du pacte social ce qui n’est pas de son essence, on trouvera qu’il se réduit aux termes suivants. Chacun de nous met en commun sa personne et toute sa puissance sous la suprême direction de la volonté générale; et nous recevons en corps chaque membre comme partie indivisible du tout. (OC: III, 361)

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As the sole repository of legitimate authority, the sovereign body must have the wherewithal of ensuring commitment from each and every constituent member – otherwise, individuals might look to profit from the rights of the citizen without fulfilling any of the attendant duties of the subject. With this in mind, Rousseau adds:

Afin [...] que le pacte social ne soit pas un vain formulaire, il renferme tacitement cet engagement qui seul peut donner de la force aux autres, que quiconque refusera d’obéir à la volonté générale y sera contraint par tout le corps: ce qui ne signifie autre chose sinon qu’on le forcerà d’être libre; [...]. (OC: III, 364)

In modern times, these lines have acquired notoriety as a signal of totalitarian tendencies on Rousseau’s part, with critics claiming that the conjunction of force and liberty prepares the ground not only for the Jacobin dictatorship, but also the Third Reich. Viewed through the lens of subsequent historical realities, the bald statement linking absolute freedom and absolute power does indeed strike a disquieting note, seeming as it does to point to the enforced compliance and total determination associated with political terror. Set in the fuller context of the argument as a whole, however, it takes on a much less sinister meaning. The problem under discussion is that of reconciling individual freedom with egalitarian social order and some form of legitimate state authority – this is, Rousseau insists, ‘l’essence du corps politique’ (OC: III, 427). The only means of achieving this harmony is, he continues, through the spirit of law. This nexus of liberty and law runs like a red thread throughout his body of work: in the *Discours sur l’économie politique*, for instance, we find the dictum, ‘C’est à la loi seule que les hommes doivent la justice et la liberté’ (OC: III, 248), whilst in the dedicatory letter to Geneva that prefaces the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*, Rousseau writes, ‘J’aurois voulu vivre et mourir libre, c’est-à-dire tellement soumis aux loix que ni moi ni personne n’en pût secouer l’honorable joug’ (OC: III, 112). Clearer still is his statement in the eighth of the *Lettres écrites de la Montagne*:

The organ of law that permits a people to obey and not serve, to have leaders but no masters, is the general will. In Book 2, Chapter I of *Du contrat social*, Rousseau writes that ‘la volonté générale peut seule diriger les forces de l’État selon la fin de son institution, qui est le bien commun’ (OC: III, 368). The ‘volonté générale’ is not the ‘volonté de tous’ – it is not equatable with the will of all individual members of the body politic, nor is it an expression of a majority view or consensus. It rather articulates the common interest of every citizen as an indivisible and inalienable collective moral conscience. The sovereign authority that enacts the general will thus comes from all and applies to all – each citizen actively partakes in the formulation of laws as part of the sovereign assembly, and each undertakes to abide by their provisions. As the sole parties to the social contract, the people therefore consent to rule over themselves, and no force is exercised except against citizens who have reneged on their commitment to obey laws of their own making. Read in these terms, one is inclined to agree with Robert Wokler’s verdict that ‘[Rousseau’s] point about force and freedom means scarcely more than that citizens must always be bound by their own [legal] agreements’ – hardly a mandate for modern totalitarianism.

The flip-side to this argument concerning the authoritarian elements of Rousseau’s social theory is that any lingering suspicions of primitive individualism must surely now vanish. In Book 1, Chapter VII, the transition from the state of nature to the social contract state is summarised thus:

> Ce passage de l’état de nature à l’état civil produit dans l’homme un changement très rémarquable, en substituant dans sa conduite la justice à l’instinct, et donnant à ses actions la moralité qui leur manquoit auparavant. C’est alors seulement que la voix du devoir succédant à l’impulsion physique et le droit à l’appetit, l’homme, qui jusques là n’avoit regardé que lui-même, se voit forcé d’agir sur d’autres principes, et de consulter sa raison avant d’écouter

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70 Wokler, ‘Rousseau and his critics’, p. 194.
Torn out of context and juxtaposed with passages from the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*, this balance-sheet might be (and has been) cited as a further contradiction – if man is naturally good and corrupted by society, how can it be that Rousseau is now extolling the benefits of the social order over and above natural freedom? The answer lies in two inter-connected dualities relating to ‘society’ and ‘liberty’. In the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*, Rousseau’s venom is directed at extant forms of political order, as established on the basis of the initial, fraudulent social contract. Natural liberty – that is the unrestricted capacity to satisfy private needs – has been lost, and the individual finds himself bound by illegitimate chains of slavery. In *Du contrat social*, however, these are transformed into legitimate bonds of citizenship in Rousseau’s ideal vision of a just and equitable society. Social cohesion demands that the citizen abandons (negative) natural freedoms, but he acquires in return a new (positive) civil and moral liberty – freedom *from* constraint is replaced by freedom *for* a higher end (cf. OC: III, 365). By suppressing his private will and choosing the common good over personal gain, the citizen emerges as a responsible moral agent, and thus becomes fully human. This, then, marks the philosophical kernel of Rousseau’s doctrine, and, just as importantly, the point of continuity between the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité* and *Du contrat social*. Taken in isolation, the two texts may (as we have seen) invite contradictory readings and objections, particularly in terms of their respective treatments of ‘nature’ and ‘society’. Read together, however, and restored to the analytical context of Rousseau’s intentions, we can see how they actually form complementary halves – the one descriptive, the other prescriptive – that make an intelligible and coherent overall picture encompassing both a profound critique of the conditions of modernity, and a radical solution to social ills through a model of political and moral regeneration.
This summary overview of the main lines of Rousseau’s social theory provides an important point of orientation for what follows. For some, the dual centre or ‘bipolarity’ of his thought (nature/individualism versus society/communitarianism) represents an exclusive dichotomy, compelling a choice between alternative Romantic and Enlightenment utopias. Here, however, focus will shift more towards Rousseau’s attempts to integrate these alternatives in a positive societal order capable of reconciling man’s instinctual and rational nature. Historical support for this kind of reading is provided by Kant, who in his *Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte* confirms the underlying coherence upon which Rousseau had always insisted, and draws attention to his overriding concern with a dialectical reconciliation of ‘Natur’ und ‘Kultur’ – an important indicator of a more critical interpretative tradition that goes beyond, and forthrightly rejects, the ‘retour à la nature’ caricature made popular by Voltaire. In line with this, the antithesis between one-sided feeling and self-individuation on the one hand, and one-sided reason and social-connectedness on the other will here be considered not so much as a binary either/or, but rather as marking the *Spannungsfeld* within which Rousseau constructs the dialectics of his social critique.

Caught squarely in the firing line of this critique is the divided human being of modern society. Torn between the conflicting imperatives of instinct and reason, inclination

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71 The term ‘bipolarity’ appears to have been first coined in the Rousseau context by Jean Wahl in his short essay ‘La bipolarité de Rousseau’, *Annales de la société Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 33 (1955), 49-55.

72 A prime example of this approach can be found in Shklar, *Men and Citizens*.

73 In the *Dialogues*, for example, Rousseau writes that ‘[n]otre plus douce existence est relative et collective, et notre vrai moi n’est pas tout entier en nous’ (OC: I, 813), whilst in *Émile*, he states: ‘Mais que deviendra pour les autres un homme uniquement élevé pour lui? Si peut-être le double objet qu’on se propose pouvait se réunir en un seul, en étant les contradictions de l’homme on ôterait un grand obstacle à son bonheur’ (OC: IV, 251). *Émile* is thus not to be an isolated solitaire but rather a law-abiding individual in society – one who contentedly and ideally bestrides both aspects of the fundamental Rousseauian paradox (cf. Kelly, ‘A General Overview’, pp. 23-30).

and duty, he is neither natural man nor moral citizen, but rather an alienated and dislocated ‘individualist in society’. Following Mira Morgenstern, I would suggest that many of the apparent dissonances in Rousseau’s thought can be traced to his understanding of the complex ambiguities of this condition – ambiguities which, in Morgenstern’s words, reflect the fact that life is ‘often frustratingly but challengingly indeterminate’. As she goes on to demonstrate, there is a discursive strand embedded in Rousseau’s writings which examines how the inability to negotiate the complexities of modern life fuels human despair – in the death of Julie, for example, and the failure of Emile and Sophie’s marriage. Challenging reader expectations, Rousseau presents in each case a minor tragedy which reflects on how the rigid dualistic perspective of eighteenth-century thought masks the true nature of reality, particularly the lack of certainty and fixed identity experienced by the subject in a world which is, as he would later claim in the Rêveries, ‘dans un flux continu’ (OC: I, 1046).

In La Nouvelle Héloïse, this critical aspect becomes a major structuring principle: the story revolves around five individuals who, locked in a series of intractable situations, are constantly interpreting and re-interpreting their experiences in a quest for clarity. Exploiting the epistolary mode, Rousseau allows differing subjective perspectives to emerge side-by-side in a cycle of contradiction, correction and confirmation. At the core of all this is the problem of the relationship between nature and culture – here telescoped through the tension between love and society – which ultimately remains unsolved. In this sense, La Nouvelle Héloïse can be read as a novel of polarities, even if, as Jean Starobinski has shown, it opens into dialectical synthesis in Book 5 with the hint of a possible reconciliation of passion and virtue in the idyllic environment of Clarens. The twin poles of nature and culture ought then, I suggest, be seen as staking the parameters of a conceptual framework for Rousseau’s exploration of happiness and morality, and a similar structural pattern can be observed across the breadth of his theoretical writings. In the first instance, his critical evaluation of modernity is articulated through the tension between multiple polarities (nature versus society; individual versus community; self versus other; wholeness versus alienation; authenticity versus inauthenticity), but these are more often than not set up only

to be pulled down: Rousseau employs them to advance seemingly contradictory positions which are then probed and qualified, leading the reader to new, and often unexpected, conclusions. The paradoxes that run through his writings are thus, in the main, as Stephen G. Salkever concludes, ‘not unfortunate accidents of style or personality, but necessary reflections of the substance of [his] understanding of the human condition’ – they too are a deliberate trope of thought, and, it might be added, a provocative rhetorical strategy. By accepting and mining these paradoxes, we can better trace the nuances of Rousseau’s own vexed relationship with the Enlightenment, and acquire a sharper and keener grasp of the ways in which he subjects the great shaping forces of modernity to the most penetrating scrutiny. What made his findings so dangerous and disconcerting to contemporaries was that they came from within, arrived at through the ‘philosophy of the Enlightenment’, and disseminated through the representational apparatus of the tradition, from the discourse on social and political injustice, to the novel of sensibility and moral instruction. In this regard, then, we can see Rousseau as not only having been an important voice in the Enlightenment, but as also having entered into one of the most searching critical dialogues with its ideas; or, as Maurice Cranston rather more succinctly puts it, as having been a ‘man of the Enlightenment at war with the Enlightenment’.  

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79 Cf. Burke’s report of what Hume disclosed as Rousseau’s ‘principles of composition’: ‘Mr. Hume told me that he had from Rousseau himself the secret of his principles of composition. That acute though eccentric observer had perceived that to strike and interest the public, the marvelous must be produced; that the marvelous of the heathen mythology had long since lost its effect; that the giants, magicians, fairies and heroes of romance which succeeded had exhausted the portion of credulity which belonged to their age; and that now nothing was left to the writer but that species of the marvelous which might still be produced, and with as great an effect as ever, though in another way; that is the marvelous in life, in manners, in characters, and in extraordinary situations, giving rise to new and unlooked-for strokes in politics and morals’ (cf. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), p. 150). More recently, Peter Jimack has likened Rousseau to a modern journalist in the sense that he ‘consciously sought the striking, lapidary phrase which would compel the attention of his readers and move their hearts, even when it meant, as it often did, an exaggeration of his thought’ (cf. Peter Jimack, *Émile* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1983), p. 10). One certainly suspects that Kleist’s penchant for the arresting opening paradox in his stories might owe much to Rousseau, who begins both Chapter 1 of *Du contrat social* (‘L’homme est né libre, et par-tout il est dans les fers’ (OC: III, 351)) and *Émile* (‘Tout est bien, sortant des mains de l’auteur des choses: tout dégénére entre les mains de l’homme’ (OC : IV, 245)) in similar fashion.  
80 This line of argument has been developed most systematically by Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).  
2.4 On Violence and Social Change: Philosophical Inspirations and Critical Reflections

It is in this light that I believe Rousseau’s theoretical writings can provide a particularly apt point of departure and singular foil for interpreting aspects of Kleist’s work. Already in the Paris letters we may see a nod in this direction, as Kleist on the one hand takes up the terms of Rousseau’s critique of Idealist teleologies of progress, yet on the other seems to group him alongside Helvétius and Voltaire as the major representatives of the French Enlightenment tradition.\(^\text{82}\) Previously, on those rare occasions where the strictly political level of Rousseau’s thought has been made the object of study, the tendency has been to separate out these two aspects into a duality – i.e. to position him as either a pre-Romantic opponent to the Enlightenment or as a strict adherent of an overarching reason-based idealism. With this study, however, I aim to make a contribution that looks beyond such polarised perspectives by examining, via a series of close readings, how Kleist engages and radicalises those tensions that are, in fact, embedded within Rousseau’s complex reflections on the ideology of Enlightenment and the conditions of modernity.

Special emphasis will be given in this context to the twin themes of violence and social change. To speak of violence in connection with Rousseau may at first sight seem counterintuitive – his writing is hardly teeming with the instances of brutality that characterise so much of Kleist’s work. Yet although his may not be a ‘literature of violence’, it is, at root, a ‘literature on violence’. Man is naturally good but corrupted in society – this dictum provides the terms for a philosophical discourse which, as Cassirer notes, transposes the problem of theodicy onto the terrain of politics, postulating the origins of evil not in original sin but rather in the structures of social life.\(^\text{83}\) In so doing, it opens up the Enlightenment project to an exploration of human violence and suffering, targeting in particular the institutional violence committed by state agents and agencies in the name of right and law. Reason, Rousseau insists, has re-appropriated the violence it set out to dispel, and is now complicit in a number of its own coercive power plays against the competing forces of impulse, instinct and desire – hence the dislocation of the modern self. Kleist, I suggest, takes up this dialectic in his own work, and so an initial point of inquiry here will be to look firstly at how he exposes the structural violence embodied in socio-political


institutions and ideologies, and then secondly at how he presents violence at the level of the individual not as the work of pre-ordained ‘types’, but rather as a product of the tension and complex interplay between psychological and structural imperatives.\(^84\)

The second important consideration in this context will be the ambivalent role of violence within Rousseau’s own political theories. In *Du contrat social*, for example, he makes quite clear that violence, in and of itself, carries neither moral standing nor justification, whilst in the essay fragment *L’état de guerre* he registers a deep horror at the conditions of war and conflict. And yet in addressing the dilemma of political evil, and particularly the cardinal issue of how a state and people might be liberated from tyranny, Rousseau nonetheless does, at points, rehabilitate the use of violence in the name of virtue and the common good. Three aspects are particularly noteworthy here. The first concerns the moral justification of violence in the overthrow of an existing (corrupt) society and the legitimacy of revolutionary action. The second centres on the question of the necessity of violence both in establishing a new polity or nation and in preserving political order, focusing in particular on the ethical implications of capital punishment, sacrifice, and the construction of identity and otherness. The third, meanwhile, relates to the exploration of how the violence of tyranny might be combated not by reason but by passion and ‘public opinion’ – by modes of patriotism and religious devotion which orient fanaticism towards

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‘sentiments de sociabilité’ (OC: III, 468) that help form new bonds between citizens. In Kleist’s work, too, these aspects emerge as recurring concerns, and so provide a useful set of leading questions around which to focus a fresh discussion of his response to Rousseau. It is by tracing the constellations produced by this nexus of violence and social change that I here hope to show how Rousseau’s social theory was by no means a mere passing interest for Kleist, but rather a lasting and vital source of inspiration and reflection, and an important ongoing intertextual reference point.

2.5 Intertextuality, Inspiration and the Rezeptionshorizont of Rousseau’s writings

Given what was said in the previous chapter, it seems advisable to make a few brief remarks to help clarify these terms of inquiry. For since being coined by Julia Kristeva in her 1967 essay ‘Bakhtin, le mot, le dialogue et le roman’, the term ‘intertextuality’ has gained particular importance in connection with postmodern critical theory. Presenting and revising the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Kristeva credits the Russian critic with the discovery that ‘tout texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations; tout texte est absorption et transformation d’un autre texte’. No text, she claims, operates as an autonomous closed system – all are produced from a host of pre-existing literary and cultural codes. Thus she proclaims that the notion of intersubjectivity is supplanted by intertextuality, and that poetic language is always polysemic – the literary word does not carry fixed referential meaning but is rather ‘un croisement de surfaces textuelles, un dialogue de plusieurs écritures’. Linking this together with Bakhtin’s second key notion of ‘carnivalisation’, Kristeva generates a theory of intertextuality that proposes the text as a dynamic site of relational processes and infinite semiosis, and which lends credence to her own theories concerning the subversive, revolutionary potential of poetic language.

Within this poststructuralist horizon, the ‘author’ or ‘writer’ disappears into the ceaseless play of signifiers – Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality coincides with the ‘mort

87 Kristeva, ‘Le mot, le dialogue et le roman’, p. 442.
de l’auteur’ announced by Roland Barthes a year later. My interest here, however, is not in intertextuality as a mode of reading or limitless field of deferred meanings, but rather as a methodology for exploring and better understanding more determinate and definable relationships between texts. Potentially more productive for an inquiry of this kind is the structuralist theory of intertextuality developed by Gérard Genette in his *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré*. He begins with a terminological revision, replacing ‘intertextualité’ with the umbrella form ‘transtextualité’ to refer to all explicit and implicit connections that link one text to another. This is then divided into a taxonomy of five partially overlapping sub-categories: ‘intertextualité’, ‘paratextualité’, ‘metatextualité’, ‘hypertextualité’ and ‘architextualité’. Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality as a *sine non qua* of language is redefined as a pragmatic and determinable ‘relation de coprésence entre deux ou plusieurs textes’ – a relationship between specific elements of individual texts achieved through quotation, plagiarism or allusion. In a move away from previous paradigms, Genette instead makes the concept of ‘hypertextualité’, defined as ‘toute relation unissant un texte B (= hypertexte) à un texte antérieur A (= hypotext)’, the centre of his theoretical investigation. As we may divine, the field of hypertextual practice is broad, encompassing forms of transformation (parody, travesty and transposition) and imitation (pastiche, caricature, forgery). It is, however, nonetheless circumscribed by an assertion of agency that clearly marks it out from poststructuralist theories of intertextuality – Genette employs the term only when reference to the earlier text is made clear to the reader:

J’envisage la relation entre le texte et son lecteur d’une manière plus socialisée, plus ouvertement contractuelle, comme relevant d’une pragmatique consciente et organisée. J’aborderai donc ici, sauf exception, l’hypertextualité par son versant le plus ensoleillé: celui où la dérivation de l’hypotexte à l’hypertexte est à la fois massive (toute une oeuvre B dérivant de toute une oeuvre A) et déclarée, d’une manière plus ou moins officielle.

The hypotext is, then, a text which can be identified as a major source of signification, and Genette focuses his inquiry into hypertextual practice on works which are intentionally and

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92 Genette, *Palimpsestes*, p. 11.
93 Genette, *Palimpsestes*, p. 16.
self-consciously referential. In doing so, he reverses the poststructuralist shift of privilege from author to reader, replacing the horizontally-oriented semiotic structures of Kristeva and Barthes with the vertically-oriented model of the palimpsest – a text written in the ‘second degree’, in which layers of signification are overlaid. As both Anthony Stephens and Pierre Kadi Sossou have recently shown, the palimpsest is a useful conceptual rubric for understanding the dynamics of textual reference in Kleist’s works, and it is one which provides an overarching guide for this study. Rather than adopting an intertextual approach that implies plurivalence as a destabilising strategy, here the inquiry will be kept in a determinate field of textual relations, focusing on how familiarity with various marked references might aid reading and interpretation by providing access to new strata of meaning within Kleist’s texts.

If, however, Genette’s parameters of hypertextuality provide a useful exemplary standard, the specific terms of his inquiry again seem less than perfectly suited for this study. Firstly, his analysis of hypertexts tends towards a type of structuralist formalism, especially concerned with questions of genre and classification. Secondly, there is the danger of being led, by the precision of his differentiations, into a terminological quagmire: concepts such as ‘transposition diégétique’, ‘transposition pragmatique’, ‘transmotivation’, ‘transvalorisation’, ‘transvocalisation’, ‘transfocalisation’ and ‘transmodalisation’ would all have to be defined and indexed at the outset, delaying (and unnecessarily complicating) entry into the main area of interest here. Of these, transvalorisation is the category perhaps most proximate to my theme, as in principally exploring the relationship between Kleist’s literary works and Rousseau’s philosophical thinking, I shall be concentrating above all on changes and continuities in concepts rather than aesthetic means. That said, strict usage of the term would necessarily entail a limiting of focus according to classification (literary, philosophical, political) which I am keen to avoid, and so I shall instead recur here towards the alternative model offered by the more traditional category of ‘inspiration’ – a useful inventory of which is provided by art-historian Michael Baxandall:

‘Influence’ is a curse of art criticism primarily because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who the patient: it seems to reverse the active/passive relation which the historical actor experiences and the

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inferential beholder will wish to take into account. If one says that X influenced Y it does seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than Y did something to X. But in the consideration of good pictures and painters the second is always the more lively reality. [...] If we think of Y rather than X as the agent, the vocabulary is much richer and more attractively diversified: draw on, resort to, avail oneself of, appropriate from, have recourse to, adapt, misunderstand, refer to, pick up, take on, engage with, react to, quote, differentiate oneself from, assimilate oneself to, align oneself with, copy, address, paraphrase, absorb, make a variation on, revive, continue, remodel, ape, emulate, travesty, parody, extract from, distort, attend to, resist, simplify, reconstitute, elaborate on, develop, face up to, master, subvert, perpetuate, reduce, promote, respond to, transform, tackle ... everyone will be able to think of others. Most of these relations just cannot be stated the other way round – in terms of X acting on Y rather than Y acting on X. To think in terms of influence blunts thought by impoverishing the means of differentiation. 95

Though framed by the terms of art criticism, Baxandall’s arguments can be readily extrapolated to literature. Turning the traditional concept of influence as an active-passive relationship on its head, his work presents a richer framework for analysis of the dynamic between predecessor and successor by detailing the wider critical and creative possibilities available to the later author – ‘influence over’ here becomes ‘influence for’. Kleist’s relationship to Rousseau’s writings must, I feel, be seen in similarly reflective terms, for seldom, if ever, does he passively take up and espouse said doctrines. His usual practice, rather, is to use Rousseau’s wide-ranging philosophy as a fertile source of inspiration and ideas which he then critically probes and creatively develops – with his own peculiar intensity and unique bent for the extreme – in a series of fictional and dramatic settings.

On the one hand, then, this study returns to the familiar terrain of traditional poetics, reviving notions of influence and inspiration, and tracing a direct lineage between authors. This will not, however, be treated in mechanistic, binary terms, and a primary area of interest will be to explore how Kleist’s dialogue with Rousseau is embedded within the broader discursive network of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century culture. An important precursor and point of bearing in this context is provided by Claus Süßenberger’s 1974 study of German reaction to Rousseau in the second half of the eighteenth century, which, taking orientation from Hans Robert Jauss’s concept of the Erwartungshorizont, closely examines how changes in the social and political sphere acted upon reader response.

Two elements are of special note here. One is the profound significance of the French Revolution: Süßenberger convincingly documents a discernible move after 1789 away from aesthetics, sentiment and (auto)biography, towards an immediately salient interest in the political theories of *Du contrat social*. The other, meanwhile, relates to the variance of opinion that prevails in the wake of this shift: where, for example, Jacques Mounier would later identify 1792 as a ‘date de partage’ and clear watershed between positive and negative response to Rousseau in Germany, Süßenberger provides compelling evidence to show not only how laudatory readings of Rousseau remained, in fact, common throughout the period to the end of the eighteenth century, but also how certain of the greatest critical thinkers of the age (most notably Kant) continued to both adhere to and probe his political teachings. Looking beyond the limits of Süßenberger’s survey, these patterns might, moreover, be traced on into the first decade of the nineteenth century, where the debate and polemics concerning the impact of Rousseau’s theories were given fresh impetus and new direction by the emergence of Napoleon as apparent executor or traitor of the Revolution. As the realities of war, occupation and imperial oppression gave birth to a new spirit of German nationalism, so we can note a further, perhaps paradoxical, shift in intellectual interest towards Rousseau’s discourses on nationhood, national education, and the project of peace, traces of which pervade not only the theoretical writings of Kant, Fichte and Arndt but also, albeit perhaps rather less directly, the central ideas of the Prussian reform circle around Stein and Hardenberg.

In briefly plotting these developments in the *Rezeptionshorizont* of Rousseau’s writings, I by no means intend to suggest an overly abrupt or absolute paradigm shift – there were many who, throughout the period, continued to associate him foremost with the intense subjectivity of the *Confessions* or the excessive sensibility of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, whilst ‘mythic’ images of Rousseau as either champion of nature and unfettered liberty of feeling, or else as a man of curious and often dangerous paradoxes were likewise upheld at both popular and intellectual levels. The aim, rather, is to provide a sense of the fuller context within which Kleist encountered Rousseau’s works, and by taking account of the politicisation of response after 1789, together with the longer-standing tradition of engaged critical discourse, we might develop a framework for inquiry that permits us to look beyond widespread contemporary trivialisations, and so to turn study of the relationship between

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the two authors in new directions. Clearly, we cannot (and probably will not) ever be entirely certain of, firstly, what Kleist read of Rousseau (the only direct references we find are to *Émile, La Nouvelle Héloïse* and the *Confessions*), and secondly, what exactly he drew from the experience – at best what we can do is to try to piece together the clues and reconstruct possible or probable lines of engagement. In the present study, an attempt will be made to do just that, and the readings that follow will, in the first instance, be offered as evidence of Kleist’s familiarity with a broad selection of Rousseau’s writings. For those who would doubt that such associations could ever be satisfactorily established in a positivist sense, however, the manner in which the relationship is placed in the wider context of contemporary political and cultural discourse should, at the very least, allow for new perspectives to emerge on the structural outlines of shared concerns and values, which will, in turn, show how the connections between the two are more complex and manifold than have previously been thought.

From this it logically follows that the Revolution and its impact should provide a particular point of focus and interest here. Seen by many as the great ‘crucible of modernity’, the political upheavals that reverberated from France across Europe crystallised the issue of violence and social change like no other event – or rather series of events – either before or since, and provide, in various guises and disguises, a vital subtext and determining force for many of Kleist’s stories and dramas. The Revolution and its wars signalled the paradigmatic shift in the emergence of the new world: the period brought forth a sudden destabilisation of agency and identity and an amplified sense of anxiety and upheaval, and this mood of uncertainty penetrates to the very core of Kleist’s fiction. Conditions of war and conflict figure, moreover, as a natural backcloth across the greater part of his oeuvre – as Hans Joachim Kreutzer notes of the dramas, for example:


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die Gegenspielerin der Heldin nacheinander drei Fehden um den Besitz eines Territoriums führen läßt, alle drei sind Spiegelgefechtereien. *Hermannsschlacht* und *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*, sehr verkürzt: Befreiungskriege. 99

In the *Erzählungen* too, we find similar contextual patterns: in *Die Marquise von O…*, for instance, the initial rape is perpetrated amidst the chaos of war, whilst in *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo* the entire narrative unfolds within the arena of violent revolutionary struggle. The same is true, in a somewhat different sense, of *Michael Kohlhaas*, whilst in his other tales, Kleist employs a range of alternative devices to generate and convey a similar climate of disorder and instability, from the earthquake that suddenly rocks St. Jago in *Das Erdbeben in Chili*, to the outbreak of plague in *Der Findling*. In several of these works, moreover, he looks beyond the conditions of revolutionary crisis and subjectivity and deliberately confronts the historical experience of the Revolution and its specific political and ethical implications: in *Das Erdbeben*, for example, where he inquires into the violent outcomes of sudden socio-political irruptions and the conflict between revolution and reaction, and in both *Michael Kohlhaas* and *Die Verlobung* where he probes the tenuous divides between liberty, justice and vengeance. In *Penthesilea*, meanwhile, Kleist offers a glimpse of post-revolutionary society and critically surveys the slide towards new forms of tyranny and oppression, whilst in his two patriotic dramas (*Die Hermannsschlacht* and *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*), he first provides a brutally graphic sketch of the necessary conditions of revolutionary violence and national insurrection, and then a rather more abstract treatment of patriotic ideals and the legitimacy of state-sanctioned violence.

Kleist’s aesthetic is thus, to some considerable extent, a political aesthetic – much of his drama and prose not only places the dynamics of subjectivity and selfhood in a politicised context of social change, but also engages in complex and often subtle fashion with revolutionary discourses of freedom and tyranny, rebellion and assimilation, agency and conditioning. Such questions are frequently invoked in the critical literature, yet seldom have they been examined in fine detail, not least as a result of a prevailing tendency to subsume Kleist’s views on the Revolution under an overarching political outlook, whether it be as a conservative (even reactionary) figure opposed to modernising impulses 100 or as a

liberal (even radical) critic of the social and political status quo. The effect of such patterns has been to eclipse the more complex lines of his politics in three vital areas. Firstly, in limiting his response to the level of ideology, such positions overlook the extent to which Kleist recognised the Revolution’s tendency to evolve out of human action, communication and contingency – a sign of which can be seen in his fictionalisation of Mirabeau’s speech to the National Assembly in the essay ‘Über die allmäßliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden’ (cf. DKV: III, 536-37). Secondly, the adoption of such broad perspectives has distracted from certain more nuanced references to aspects of revolutionary political culture – to the stock of symbols, language and imagery that transmitted new values and identities in France, and that has, since the late 1970s, returned very much to the fore of revolutionary historiography. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, critics have, in attempting to categorise Kleist as having been either ‘for’ or ‘against’ the Revolution, tended to fall into the trap of conflating disparate events into a single abstract entity and so missed the implications of a more specific and localised response to successively unfolding revolutionary paradigms, from the initial idealism of liberty, equality and fraternity, through war and terror, to despotism and imperial expansion. Only in recent years has there been an advance on this front, with calls made for a more differentiated understanding of the ways in which Kleist’s political views straddle such rigid postures and transcend static axioms. As a complement to these developments, we now also find an increasing number of studies which convincingly and accurately situate elements of the excessive violence present in his fiction in direct relation to the historical context of war and Revolution.


102 See in particular the path-breaking studies by Mona Ozouf (La fête révolutionnaire, 1789-1799 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976)) and Maurice Agulhon (Marianne au Combat: l’Imagerie et la Symbolique Républicaines de 1789 à 1880 (Paris: Flammarion, 1979)), both of which will be drawn on at relevant points in subsequent chapters.


Looking at this complex of violence through the lens of Kleist’s dialogue with Rousseau throws up some interesting insights and possibilities. Stephens has made an initial move in this direction by drawing out the counterpoint between Kleist’s view of Rousseau as spiritual father of the Revolution and Napoleon as its historical heir, and suggesting, again quite rightly to my mind, that it is this paradoxical nexus that conditions his response to contemporary politics. Time and again in his fictional works one certainly senses Kleist grappling with the psychologies and mechanisms that might help explain how the progressive ideals of 1789 had collapsed into violence and despotism both at home and abroad. As the political situation in Prussia continued to deteriorate and his own interest and involvement in the reform agenda grew deeper, however, one suspects that he may not only have come to a more critical, less mythical reconsideration of revolutionary ethics, but also of Rousseau’s role as spiritual and intellectual forefather. It is in this sense, I shall argue, that the Revolution might be seen to serve as a vital counterfoil for Kleist’s Auseinandersetzung with Rousseau’s politics and ethics, reinvesting it with specific historical pressure and meaning. With this in mind, two further discursive processes will be considered here: firstly, how Kleist employs the rapidly evolving paradigms of the Revolution to reflect on the validity of Rousseau’s insights and the potential dangers of his prescriptions; and second, how he takes up the premises of Rousseau’s theories both to expose the social and political tensions that came to drive the revolutionary dynamic, and to provide something of a model response to the national crisis threatened by Napoleonic expansion.

2.6 The Parameters of this Study

In many studies of this kind, it is usual practice to begin with a discussion of Kleist’s philosophical essays as a pathway into his creative works. A similar pattern might easily be followed here – both the ‘Betrachtungen über den Weltlauf’ and ‘Über das Marionettentheater’, for example, readily lend themselves to being read through the optic of de la Révolution française chez Heinrich von Kleist’, in Écritures de la Révolution dans les pays de langue allemande, ed. by Geoffroy Rémi and Patricia Desroches-Viallet (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Etienne, 2003), pp. 63-80, Uwe Schütte, Die Poetik des Extremen: Ausschreitungen einer Sprache des Radikalen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), esp. pp. 18-24, and Hans-Jürgen Schings, ‘Über einige Grausamkeiten bei Heinrich von Kleist’, KJb (2008/9), 115-37.

Rousseau’s social and cultural critiques. That I have deliberately chosen to eschew such preliminaries can be explained on three counts. Firstly, it seems to me that placing Kleist’s philosophical writings at the front of studies suggests they have particular explanatory or revelatory force, of which I am not convinced. Secondly, by linking such an approach to Rousseau, one might convey the impression that he ought to be considered a dominant external authority for understanding Kleist’s texts, which is by no means the intention here – the interest is in locating a particular mode of Kleist’s discourse, not establishing Rousseau’s credentials as the most important of his countless interlocutors. And thirdly, I feel that by providing an overarching template for Kleist’s reading of Rousseau in the philosophical essays one runs the risk of obscuring complexities in the fictional works behind an artificially-imposed sense of systematicity. Instead, the present study is structured around four chapters, each dealing with one of Kleist’s dramas or stories, and each focusing on a select few themes and motifs. The following chapter on Das Erdbeben in Chili looks at questions of theodicy, sacrifice, and the bounds of physical and moral evil, as well as the problematic relationship between patriotism and religion. In Chapter Four, the discussion centres on the dialectic of freedom and slavery and the ethics of violent revolution in Die Verlobung in St. Domingo, whilst Chapter Five picks up similar themes in relation to the nationalist context of Die Herrmannsschlacht, with additional focus falling on the performance of identity and ideology. In the sixth chapter, meanwhile, attention will turn to Kleist’s dramatic masterpiece Prinz Friedrich von Homburg, and particularly to the overriding tensions between patriotism and liberty and the quandary of how to order public and private values.

This scope could, of course, have been extended – indeed, at first sight it may seem unduly narrow. In a broadly comparative perspective, one might, for example, look again at the representation of pity and the explorations of nature and nurture in Der Findling, at the treatment of music in Die heilige Cäcilie, even at the discourses of honour in Der Zweikampf – all of these elements may, in one way or another, be seen to derive stimulus from aspects of Rousseau’s thinking. Likewise in the dramas, where one could perhaps look a little closer at the implications of the ‘Erbvertrag’ in Die Familie Schroffenstein, at the critique of legal corruption in Der zerbrochne Krug, or at questions of leadership and legitimacy in Robert Guiskard. Here, however, I have opted for a limited thematic focus in the belief that what is missing from existing scholarship is cohesive analysis that engages in close detail with Rousseau’s philosophical ideas – the object being, by linking this to early
nineteenth-century political discourse, to provide a new, historically-oriented perspective on a specific, central aspect of Kleist’s work: his problematic representations of violence and social change. In view of this, I feel the particular qualities of the four texts selected to offer the most productive framework within which to assess the subject at hand: whilst Michael Kohlhaas may, for example, have been included given the primacy with which it treats our twin themes, Rousseau is, in fact, surprisingly quiet on the individual’s right to rebellion and resistance, and so both Das Erdbeben in Chili and Die Verlobung in St. Domingo appear a more appropriate and suited fit – this, coupled with the fact that the latter two have been subject to some rather incautious judgements in relation to Rousseau which are, I believe, in urgent need of redress. The same is essentially true of the two plays which have been included over Penthesilea in an attempt to move critical debate in new directions and to press home the point that Kleist did not, in his later turn towards political drama, reach a terminal split with Rousseau but rather continued to avail himself of his wide-ranging theories and insights. Clearly, then, the aim here is not to provide any kind of comprehensive catalogue of all points of contact, nor to reconstruct a grand philosophy implicit in Kleist’s reading of Rousseau. The intention, rather, is to pay particularly close attention to a selection of thematic constellations which, when set in full context, shed new, important, and at times unexpected, light on the political and ethical issues at play in Kleist’s texts.

106 The extent to which Kleist engages revolutionary politics, and particularly the sublime figure of the ‘revolutionary Amazon’ in Penthesilea, has long-since been a common point of focus in the secondary literature (see, for example, Inge Stephan, “Da werden Weiber zu Hyänen ...”: Amazonen und Amazonenmythen bei Schiller und Kleist’, in Feministische Literaturwissenschaft, ed. by Inge Stephan and Sigrid Weigel (Berlin: Argument, 1984), pp. 23-42, and Sigrid Lange, ‘Kleists Penthesilea’. Weimarer Beiträge, 37 (1991), 705-22), whilst certain intersects with Rousseau’s theories have been explored by Wolff (cf. ‘Kleists Amazonenstaat’) and more recently alluded to by both Ritchie Robertson (cf. ‘Women Warriors and the Origin of the State’) and Maike Oergel (cf. ‘The Amazon State in Kleist’s Penthesilea: Revolutionary Republic of Female Liberation or Anti-individualistic Totalitarianism?’, PEGS, 78 (1/2) (2009), 70-80). These lines of inquiry have, however, seldom been extended to either Die Herrmannsschlacht or Prinz Friedrich von Homburg.
CHAPTER THREE

Das Erdbeben in Chili

First published in September 1807 in Cotta’s Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände, Das Erdbeben in Chili is widely regarded as one of Kleist’s fictional masterpieces. Set against the historical backdrop of the earthquake that rocked Santiago on 13 May 1647, this is a daring and dramatic tale of thwarted love and extreme violence, within the brief compass of which Kleist manages to reflect on a broad variety of current theological, philosophical and political controversies – from questions of the providential order and the bounds of physical and moral evil, to an exploration of the ethics of social change and the volatile psychological dynamics of fanaticism, demagoguery and mob behaviour.

The story revolves around the ill-fated relationship between Josephe Asteron, only daughter of the nobleman Don Henrico Asteron, and her bourgeois tutor Jeronimo Rugera – a motif which not only recalls the legend of Abelard and Heloise, but also, and perhaps more directly for contemporary readers, the world of Rousseau’s La Nouvelle Héloïse and the parallel situation of his protagonists Julie and Saint-Preux. Here as there, the liaison across class lines calls forth the hostility of the young girl’s father: upon learning of the affair, Don Henrico Asteron first has Jeronimo dismissed from his post, and then banishes Josephe to a Carmelite convent. Shortly after, however, the lovers contrive to meet up in the garden of the convent, and nine months later Josephe collapses on the steps of the cathedral during the Corpus Christi procession and gives birth to a child, Philipp. Inevitably, the affair occasions great scandal, and Jeronimo is cast into prison, whilst Josephe is tried and sentenced to death. The narrative sets in at this point, opening in medias res just as Josephe is due to be executed, and with Jeronimo on the verge of hanging himself in despair from a pillar in his prison cell. At this very moment, the earthquake strikes, shattering the walls of the prison and disrupting the spectacle of Josephe’s execution, allowing a seemingly miraculous double escape – Josephe is even able to rescue Philipp from the convent before it collapses. Fleeing the destroyed city, the two find one another in an idyllic valley, provocatively likened to the ‘Tal von Eden’ (DKV: III, 201), where the survivors of the trauma come together in a spirit of egalitarian co-operation and universal reconciliation; and this, coupled with the friendly welcome afforded by the family of
nobleman Don Fernando Ormez, convinces Jeronimo and Josephe that their rescue was ordained by a higher power, and that their alleged sins have been forgiven. Encouraged by this, and despite the express misgivings of Donna Elisabeth (Don Fernando’s sister-in-law), they resolve to return to the city the following morning to attend a thanksgiving service at the only cathedral not to have been razed by the tremor. The decision backfires spectacularly, however, when the presiding canon delivers a hellfire and brimstone sermon interpreting the earthquake as a form of divine retribution for moral decay and laxity, and for the sins of Jeronimo and Josephe in particular. With this, the attending crowd is transformed into a baying, bloodthirsty mob, and the scene descends into a brutal orgy of violence. Jeronimo and Josephe are both bludgeoned to death, as is Don Fernando’s other sister-in-law, Donna Constanze, and his young son, Juan, who is mistaken for the illegitimate bastard Philipp. At the story’s close, Philipp is adopted by Don Fernando and his wife, Donna Elvire, and the text ends with the suitably enigmatic line: ‘und wenn Don Fernando Philippen mit Juan verglich, und wie er beide erworben hatte, so war es ihm fast, als müßt er sich freuen’ (DKV: III, 221).

Even from this brief outline it can readily be seen how much of the central action of the tale is structured on a conflict of perspectives concerning divine intervention and its role in human affairs. The act of interpretation thus becomes a major thematic concern – in an important formal analysis from the 1960s, John Ellis first made the case by suggesting that ‘the point of the story lies less in the meaning of the events than in the attempts of the characters involved […] to make sense of them’. More recently, the manner in which the text defies any single essentialising interpretation of cause and meaning of the earthquake has, in keeping with broader trends, been carried over to the level of authorial discourse – Norbert Altenhofer, for example, sees in the story a ‘Skandalon der Hermeneutik’ and ‘Mimesis der Rätselhaftigkeit des Lebens, der Undurchschaubarkeit der Welt’, whilst Werner Hamacher writes along a more deconstructionist line:

Kleists Erzählung inszeniert mit dem Drama der Darstellung zugleich das von Interpretationen, die um der Einheit der Erfahrung willen Fakten im Hinblick auf ihre transzendente Bedeutsamkeit auslegen. Gerade jener Einheit der Erfahrung wird aber durch den Ausgang des Konflikts der Interpretationen, den

Kleist erzählt, der Grund entzogen. Und jede Deutung seines Textes, die diese Erfahrungseinheit durch seine Einbettung in ein historisches, gesellschaftliches oder psychologisches Kontinuum wiederherzustellen sucht, wird von der narrativen Interpretationskritik, die er selber ist, ihrer Unhaltbarkeit überführt.\(^3\)

To be sure, the narrative does establish this ambiguity of representation and interpretation, as all attempts to invest the earthquake with tangible substance are confounded by a subsequent twist in the plot. Yet the indeterminability that emerges from within the story does not necessarily imply an abandonment of hermeneutic consciousness or a suspension of meaning in the text itself. It is rather, as Jochen Schmidt notes, ‘gerade der “Sinn” der Erzählung, daß das Erdbeben ein “sinnloses” Geschehen repräsentiert’;\(^4\) and though this no doubt reflects Kleist’s familiar concern with the paradoxical and chaotic aspects of the ‘gebrechliche Einrichtung der Welt’, it also carries a direct connotative reference to contemporary discourse and the intellectual debates that followed upon the great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 – widely accepted as a primary reference for the story’s focal event (cf. DKV: III, 804).\(^5\) Confronted with suffering and death on an almost unprecedented scale (estimates as to the death toll vary from a low of 10,000 to a high of 100,000),\(^6\) theologians and philosophers began to wrestle anew with questions of divine providence, pre-determinism and the destructive power of nature. At the heart of this lay the old Epicurean dilemma of how to reconcile God’s omnipotence and beneficence given the existence of physical evil, with particular spotlight turning on a renegotiation – led by Voltaire and Rousseau – of the metaphysical precepts of optimism, especially the Leibnizian doctrine of pre-established harmony and ‘le monde le meilleur possible’ (PSL: VI, 241), and Alexander Pope’s axiom ‘Whatever is, is right’ (PAP: III, 51).

That Kleist quotes the terms of this theodicy debate in Das Erdbeben has long-since been recognised in the scholarly literature, much of which draws particular attention to this

\(^3\) Werner Hamacher, ‘Das Beben der Darstellung’, in Positionen der Literaturwissenschaft (see Altenhofer, ‘Der erschütterte Sinn’), pp. 149-73 (p. 172).
Yet as Hedwig Appelt and Dirk Grathoff duly note, even the most deliberate and detailed of these studies tend to fall into the trap of undervaluing Rousseau’s contribution to the discourse, misconstruing it as little more than a facile defence of orthodox optimism that counterpoints the assault launched by Voltaire in his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* and later *Candide* – an outlook which Kleist is then inevitably held to reject outright. In fact, the position Rousseau stakes out in his famous reply to the poem (commonly known as the *Lettre à Voltaire sur la providence*) is a good deal more complex, for though he vehemently contests Voltaire’s critique of optimism, he does not simply embrace Leibniz and Pope. Instead, what he offers is a ‘double teaching’ of natural and divine providence which aims at both providing an explanation for the presence of evil in the world and offering consolation for it. Careful analysis of the letter thus reveals that Rousseau’s views on optimism and theodicy are not only more singular and original than commonly assumed, but that they are also intricately bound up with his broader theories on the origins of evil and the nature of human moral accountability. By tracing these arguments in full detail, we can, I feel, gain access to an altogether more involved dialogue that unfolds in Kleist’s tale – one that not only puts into question a good deal of received opinion on the subject of theodicy, but which also opens up the context for a complex, multi-layered inquiry into the origins of violence that extends, via analogy, to a graphic critique of revolutionary modalities.

### 3.1 ‘Tout est bien pour le tout’: Theodicy, Optimism and the Origins of *Mal*

In order to properly judge Rousseau’s position on the question of theodicy, we must first come to terms with the initial polemic of Voltaire’s *Poème*. The tone is set in the opening verse: luridly cataloguing the devastation wrought by the earthquake and bitterly protesting...
its injustice, he challenges the defenders of optimism to confront the demonstrated realities of physical evil and not to take refuge behind abstract and sophistical philosophical platitudes. To maintain that ‘tout est bien’ in the face of such horror, or to attempt to explain away events through such axioms as ‘All Discord, Harmony, not understood’ or ‘All partial evil, universal good’ (PAP: III, 50-51), is, he insists, morally repugnant, serving not only to trivialise the suffering of the victims, but also to distort the conditions of human existence. For as he spells out both in the preface and in a later stanza, the earthquake is but a single proof (albeit a profoundly disturbing one) of the sad truth that ‘le mal est sur la terre’ (CWV: 45, 468; 476); and so with this in mind he turns in the second half of the poem to an exploration of the origin and cause of such evil.

In broaching this question, Voltaire glosses a number of possible explanations. Most important in our context is the so-called ‘necessary law’ argument – the view that evil is the inevitable consequence of nature’s laws, either because it necessarily contributes to the greater good, or because God is disinterested in the specific workings of his decrees and allows them to run their course ‘sans couroux, sans pitié, tranquille, indifférent’ (CWV: 45, 478). The first of these variants is rejected on the grounds of entailing that the world would be less well off had the tragedy of Lisbon never occurred – ‘Quoi! L’univers entier sans ce gouffre infernal, / Sans engloutir Lisbonne eut-il été plus mal?’ (CWV: 45, 472). This then leaves the second option relating to God’s attitude towards his creation and his creatures, and it is here that we approach the true crux both of Voltaire’s critique, and Rousseau’s subsequent reply. For faced with the vexed terms of the Epicurean dilemma, Voltaire implicitly but fundamentally rejects God’s benevolence by asserting His omnipotence:

Non, ne présentez plus à mon coeur agité  
Ces immumables lois de la nécessité,  
Cette chaîne des corps, des esprits, et des mondes.  
O rêves des savants! ô chimères profondes!  
Dieu tient en main la chaîne, et n’est point enchaîné;  
Par soin choix bienfaisant tout est déterminé: [...]. (CWV: 45, 474)

It is from this point that Rousseau sets out his response in the Lettre. Tellingly, he begins by calling attention not to the rigour of the poem’s argument but rather to its emotive rhetorical effect. The critical chord is clearly struck: whereas the optimistic tenor of Leibniz’s Théodicée and Pope’s Essay on Man brings solace and hope in the face of evil, Voltaire’s denial of providence merely serves to aggravate human misery, reducing the
reader to disconsolation and despair (cf. OC: IV, 1060). Not surprisingly, in negotiating the
terrain of the dilemma, Rousseau thus opts for making God all-good but not all-powerful:
‘Si l’embarras de l’origine du mal vous forçoit d’altérer quelqu’une des perfections de Dieu,
pourquoi vouloir justifier sa puissance aux dépens de sa bonté? S’il faut choisir entre deux
erreurs, j’aime encore mieux la premiere’ (OC: IV, 1060-61). The fact that he refers to both
these options as ‘erreurs’, however, provides an early sign that his own position amounts to
more than a straightforward endorsement of the optimist doctrine, and in fact, as we shall
come to see, Rousseau’s defence of providence bears only a qualified resemblance to the
orthodoxies of the ‘tout est bien’ philosophy.

The greater complexities of his standpoint can be traced to two important points of
revision. The first is his express denial – going against both the optimists and their critics –
that the existence of providence requires justification from any system of philosophy. Such
questions are, he insists, entirely beyond the purview of philosophical logic or reflection –
belief in a providential order cannot stem from reason or ratiocination, but solely from faith
in God (cf. OC: IV, 1068-70). In this regard, Rousseau’s position is, as Christopher Kelly
and Roger Masters point out, one of relative neutrality, underpinned in the first instance by
a belief in the need to separate metaphysics and morals and to distinguish general and
particular evils – a point all too often missed by those on both sides of the debate.10 For to
deny, as many theistic optimists do, that the individual encounters particular evil is, to
Rousseau’s mind, frankly absurd – no true philosopher could ever sanction such a claim.
Yet no less absurd is Voltaire’s error in taking particular evils – having toothache, being
poor, getting robbed (cf. OC: IV, 1069) – as proof of a general evil that inheres in the
nature of things and refutes the possibility of providence. As a safeguard against such
fallacies, Rousseau thus proposes a modest yet significant modification to the ‘tout est
bien’ tenet: ‘au lieu de Tout est bien, il vaudroit peut être mieux dire: Le tout est bien, ou
Tout est bien pour le tout’ (cf. OC: IV, 1068).

The effect of this qualification is to call attention to the epistemological and moral
limitations that attend the question of providence. For since a perfect knowledge of the
workings of the universe is beyond human grasp, both the theists and the philosophers are,
Rousseau suggests, guilty of habitually forming judgements about God’s will which are

with the Critics of the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité’, in Rousseau and Liberty, ed. by Robert Wokler
(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 53-69 (p. 64).
limited by their own finite perspectives, and which, in reality, reflect nothing other than self-interest and pride (cf. OC: IV, 1069). In nuancing the ‘tout est bien’ axiom, he aims to give the lie to such mauvaise foi by bringing to bear the Malebranchean view that providence is exclusively universal and redounds solely to the benefit of ‘le tout’. His premise is that God is something of a Deus absconditus – one who, having created a good universe, limits his involvement in human affairs, and is little concerned with daily operations and the fate of passing individuals (cf. OC: IV, 1069). In this view of things, nature cannot be seen as anything but an inexorable and morally-neutral force, and so any attempt to interpret particular evils – including such large-scale calamities as the Lisbon earthquake – in teleological terms as a manifestation of divine agency ought, Rousseau insists, to be entirely foreclosed.

This separation of nature, providence and morality marks the second key revisionary aspect of Rousseau’s position, and opens up a perspective on the larger significance of his narrative on evil within the broader context of his system of thought. For as we have seen in the previous chapter, the argument of the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité had already transferred the problem of evil from the province of theology to that of history and anthropology by denying original sin and showing man’s most significant ills to come from society and human progress. In reference to the Lisbon earthquake, Rousseau reverts to this same argument, contending that though the initial tremor may have been an unavoidable natural evil, much of the resultant suffering was not:

Sans quitter votre [Voltaire’s] sujet de Lisbonne, convenez, par exemple, que la nature n’avoit point rassemblé là vingt mille maisons de six à sept étages, et que si les habitans de cette grande ville eussent été dispersés plus également, et plus légèrement logés, le dégât eût été beaucoup moindre, et peut être nul. (OC: IV, 1061)

In saying as much, he recasts the loss at Lisbon as an instance of mal moral rather than mal physique, and thus implicitly attributes the greater portion of blame to man rather than nature. Yet in doing so, he touches on the knotty paradox later articulated in the opening to Émile: if ‘tout est bien, sortant des mains de l’auteur des choses’, then how does it come to pass that ‘tout dégénère entre les mains de l’homme’ (OC: IV, 245)? Or, put another way, if man is naturally good, how does he come to accrue responsibility for moral evil? The answer, Rousseau suggests, lies in the abuse of the faculties bestowed on us by God (cf. OC:
IV, 587-88), and by way of such reasoning, he presents a solution to the problem of theodicy that at once exonerates God of responsibility for evil and preserves the principle of the natural goodness of man. For it is not ‘l’homme naturel’ who is source and agent of moral evil, but rather ‘l’homme libre, perfectionné, partant corrompu’ (OC: IV, 1061) – in other words, the individual who has undergone the complex process of socialisation and corruption charted in the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*. As Cassirer notes, Rousseau’s ethical theory thus takes an innovative step in placing culpability for evil where it had never previously been sought and creating a new subject of ‘Imputabilität’ that focuses attention on human society rather than individual man. What this brings is a double benefit of consolation and hope, for as well as allowing room to defend the beneficence of providence, the theory of the natural goodness of man, in showing evil to arise from human experience rather than nature or God, also urges the prospect of it being mitigated through social, political and moral reform. In thus coupling providence and progress in a practical theodicy, Rousseau not only signals opposition to Voltaire, but also goes beyond the ‘pure’ metaphysics of Leibniz and Pope, marking out a quite particular position that, contrary to much received opinion, both disrupts and reorientates the established trajectories of the debate.

3.2 From ‘wunderbare Errettung’ to ‘ungeheure[r] Keulenschlag’: Providence, Agency and the Bounds of Evil

How then might this fuller understanding of Rousseau’s concerns bear relevance for a reading of *Das Erdbeben*? Two points can be drawn out here, one of which has received a fair deal of critical attention, the other less so. The first relates to the question of interpretation, and the constant efforts of those affected by the earthquake to draw causal connections to a divine purpose. This theme manifests itself through Kleist’s subtle orchestration of individual and collective reaction, particularly via the contrast between the responses of Jeronimo and Josephe on the one hand, and the Chorherr on the other. For the lovers, the earthquake is a sign of God’s benevolence and favour: having escaped the city, Jeronimo sinks to his knees, ‘Gott für seine wunderbare Errettung zu danken’ (DKV: III, 195), whilst Josephe is later moved to call the day that has passed ‘eine Wohltat, wie der

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Himmel noch keine über sie verhängt hätte’ (DKV: III, 207). The Chorherr, however, calls this optimistic perspective into question by offering a markedly different version of events, agreeing that the earthquake occurred ‘auf den Wink des Allmächtigen’ (DKV: III, 213), but holding it as a sign of divine punishment rather than salvation – as an ‘entsetzliche[s]’ judgement on the ‘Sittenverderbnis der Stadt’ and its Sodom and Gomorrah-like ‘Greuel’, exemplified by Jeronimo and Josephe’s sexual misconduct (DKV: III, 215).

The effect of this juxtaposition is to induce something of a teleological impasse by drawing attention to the ambiguity of experience and, more particularly, the relativity of perception that undermines both viewpoints. The canon’s ‘Deutungshorizont’, for example, is marked off by the limited perspective of his own vengeful theological creed, coupled, one suspects, with a more deliberate interest in securing the restoration of the moral codex of the dominant theocracy. Jeronimo and Josephe, meanwhile, are likewise guilty of constructing a grand causal theory based on their own self-interest and pride – witness, for example, their apparent ‘Rührung’ at the thought ‘wie viel Elend über die Welt kommen mußte, damit sie glücklich würden’ (DKV: III, 203). A note of caution ought to be sounded here, for there is a clear distinction to be heeded between the malevolent design of the Chorherr and the misplaced faith of the lovers – the purpose is assuredly not to advance any kind of moral equivalency. Nor, as Hilda Brown rightly notes, is it to belittle Jeronimo and Josephe by exposing their naivety and philosophical deficiencies. The point, rather, is to underscore how all such theo-teleological interpretations are circumscribed by subjective interest and perspective – a tendency cast into even sharper relief by the account of Jeronimo’s own volatile oscillations in the immediate aftermath of his escape (cf. DKV: III, 195).

The corollary to this point is provided by the narrative detail that records the indiscriminate destruction wrought by the earthquake. Typically, Kleist complicates the picture by having the narrator indulge in the same intentional fallacy as his characters – time and again, he too points towards an (optimistic) explanation of events as a consequence of divine will. In the description of Josephe’s rescue of Philipp, for example, he refers to her as having been protected by ‘alle Engel des Himmels’ (DKV: III, 199) and the child as ‘den teuern Knaben, den ihr der Himmel wieder geschenkt hatte’ (DKV: III,

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13 For a detailed discussion on this point, see Ellis, ‘Das Erdbeben in Chili’.
199), whilst in deliberately charting the devastation of those institutions which had originally conjoined to condemn the lovers (church, state, family), he implies a vision of divine retribution being exacted on a cruel and corrupt society. Such a view is, however, belied by the death of the Abbess, who not only sought to intercede on Josephe’s behalf when she was being tried, but who also promised to undertake the care of Philipp after the execution. Her demise suggests the ultimate truth that the earthquake knows no ethical bounds – striking both good and evil, just and unjust, the violence enacted is the work of blind contingency, ambiguous and impenetrable. On this point, claims to a teleological morality break down, and so Kleist’s story parallels Rousseau (and later Kant) by taking up a critique of all attempts to impute to nature any kind of divine scheme of justice. As we may come to expect, however, the idea is here driven to a logical and aesthetic extreme in the story’s violent denouement, which is first prefigured by Josephe’s tragically ironic resolve ‘ihr Antlitz vor dem Schöpfer in den Staub zu legen’ in reverence to his ‘unbegreifliche und erhabene Macht’ (DKV: III, 211; emphasis added), and then set off by the crucial impetus of the canon’s demonisation of the lovers and his dramatic invocation of divine vengeance. With the brutal murders that follow – climaxing in that of the child, Juan, his brains smashed out against a pillar – the error of such mauvaise foi is made to play out its full and terrifying potentialities.

The scenes of violence in the cathedral also pertain to our second main point of interest here by signalling a shift in emphasis from physical to moral evil. In the opening section of the story, Kleist exploits to the fullest the destructive force of the earthquake, yet it is not to this that his central protagonists succumb – the tragic fate of Jeronimo and Josephe is to survive the natural catastrophe only to then fall victim to an all too human ritual of sacrifice. A structural foil for this reversal can be traced in Candide, where the two main characters, having likewise survived the devastation of an earthquake, are similarly condemned – spuriously, as the text makes clear – to be sacrificed at an auto-da-fé as a preventative against further disaster.14 In rehearsing this same dialectic of survival and sacrifice in his own narrative, Kleist follows the critical lead set by both Voltaire and Rousseau by diverting primary interest away from the unexplained and inexplicable evil inflicted on man by nature, and towards an exploration of that unloosed by modes of human conduct and agency.

The question of the motivation of the crowd in these scenes has elicited a good deal of critical discussion, particularly in recent times. In much of the earlier literature on the text, the tendency was to see the mob lynchings in the narrative line as an eruption of barbarism and naked brutality – Hans M. Wolff, for example, spoke for many in referring to the violence as an ‘Ausdruck wildesten Hasses, tierischer Mordgier und eines grauenenerregenden Fanatismus’. To his mind, the episode is consciously crafted to contrast with, and eclipse, the state-sanctioned violence of the opening section of the story – a point which he takes to reflect Kleist’s growing appreciation of the ‘Staat’ as the ‘geringere Übel’. In a more recent study, Friedrich Kittler likewise cites a clear distinction between the ‘nackte Gewalt’ of the mob in the cathedral and the ‘rituelles Schauspiel’ staged by the established authorities in the earlier scenes, but develops the theme in a different direction, offering a reading that locates the text in the discursive framework provided by contemporary (post-1806) notions of ‘Volksgewalt’ and ‘Partisanentum’. Other critics, by way of contrast, have sought an explanation for the crowd’s actions in terms of an underlying collective authority or motivation – René Girard, for instance, argues that the lynchings be read as embodying a victimage and scapegoat mechanism that underpins all forms of social order, whilst David Pan suggests that the sacrifice of Jeronimo and Josephe is legitimised by the specific aesthetic structures within which it is embedded, namely those of the Kantian paradigm of the sublime. Both are, I feel, quite correct in their initial assessment that the violence of the mob is not simply attributable to irrational bloodlust, and in calling attention to a more complex collective dynamic. That said, neither account is entirely satisfactory, for where Girard (as Pan rightly notes) errs in failing to register the crowd’s desire to locate specific rather than arbitrary victims for sacrifice, so Pan does in overlooking two equally crucial factors which pose a problem for his recuperative reading in terms of the Kantian conflict between individual and communal morality – firstly, the all-important role played by the Chorherr as trigger for the sudden

and dramatic psychological polarisation that occurs within the cathedral, and secondly the 
unmistakably negative accent that attends the presentation of Santiago society in the 
opening section of the story.

To help elucidate the terms of this social critique, we can turn again to the parallels 
that link Kleist’s story with *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. In both texts, the affair between noble 
daughter and bourgeois tutor thematises the tension between individual and society: like 
Saint Preux’s love for Julie, so Jeronimo’s for Josephe poses a threat to the established 
patriarchal hierarchy that underlies the foundations of social order. In both cases, moreover, 
the sexuality of the young couple is positively charged and used as a means of exposing the 
stifling standards that prescribe the limits of individual freedom within the social system. 
For his part, Rousseau conjoins this moral critique of the patriarchal family with the private 
struggles of conscience of his characters, particularly Julie, in coming to terms with the 
conflicting imperatives of inclination and duty. In re-working the theme for his own novella, 
however, Kleist pares down the issue by eschewing all such questions entirely, focusing his 
critical gaze exclusively on the social structures and agencies which so violently oppose 
and condemn the lovers, and thereby giving an even clearer signal of where our sympathies 
ought to lie.20

The first target of his critique, again following the Rousseauian model, is the strict 
social code of the patriarchal family system – as readers we are not only led to assume that 
Josephe’s father (‘einer der reichsten Edelleute der Stadt’ (DKV: III, 189)) objects to her 
liason with Jeronimo on class grounds, but are also openly told that he is later made aware 
of a subsequent secret rendezvous thanks to the ‘hämische Aufmerksamkeit seines stolzen 
Sohnes’ (DKV: III, 189). With the events that follow, however, the scope of this critique 
swiftly opens up to target the broader institutional structures of the state, particularly the 
Church, and the ideological conditioning of the general populace. For the collective 
response to Josephe’s fatal collapse on the cathedral steps is harsh and punitive – having 
first been dragged off to prison ‘ohne Rücksicht auf ihren Zustand’ (DKV: III, 189), she is 
then subjected to the ‘geschärfteste Prozeß’ (DKV: III, 191), resulting in the passing of the 
disproportionately severe verdict of death by immolation. When this is later commuted to a 
beheading on account of the viceroy’s intercession, the decision is made, we are told, ‘zur 
großen Entrüstung der Matronen und Jungfrauen von St. Jago’ (DKV: III, 191), though this

sense of outrage does not prevent them from planning to enjoy the spectacle of the execution:

Man vermietete in den Straßen, durch welche der Hinrichtungszug gehen sollte, die Fenster, man trug die Dächer der Häuser ab, und die frommen Töchter der Stadt luden ihre Freundinnen ein, um dem Schauspiele, das der göttlichen Rache gegeben würde, an ihrer schwesterlichen Seite beizuwohnen. (DKV: III, 191)

This ironic display of false piety – the execution is to be offered to divine vengeance, whilst the public suffering of the condemned offers potential enjoyment and the experience of sisterhood to the spectators – bears testimony to the hypocrisy and spitefulness of the town’s womenfolk, and offers a further telling indictment of social codes and public morals. To be sure, one must be ever mindful here of a lack of objectivity on the part of the narrator, who pulls no punches in giving vent to his indignation at the treatment of Josephe. That being said, the events of this opening sequence effectively speak for themselves, and there can be little serious doubting that Kleist intentionally crafts the story so as to highlight the horrors of a society riddled with the vices of injustice and inequality, and to expose the workings of a cruel and oppressive (religious) state machinery that thinks solely in terms of vengeance, punishment and public execration, and which is founded on the use of brutal forms of institutionalised violence.

The force of this criticism is accentuated by the contrastive split between the first and second sections of the story. For as mentioned earlier, one of the specific effects of the earthquake, amidst all the general devastation, is to destroy the seats of agency of both state and church institutions:

Sie [Josephe] hatte noch wenig Schritte getan, als ihr auch schon die Leiche des Erzbischofs begegnete, die man so eben zerschmettert aus dem Schutt der Kathedrale hervorgezogen hatte. Der Palast des Vizekönigs war versunken, der Gerichtshof, in welchem ihr das Urteil gesprochen worden war, stand in Flammen, und an die Stelle, wo sich ihr väterliches Haus befunden hatte, war ein See getreten, und kochte rötliche Dämpfe aus. (DKV: III, 199)

The immediate impact of this sudden collapse of state authority – a point given further stress by the popular proclamation that ‘es gäbe keinen Vizekönig von Chili mehr!’ (DKV:

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21 On the question of narrative structures and perspective, see particularly Wolfgang Kayser, ‘Kleist als Erzähler’, *GLL*, 3 (1954/55), 19-29, and Ellis, ‘Das Erdbeben in Chili’. 

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III, 205) – is to breed a spirit of chaos and disorder, rendered in a kaleidoscopic series of vivid tableaux (cf. DKV: III, 193). As the survivors flee the city and gather in scattered groupings in the surrounding countryside, however, an alternative utopian social vision presents itself:

Auf den Feldern, so weit das Auge reichte, sah man Menschen von allen Ständen durcheinander liegen, Fürsten und Bettler, Matronen und Bäuerinnen, Staatsbeamte und Tagelöhner, Klosterherren und Klosterfrauen: einander bemitleiden, sich wechselseitig Hülfe reichen, von dem, was sie zur Erhaltung ihres Lebens gerettet haben mochten, freudig mitteilen, als ob das allgemeine Unglück Alles, was ihm entronnen war, zu einer Familie gemacht hätte. (DKV: III, 207)

The socio-political implications seem transparent here – beyond the walls of corrupt civilisation, the citizens come together in a new form of community in which all structures of inequality are transcended by a spirit of fraternity and common humanity. Quite rightly, this has come to be recognised and accepted as being, at least in part, an allusion to Rousseau’s theory of the natural goodness of man, recalling the physical and moral topoi of the patriarchal idyll described in the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité (cf. OC: III, 167-71). Where critics have disagreed, however, is over the significance of the reference, and particularly the meaning to be adduced from the fact that the idyll fails to endure. For Xylander, for example, what we witness here is ‘die tragische Stimmung des jungen Kleist, der das Ideal Rousseaus, die Rückkehr der Menschen zu ihrem guten Ursprung […] sich nicht vollenden läßt’.22 Peter Horn, on the other hand, sees the patterning of events as signalling a more critical rejection of Rousseau’s ‘back to nature’ creed,23 whilst in recent times, there has been a growing tendency to view the apparent ‘Naturzustand’ as being cast in an ironic or parodic mode.24 On the face of things, one might well incline to agree with this position, as the demise of the idyll surely demonstrates the point – echoed by Herr C. in ‘Über das Marionettentheater’ – that there can be no return to an arcadian paradise.25 Yet to read into this an ironic or subversive critique of Rousseau is to miss the crucial fact (recalling our discussion in the previous chapter) that he himself never proposed any kind of ‘retour à la nature’ – the second of his two great principles, lest we forget, is that ‘la

23 Horn, ‘Anarchie und Mobherrschaft’, p. 84.
25 Cf. ‘Doch das Paradies ist verriegelt und der Cherub hinter uns; wir müssen die Reise um die Welt machen, und sehen, ob es vielleicht von hinten irgendwo wieder offen ist’ (DKV: III, 559).
nature humaine ne rétrograde pas’ (OC: I, 935). Once passed, the state of nature is, he insists, gone forever, and serves only as a yardstick against which to measure the ‘fall’ of modern man. For such is the force of perfectibility and the effect of human conditioning that acquired faculties can be neither erased nor renounced at will, and so even if the physical structures of a corrupt society were to be destroyed, the psychological, moral and ideological afflictions of the people – the ‘esprits inquiets’, ‘coeurs corrumpus’ and ‘désirs effrénés’ (OC: III, 207) – would nonetheless live on.\(^{26}\)

It is on this very premise that the climactic moment of peripeteia in the cathedral is structured. As so often noted, the utopia in the valley is coded as an instance of ‘Schein’ or ‘Täuschung’ – the marked lyric beauty, for instance, and the express description of the night as being ‘wie nur ein Dichter davon träumen mag’ (DKV: III, 201) both hint towards an illusory quality, as does the recurrent use of qualifying ‘als ob’ constructions.\(^ {27}\) There is, moreover, implicit evidence to suggest that corporate distinctions have not been entirely eradicated here: as Robert Brown points out, social difference is in fact underscored by the anomaly of seeing ‘Menschen von allen Ständen durcheinander liegen’ (DKV: III, 207),\(^ {28}\) whilst we may also sense a trace of patriarchal chivalry both in Don Fernando’s initial approach to Josephe and the manner of the ceremonial procession back into the city. The point portended by such signs is that the aesthetic transformation of society does not signal a complete rupture with the past, nor does it provide a barometer of genuine social and moral change\(^ {29}\) – anxieties which are amply borne out by the scenes that unfold when the citizens of Santiago return to the ‘Dominikanerdom’ for the thanksgiving service.

Initially, the mood in the cathedral appears to carry over from the valley and to thus augur well for reconciliation and reunion: as the narrator accounts, ‘Niemals schlug aus einem Christlichen Dom eine solche Flamme der Inbrunst gen Himmel, wie heute aus dem

\(^{26}\) Harry Steinhauer offers a more balanced reading here, recognising how Kleist critically engages Rousseau’s own sceptical view of the possibilities of a return to natural conditions (cf. Harry Steinhauer, ‘Heinrich von Kleists Das Erdbeben in Chili’, in Goethezeit: Studien zur Erkenntnis und Rezeption Goethes und seiner Zeitgenossen: Festschrift für Stuart Atk ins, ed. by Gerhart Hoffmeister (Bern: Francke, 1981), pp. 281-300). Where, however, Steinhauer suggests the potential for tragedy lies in the malevolence of certain individuals – ‘der bigotte Prälat, der “Bluthund” Pedrillo und der Mann, der sich für Jeronimos Vater ausgibt’ (p. 292) – I believe the point is rather to stress the more general effects of history and culture as an impediment to any backward-looking pre-social utopia.


\(^{29}\) We might also recall here Josephe’s unwittingly ironic reflection that ‘nicht jeder, der ein zertrümmertes Gebäude bewohnt hatte, unter ihm notwendig müße zerschmettert worden sein’ (DKV: III, 201).
Dominikanerdom zu St. Jago; und keine menschliche Brust gab wärmere Glut dazu her, als Jeronimos and Josephens!’ (DKV: III, 213). When the sermon begins, however, and the canon revives the issue of Jeronimo and Josephe’s misalliance both as a contravention of social morality and causal trigger for the earthquake, the intense emotional charge of this religious fervour – which the text so carefully sets up through aesthetic and aural effects – is polarised into a sudden release of destructive violence. The dramatic pitch of the final scenes hinges on this reversal, and for this reason I cannot agree with those critics (like Kittler and Pan) who play down the role of the Chorherr, or those (like Wolff) who see in the lynchings nothing more than anarchic mob brutality. For the abruptness of the shift in atmosphere carries the point that the violence is a direct product of the manipulative demagoguery of the Chorherr, who, tapping the ingrained cultural and religious conditioning of the people, succeeds in swiftly re-establishing the old social order. The terror wrought by the mob is thus not so much instinctive as induced, and the desire to seek out and punish Jeronimo and Josephe is, as the narrative makes clear, impelled by the authority of the same bigoted religious codes which earlier determined the immorality of their conduct and demanded sacrificial justice (cf. DKV: III, 215; 217). Even the ‘Fürst der satanischen Rotte’ (DKV: III, 221) Pedrillo, seen by many as an emblem of demonic evil, is driven by more than just an irrational and inhumane savagery, and it ought to be noted that the ‘Mordlust’ which is left unsated by the clubbing of Josephe is, in fact, stilled once he believes her bastard child also murdered. Viewed from this angle, then, we can see how the apparent ‘nackte Gewalt’ of the crowd marks not a point of contrast to the state-sanctioned violence of pre-quake Santiago, but rather a continuation and extension – in popular form – of the same ritualised mechanisms of scapegoating and vengeance.

It is at this juncture, I suggest, that the deeper significance of Kleist’s dialogue with Rousseau really comes to the fore. On the one hand, as we have seen, the canon’s sermon evidently stands as a dark and sinister variant of the intentional fallacy excoriated in the Lettre à Voltaire. Yet beyond offering a general critique of teleological modes of thought, Kleist appears only marginally concerned with the strictly metaphysical aspects of the theodicy problem – unlike Rousseau, for example, he exhibits little interest in affording purchase to the idea of a benevolent deity, and in fact one might question whether there is

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30 For an excellent account of these effects see Brown, The Ambiguity of Art, pp. 157-58.
not an undertone of irony in the manner in which he plays out the theological implications of providence and chance through the blinkered perspectives of his characters and narrator. Of far greater interest and import is the striking parallel we observe here to the twofold movement that characterises the fuller compass of Rousseau’s discourse, as Kleist likewise links the questions of providence and theodicy into a broader inquiry – anchored and reflected by the three-part structure of the narrative – into the social origins of evil. Within this schema, the apparent utopia of the valley emerges not as a hopeless chimera but rather (much like the ‘golden age’ of the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité) as a heuristic counterpoint to social reality – one which offers a fleeting and tantalising glimpse of the true human potential for co-operation and brotherhood.32 This, in turn, invites a new angle of vision on the underlying moral aspect of the text, for where many critics have, quite understandably, inferred a wholly pessimistic (if not nihilistic) outlook from the collapse of the idyll and the climactic scenes of violence, the Rousseauian paradigm tempers this somewhat by holding out the possibility, however tentative, of genuine change and progress – a hope which is, I feel, subtly conveyed by Kleist through the subjunctive mode of the final line. The philosophical premise of the narrative thus appears to lie in the juxtaposition between the ideals of natural goodness and perfectibility on the one hand, and the violence of the situational context in Santiago on the other; and it is from within these (Rousseauian) parameters that a broader perspective opens up in the final scenes on the ethics and dynamics of social change. Marking this through the sudden, brutal polarisation triggered by the canon’s ‘priesterliche[.] Beredsamkeit’ (DKV: III, 215), the story draws attention to a range of socio-psychological tensions – between human agency and cultural conditioning, violentia and potestas, and, more broadly speaking, liberal ideals and the reality of an ‘unmündig’ populace – which, when taken together, offer a particularly (and typically) graphic reflection on how genuine social change, even where possible and desirable, cannot be effected by an impulsive ‘Umsturz’ of physical structures that leaves ingrained moral values intact.

32 Marcel Krings makes a similar point in his essay on Kleist and Rousseau, suggesting that the middle-section of the narrative functions as a ‘regulative Gegenentwurf zur Zivilisation’, though he, like Wolff, sees in the final scenes only a ‘mordlustige Anarchie’ which ‘zeigt das Ende der Hoffnung auf einen Rechtstaat’ and ‘führt die Notwendigkeit von Gesetzen vor Augen’ (cf. Marcel Krings, ‘Naturunschuld und Rechtsgesellschaft: Kleists romantische Rousseau Modifikationen’, Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik, 37 (2005), 13-27 (p. 26)).
3.3 ‘Der Umsturz aller Verhältnisse’: Allegories of Revolution?

Having traced the playing out of these issues from an anthropological perspective in connection with Rousseau’s theories on the social origins of violence, we can now begin to look at how these insights might be extended and applied to situate the patterns of the narrative in the political context of revolutionary events and currents. The structures of the text invite an allegorical reading as a reflection of Kleist’s ‘Geschichtspessimismus’: mirroring the course of the Revolution, the sudden overthrow of the existing order in Santiago offers the promise of a new ‘Naturgesellschaft’ founded on the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity only to then play out in fanatical mob violence and the restoration of the old regime. This sense of parallel is, moreover, supported by the common trope of likening the Revolution to some elemental force of nature, whether the tempestuous storm, volcanic eruption, immeasurable flood or universal earthquake. Belonging to the aesthetic discourse of the sublime that framed modes of revolutionary thought and philosophical response, such metaphors of catastrophe register both an awesome mix of marvel and horror, admiration and dread, on the one hand, and, on the other, a terrifying fear of the unknown and inscrutable that dislocates traditional fields of representation and comprehension. Viewed in this way, we can appreciate how the earthquake of Kleist’s tale – as an event that breaks down conventional patterns of interpretation – sustains the linking of two quite distinct discursive registers, serving not only as a vehicle for an inquiry into issues of theodicy arising from the Lisbon disaster, but also as a dramatic analogy for the Revolution.

Once alert to this trace, the reader can detect further indicators of reference throughout. Looking again at the descriptions of the devastation wrought by the earthquake, for example, we can see how, in a symbolic echo of 1789, the structures and sites of clerical (church, convent), monarchical (viceroy’s palace) and patriarchal (Josephe’s father’s house) for a long time, this discursive link was largely underplayed or ignored. There are now, however, a number of valuable studies that look in detail at the extent to which the tale echoes and reflects aspects of the Revolution – cf. Helmut J. Schneider, ‘Der Zusammensturz des Allgemeinen’, in Positionen der Literaturwissenschaft (see Altenhofer, ‘Der erschütterte Sinn’), pp. 110-29, Hans H. Hiebel, ‘Reflexe der Französischen Revolution in Heinrich von Kleists Erzählungen’, Wirkendes Wort, 39 (2) (1989), 163-80, and Helmut Koopmann, ‘Das Nachbeben der Revolution: Heinrich von Kleist, Das Erdbeben in Chili’, in Deutsche Romantik und Französische Revolution, ed. by Gerard Koziielek (Wroclaw: Wydawn, 1990), pp. 85-108.

authority fall victim to a sudden outburst of violence (cf. DKV: III, 199), whilst the
destruction of the prison evokes the memory of that most iconic of revolutionary events –
the storming of the Bastille. Incidental details provide yet further clues, whether it be the
explicit defiance of monarchical orders (cf. DKV: III, 205), the instance of popular justice
that sees an innocent man summarily strung up on suspicion of looting (cf. DKV: III, 205),
or the reference to heroic displays of ‘Römergröße’ that recalls the cult of Roman antiquity
in the Revolution (DKV: III, 207); whilst certain other phrasings also carry a significant
revolutionary ring, the most obvious being the ‘Umsturz aller Verhältnisse’ (DKV: III, 209),
though Josephe’s reflections on ‘die Summe des allgemeinen Wohlseins’ (DKV: III, 207-9)
might also be seen as an indirect allusion to the ideological and moral tensions between
progressive ideals and violent methods. In the final episode in the church, moreover, we
find a series of referential elements that invite parallels to the state-sanctioned butchery of
the Terror, from the fierce set-piece oratory of the Chorherr and the ironic (and otherwise
anachronistic) echo of Jacobin vocabulary in the repeated cries of ‘Bürger’, to the plebeian
spirit embodied in Pedrillo, a humble cobbler armed with a club, and Josephe’s telling
censure of the mob as a streak of ‘blutdürstenden Tiger’ (DKV: III, 219) – a commonly-
used metaphor for the unrestrained, and at times savage, masses of the Revolution. Even
the shocking murder of young Juan, heralded by Pedrillo’s bloodcurdling ‘schickt ihr den
Bastard zur Hölle nach!’ (DKV: III, 219), might be seen to reflect aspects of revolutionary
psychology, not only in terms of the sacrifice of the other as a social mechanism, but also in
relation to the associative extension of violence, particularly towards family members – one
need only think, perhaps, of the famous case of Malesherbes whose death sentence of 1794
saw not only himself but also his daughter, his granddaughter, his granddaughter’s husband
and his sister (along with his two secretaries) submitted to the guillotine. Taken together,
these various indicators provide ample evidence to suggest that Kleist is here, quite
intentionally, quoting a version of revolutionary events.

Before proceeding any further with this line of inquiry, it ought to be acknowledged
that the paradigm does, inevitably, have its limitations, many of which are inherent in the
attempt to directly align a literary text against specific historical structures. With regard to
the final scenes, for instance, a number of critics have challenged the claim to a parallel
with the Terror on the grounds that it is a representative of the old order who incites the
mob, and that neither this, nor the obvious religious impulse fits with the image of radical
sanscullotism – a point to which I shall return in due course. Others have taken issue more generally with the revolution-as-earthquake metaphor, questioning the validity of any attempt to connect a consciously-willed socio-political upheaval with the evidently chance happenings of a natural disaster. Yet whilst such reservations are by no means without warrant, they are, perhaps, somewhat insensitive to the more complex ways in which texts of the period refer to, and engage with, revolutionary politics – not least as a result of strict censorship laws. In this regard, Helmut Koopmann is, I feel, on the right lines when he suggests that Das Erdbeben be read as a form of ‘allegorisches Erzählen’ which determines that ‘nicht direkte Gegenbilder der Wirklichkeit in der Literatur zu finden sind’ and, vice versa, that ‘die Literatur nicht direkt und unverändert die Wirklichkeit projektiert’. Kleist’s story certainly cannot be read as a mimetic depiction that exactly mirrors historical realities, yet nor is this to be expected. It is rather the case that the text adopts a narrative strategy of metaphor, allegory and allusion through which a set of themes and issues produced by one historical constellation becomes interpretable in another; and in this way Kleist is able to abstract from and explore certain revolutionary mechanisms without issuing a grand historical theory of causality. Within this perspective, one is inclined to see the earthquake metaphor not as a politically-loaded referent that in some way divests the Revolution of legitimacy, but rather and simply as a fictional device that maps the traumatic condition of a sudden ‘Umbruch’, and thereby opens up the field for a critical inquiry into the dynamic processes that follow in the wake of such radical social change.

3.4 ‘Auf den Feldern, so weit das Auge reichte …’: Festival Aesthetics and the Vision of Nature

Working on this premise, I should like to look here at two further important parallels which have previously gone unmentioned, and which together provide a useful gloss both to Kleist’s treatment of revolutionary themes in the text and to his engagement with Rousseau. The first relates to the manner in which the topographical shifts carried by the narrative movement are linked with a series of public spectacles or celebrations – the Corpus Christi procession, Josephe’s planned execution, the communal gathering beyond the city walls,

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and the thanksgiving service in the Dominican church. Located in the specific context of revolutionary culture, these scenarios acquire an acute significance, particularly the middle sequence in the valley. For where critics have rightly noted how the natural idyll stands as an allegorical-textual representation of the ideals of liberté, égalité and fraternité, they have been less alert to the ways in which the scene also replicates the principal performative modality for staging and dramatising the new identity of the patrie – the great revolutionary festival.

As we know from Mona Ozouf’s landmark study *La fête révolutionnaire, 1789-1799*, these festivals were fundamentally important moments in the history of the Revolution. At least from the moment of the epoch-making ‘Fête de la Fédération’, begun in Paris on 14 July 1790, they came to perform a vital ideological function as a means of re-defining relations between individual, community and nation, offering the opportunity for the ritual reenactment of a new public spirit of communion and brotherhood transcending all lines of social difference. As an instrument for patriotic (national) education, they were, moreover, considered a necessary aesthetic complement to the teachings of Enlightenment philosophy, a way of visually transmitting the ideals and ideology of the Revolution so as to foment an emotional and psychological connection both between individual citizens, and between the collective citizenry and the patrie. Thus as Ozouf writes, ‘L’élaboration de la fête, lieu où se nouent le désir et le savoir, où l’éducation des masses se plie à la jouissance, marie la politique à la psychologie, l’esthétique à la morale, la propagande à la religion’. In such a way, the institution of the festival became ‘l’indispensable complément du système de législation’.

The symbolic charge of the festival stemmed from its marking of a temporal shift – its manifestation of a sense of re-birth and ‘régénération’, and its signalling of a clean break with the institutional past. This, in turn, was underlined and underpinned by a deliberate reconfiguration of spatial arrangements, as it was made an essential principle that all festivals should take place in vast open spaces, on fields and squares with no visible obstructions or boundaries. Horizontality and openness thus became identifiable with freedom and equality, whilst verticality and closedness were associated with oppression and the hierarchical distinctions of the old regime. As Ozouf notes, these natural amphitheatres

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40 Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire*, p. 16.
had, moreover, the advantage of being an ‘espace sans mémoire’: where traditional festive sites bore the indelible mark of history, the new settings were unspoiled, providing a spatial realm that carried no trace of tyranny, fanaticism and injustice. Recasting time and space in this way, the revolutionary festival was thus able to symbolise entry into a new world of democracy and oneness, countering the divisions articulated by traditional spectacles with a fresh and powerful dramaturgy of unity.

That Kleist would have been familiar with this tradition is in no doubt, and it is interesting to consider how the iconic vision of the festival reflects in his structuring of the valley scene in Das Erdbeben. The idea of ‘un peuple qui part d’un bon pas’, for instance—cited by Ozouf as ‘la première image de la fête, la première condition pour que le témoin d’une fête sache qu’elle a bien eu lieu’—is configured both literally by the movement of the survivors from city to surrounding country, and metaphorically by the apparent break with traditional power structures and the communal (re)integration of Jeronimo and Josephe, whilst the coupling of these aspects conveys the sense—albeit somewhat tenuously given Donna Elisabeth’s misgivings—that the valley is an ‘espace sans mémoire’. By locating the scene in a ‘weites […] Tal’ (DKV: III, 197), Kleist plays further on the spatial iconography of the festival by opening up a horizontal vista that connotes liberty, equality and fraternity: in the passage beginning ‘Auf den Feldern, so weit das Auge reichte […]’ and ending ‘[…] als ob das allgemeine Unglück Alles, was ihm entronnen war, zu einer Familie gemacht hätte’ (DKV: III, 207) we find a striking, explicit reference to the link between unimpeded vision and a spirit of union that was the centrepiece of festival ideology, as well as an allusion to the primary experience of the ‘fête’ as a reunion of a large human family within a particular consecrated space. Again, further details support and sustain the analogy: Josephe’s breastfeeding of Juan, for example, bizarrely explained away in the narrative via reference to Donna Elvire’s injured feet, might be seen in connection with the ‘moral politics of the bosom’ that saw the bare breast claimed by the Revolution— and festival organisers—as a potent symbol of the new nurturing and free Republic, whilst the lyric accent on the natural beauty of the locale corresponds to the emphasis given in festival itineraries on the need to stress the spectacle of nature that lay behind the new

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41 Ozouf, La fête révolutionnaire, p. 153.
42 Ozouf, La fête révolutionnaire, p. 24.
social order – a point given greater weight by the description of the scene as being ‘wie nur ein Dichter davon träumen mag’ (DKV: III, 201). As Jeronimo, Josephe and Philipp later settle under the branches of a splendid ‘Granatapfelbaum’, one is, moreover, tempted to recall the standard festival imagery of the liberty tree, even if, in opting for the specific symbolism of the pomegranate, Kleist invests the sign with a paradoxical and foreboding double aspect, borne of associations with, on the one hand, fertility, fruitfulness and re-birth (made relevant in a revolutionary context by Louis Lafitte’s allegorical representation of Fructidor), and, on the other, Persephone and the underworld.45

This sense of linkage to festival aesthetics is redoubled when bracketed with an ongoing dialogic relation with Rousseau. For inasmuch as the civic festival boasted a political and cultural heritage dating back to the classical age of Greece and Rome, it was Rousseau, more than any other, who injected the tradition with new life and salience in an eighteenth-century European context. The political rationale for this is provided not so much in Du contrat social, but rather in the later constitutional programmes he drafted for Corsica (Projet de constitution pour la Corse) and Poland (Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne) respectively. In both works, Rousseau anchors the vital role of public spectacle within the framework of a republican ideal of liberty, urging the reforming legislators of the two nations to look back to the ancient assemblies of Sparta and Rome and to found an official political aesthetic that encourages patriotic fraternity by articulating the democracy of the polis and the political constitution of the people as a citizenry.

In thus linking aesthetics and education, Rousseau also builds on the moral arguments of his earlier writings, particularly the Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles. Here, in responding to d’Alembert’s calls for the establishment of a ‘théâtre de comédie’ in Geneva, he delivers a searing critique of the modern theatre – one which has seen the text commonly read as little more than a continuation of the reaction against Enlightenment and civilisation initiated by the Discours sur les sciences et les arts. As David Marshall has suggested, however, one might, in fact, turn this perspective on its head and see in Rousseau’s early discourses the ‘beginning of a critique of theatricality: a critical investigation into the role of spectacle and theatrical relations in European culture’.46

Looking to the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité, for example, we see how the issue of

amour-propre and its effect on social relations is cast as an aesthetic problem: in the true state of nature, ‘chaque homme en particulier se regardant lui-même comme le seul Spectateur qui l’observe’ (OC: III, 219) and so ‘l’Amour-propre n’existe pas’ (OC: III, 219), whereas once individuals begin to assemble in groups they become conscious of others as both observers and objects of observation, and so public esteem acquires value, marking the first step on the march to inequality and hypocrisy. In the Lettre à d’Alembert, Rousseau illustrates and extends this argument from the reverse direction, condemning modern theatre as a corrupt form of entertainment that, in promoting imitation and forcing a distinction between actor and spectator, reproduces the deceptions and divisions of the feudal order, and which is, as such, incompatible with virtuous civic society. To drive home the point, he juxtaposes this image with that of an alternative festive ideal:

Mais n’adoptons point ces Spectacles exclusifs qui renferment tristement un petit nombre de gens dans un antre obscur; qui les tiennent craintifs et immobiles dans le silence et l’inaction; qui n’offrent aux yeux que cloisons, que pointes de fer, que soldats, qu’affligantes images de la servitude et de l’inégalité. Non, Peuples heureux, ce ne sont pas là vos fêtes! C’est en plein air, c’est sous le ciel qu’il faut vous rassembler et vous livrer au doux sentiment de vôtre bonheur. [...] Plantez au milieu d’une place un piquet couronné de fleurs, rassemblez-y le peuple, et vous aurez une fête. Faites mieux encore: donnez les Spectateurs en Spectacle; rendez-les acteurs eux-mêmes; faites que chacun se voye et s’aime dans les autres, afin que tous en soient mieux unis. (OC, V, 114-15)

For Rousseau, the contrast between theatre and festival is an aesthetic marker of the opposition between human egoism and republican sociability – where the former is mere entertainment that inspires frivolity, vanity and moral collapse, the latter is an educational institution, capable of contributing ‘à former dans les mêmes hommes des amis, des citoyens, des soldats, et par consequent tout ce qui convient le mieux à un peuple libre’ (OC: V, 96). Of all and for all, the festival breaks down the barrier between actor and spectator and so transcends the artifice of alienation and representation that is – at least in Rousseau’s eyes – the defining character of modern theatre. In so doing, it restores man to a state of moral openness that, on the one hand, simulates a return to the lost utopia of the patriarchal ‘golden age’, but which also simultaneously provides a model for the modern republic as a symbolic embodiment of a unified general will. It is in this specific dual context that the motif of the festival thus emerges, in the words of Starobinski, as ‘une des images-clés de
l’oeuvre de Rousseau’ and ‘une des images les plus inspiratrices’, marking as it does the critical nexus between transparency and virtue that not only structured his own political theories, but which also provided the architecture for revolutionary aesthetics and ideology.

In order to gloss this issue (and its immediate relevance to Das Erdbeben), we might do well to consider Rousseau’s most famous rehearsal of the festival ideal – the exultant wine harvest described by Saint-Preux in La Nouvelle Héloïse (cf. OC: II, 602-11). Again, what is impressed here, above all else, is a sense of ‘transparence’ – Saint-Preux marvels at how ‘[t]out vit dans la plus grande familiarité; tout le monde est égal, et personne ne s’oublie’ (OC: II, 607). The entire community, peasants and nobles alike, partake freely, equally and fraternally, and perfect unity reigns. In this respect, the festival at Clarens expresses a nostalgia for lost innocence and simplicity, and critics have often noted how this tableau served as one of the primary references for the cult of sensibility and nature-worship that grew up in Rousseau’s shadow. What is seldom commented on, however, is the fact that in linking hand-in-hand the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity, the wine harvest was also seen as something of a blueprint for the creation of a virtuous republic, and that it was from this image, even more than those in the relatively (but by no means as) popular Lettre à d’Alembert and Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne, that the revolutionaries looked to take inspiration for their own festivals. Thus it was that neo-classical forms and patriotic military displays became increasingly conjoined with a decidedly pastoral character and idiom: at the ‘Fête de l’Être suprême’ (1794), for example, the iconography was strikingly reminiscent of the scene at Clarens, with Jacques-Louis David’s script emphasising not only nature and landscape (the centrepiece at the Champ-de-Mars was a huge, artificial mountain) but also, specifically, fecundity and harvest. In his speech of 18 Floréal (7 May 1794) announcing the creed, moreover, Robespierre gave clear indication of the extent to which the festival aesthetics of Sparta and Rome have been thoroughly filtered through Rousseau’s epistemology of sentiment and transparency, declaring:

Le véritable prêtre de l’Être suprême, c’est la Nature; son temple, l’univers; son culte, la vertu; ses fêtes, la joie d’un grand peuple rassemblé sous ses yeux pour resserrer les doux noeuds de la fraternité universelle, et pour lui présenter l’hommage des cœurs sensibles et purs. (OMR: X, 457)

48 Cf. Ozouf, La fête révolutionnaire, pp. 115-17.
What this means for our interpretation of the valley scene in *Das Erdbeben* is that two possible frames of reading effectively merge. On the one hand, as has been noted, the description of the idyll carries a stark echo of the corresponding sequence in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, both by dint of physical imagery and symbolic connotations of equality and fraternity, friendship and family, harmony and transparency. If we consider the way Kleist references Rousseau’s text elsewhere in the story, and how he quotes the harvest scene in his social critique of post-revolutionary Paris (cf. DKV: IV, 237-38), a direct citation seems all the more likely. Yet the overlap between Rousseau’s aesthetics and those of the revolutionary festival means that these same signs might, in fact, just as well be seen in this latter context, and so it becomes virtually impossible, should one wish to do so, to define and delimit exact lines of reference within the narrative. In either case, we ought again to take note of the limitations that attend the analogy, notably the fact that in Kleist’s scene the coming together is entirely and genuinely spontaneous – this in contrast to both the harvest at Clarens, which is policed by the benevolent overseer of the estate, Baron de Wolmar, and the carefully stage-managed festivals of the revolution. At the same time, we must also take account of the all-important point that the idyll ultimately proves illusory. Again, as with the apparent reference to Rousseau’s theory of the natural goodness of man, one might be inclined to read this as parody or ironic subversion on Kleist’s part – a critique of the festival myth as unreal utopia. Once more, however, such a conclusion is rather too thin in that it overlooks the extent to which this element of illusion is, in fact, inscribed within the referential motif itself. In *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, for example, the embracing spirit of fraternity and equality is, as the denouement shows, but an outward façade, a moment of escape from the realities of a centralised system of authority founded on master-slave relations. As Starobinski puts it in his classic account:

Clarens n’a pas rétabli le règne de l’innocence et n’a pas instauré celui de l’égalité. Seuls, au jour de la fête, l’image de l’innocence et le sentiment de l’égalité viennent enchanter les âmes sensibles.\(^50\)

These lines, which might be turned almost word-for-word to the scene in *Das Erdbeben*, could just as readily be applied to the revolutionary festival, which, as Ozouf demonstrates,

likewise operated as a utopian moment out of time, dramatically rendering a sense of liberty, equality and fraternity that was never to be enacted as social reality, and which came to stand in ever sharper contrast to the escalating violence. The usefulness of establishing this point becomes particularly clear if we consider how it manifests in the broader reception of the festival in the German literary context. For as Emanuel Peter has shown, the motif is well-grounded in the works of early Romanticism, and tracing this, he finds that it regularly emerges as a form of ‘literarische Utopie, indem es zum Gegenbild der schlechten (Revolutions-) Wirklichkeit in dem Masse wird, wie diese (in den Augen der Frühromantiker) ihre eigenen Ideale verrät’. At the same time, Peter also notes how, troped as a reconciliation with nature, the image of the festival is also commonly used to project a parallel representation of Rousseau, by Hölderlin, for example, in Hyperion, and Novalis in Die Christenheit oder Europa. In Das Erdbeben, Kleist connects, I suggest, to this tradition, and that he should do so follows logically from the associations he makes in the Paris letters of 1801. Exploiting the full ideological status of the festival motif as an imaginative node for ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity, he employs it as a utopian symbol for both the Revolution in its initial spirit and Rousseau’s philosophical ideals – the two being, to his mind, essentially one and the same. In the final scenes, this image is not only juxtaposed with the brutal realities of violence but also subverted through an ironic reversal of festival iconography – where the survivors earlier set out from city to country, they now hurry back ‘in Strömen’ (DKV: III, 209), returning to the enclosed spaces of traditional worship that carry the memory of both the old theocratic order and the events of the preceding days, as exemplified by the ‘Riß’ (DKV: III, 215) in the wall that becomes a vital prop for the canon’s incendiary invocation of divine justice. In this way, Kleist uses the contrast of aesthetic experience in the valley and the church – and particularly the opposition between illusion (‘Schein’) and reality – to both carry and reinforce a critical comment on the course of the Revolution as a betrayal of original principles.

3.5 ‘Steinigt sie! Steinigt sie!’: Fanaticism, Terror and Civil Religion

The discussion in the previous section has marked a short excursus away from our central focus here on the theme of violence. Yet in delineating the links to festival aesthetics, we have been able to open up new insights with regard to both the text’s presentation of the historical experience of the Revolution as failure and to Kleist’s familiarity with the specific manifestations of revolutionary culture, and it is these aspects which provide a context for the second parallel that I believe warrants attention, and which relates back to the overmastering issue of religion and religious fanaticism. At root, the Revolution was, of course, anti-clerical, and in the early years in particular religion came to be commonly seen as an ally to counter-revolution. With this in mind (and notwithstanding what was said earlier about the more abstract political framing of the novella), it seems perhaps only to be expected that commentators should express reservations about attempts to link the violence of the final scenes in *Das Erdbeben* with the political terror of the Jacobins. An alternative response presents itself, however, if we consider how, despite its disengagement from the old Catholic faith, the Revolution nonetheless retained a strong element of religious reference. Ozouf, for example, makes this a central plank of her argument, interpreting the revolutionary festival as part of a broader ‘transfert de sacralité’—a vast cultural overhaul intended to legitimate and sanctify commitment to the new regime in terms of a new secular religion. This is not, moreover, an exclusively ‘modern’ perspective: Émile Durkheim, for example, remarks that ‘cette aptitude de la société à s’ériger en dieu ou à créer des dieux ne fut nulle part plus visible que pendant les premières années de la Révolution’, whilst Alexis de Tocqueville also refers to the Revolution as ‘une sorte de fureur à l’Église’. Going back further still, we can, in fact trace this all the way into the context of contemporary German response – to Schleiermacher, for instance, who in his treatise *Über die Religion* outlines the utopia, drawing on the French experience, of a republican ‘Stadt Gottes’, and to Novalis, who likewise calls for the establishment of a new religion, modelled on Robespierre’s ‘Culte de l’Être suprême’, that might regenerate society and provide a central core for republican life.

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The reference to the Cult of the Supreme Being is of particular significance here, for it was at this point that the project of instituting a new secular religion reached its apogee. Like his fellow Jacobins, Robespierre was, broadly speaking, anti-clerical, in that he was a fierce critic of the avarice and hypocrisy of the Catholic Church. At the same time, however, he was deeply suspicious of atheism and felt the need for some kind of religious faith as a foundation stone for public morality, and to this end he envisaged the cult as a means of investing the citizenry with a ‘sentiment religieux qu'imprime dans les âmes l'idée d'une sanction donnée aux préceptes de la morale par une puissance supérieure à l'homme’ (OMR: X, 453). What makes this doubly relevant for our present concern is the fact that the inauguration of the new creed was directly associated with a marked acceleration of the Terror – just two days after the great festival, Robespierre passed, together with Couthon, the infamous Prairial Law that suspended defendants’ rights and initiated a period of unprecedented bloodshed. At first sight, the link between the two elements strikes as a particularly startling and incongruous paradox. The rod connecting them – at least in Robespierre’s mind – can, however, be divined from his famous statement of 17 Pluviose:

Si le ressort du gouvernement populaire dans la paix est la vertu, le ressort du gouvernement populaire en révolution est à la fois la vertu et la terreur: la vertu, sans laquelle la terreur est funeste; la terreur, sans laquelle la vertu est impuissante. La terreur n’est autre chose que la justice prompte, sévère, inflexible; elle est donc une émanation de la vertu; elle est moins un principe particulier, qu’une conséquence du principe général de la démocratie, appliqué aux plus pressans besoins de la patrie. (OMR: X, 357)

Where Robespierre speaks of virtue in this context, he does so in the Rousseauian sense of the citizen’s devotion to the common good – in the *Discours sur l’économie politique*, Rousseau writes:

Voulez-vous que la volonté générale soit accomplie? faites que toutes les volontés particuliers s’y rapportent; et comme la vertu n’est que cette conformité de la volonté particulière à la générale, pour dire la même chose en un mot, faites regner la vertu. (OC: III, 252)

In effect, what he means is patriotism, and so the Cult of the Supreme Being – as the culmination of Robespierre’s project to compel loyalty to the Republic – becomes, in 1794, the ideological bedrock of political virtue and, by extension, the formal rationale for terror.
Clearly, the matter is political before it is religious; Robespierre evaluates religion first and foremost in civic terms as a bonding agent and basis for law, order and justice. That said, we can see how, as it entered its most active and acute phase, the Terror was in fact fired by a ‘sentiment religieux’, albeit it one directed towards secular purposes.

By invoking this aspect of the revolutionary process, I do not mean to claim that Kleist writes the final scenes in the church as an exact, or even direct, reference to the Supreme Being. The fact that the religious impulse comes from the old Catholic order, for example, would hardly fit here, while the political referentiality of the tale is at any rate, as we have seen, more abstractly coded than this kind of reading would suggest. The object rather is simply to show how the element of religious fanaticism ought not, in itself, to prevent us from regarding the episode as a representative parallel to the excess of the Terror. By the same token, one might choose to consider this the other way around, so to speak, on the basis that terror as a political measure was by no means the exclusive preserve of radical Jacobinism but was also part of the counter-revolutionary movement – there were, for example, counter-revolutionary terror campaigns in the South East as early as 1791, whilst the reaction of 1794 was itself accompanied by an element of terror that saw Robespierre and twenty-one others executed without trial on 10 Thermidor. Placed in the fuller context of these connections between religion, terror, revolution and counter-revolution, the denouement of *Das Erdbeben* thus seems to evince two possible lines of interpretation: either Jeronimo and Josephe, and with them the idyll of liberty, equality and fraternity, fall victim to an undisciplined revolutionary ‘Pöbel’ (as is suggested by the quite specific echoes of the Terror), or else they succumb to the violent forces of reaction (as would fit more obviously with the three-part narrative structure). Or perhaps – and this is the view I would favour – both meanings are again suggested at once; maybe the text conveys a double perspective that allows for a wider-ranging critique of revolutionary violence targeting both the corruption and violence of the old order and the political ‘Unmündigkeit’ of the masses that, beginning with the massacres of 1792-4, steered the Revolution towards its closure, and ultimate perversion, under Napoleon?56 Read in this way, the final scenes in the church would appear to reflect above all on the tension Kleist felt between the need for social and political reform and the horror and bloodshed of

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56 Both Kittler (‘Ein Erdbeben in Chili und Preußen’, pp. 33-34) and Hiebel (‘Reflexe der Französischen Revolution’, pp. 170-71) consider how the scenes in the church might be seen to reflect the contemporary paradigm shift between traditional military methods and Napoleon’s method of total war.
popular revolution, as well as on the conflict between the forces of revolution and counter-
revolution that had been a prime motor for the spiralling of violence since the initial
‘Umsturz aller Verhältnisse’ in 1789.

In the space remaining here, however, I would like to explore more fully the issue
of ‘civil religion’, as this leads directly back towards Rousseau. For the Cult of the
Supreme Being was not only couched in Rousseauian terms, it was also an attempt by
Robespierre to put into practice an essential part of his concept of political virtue. The
template is provided by the penultimate chapter of Book 4 of *Du contrat social*, titled ‘De
la religion civile’, where Rousseau offers a radical critique of traditional religion and fixes
the articles of a patriotic-civic profession of faith. Inevitably, the passage prompted much
fury and scandal amongst both Catholics and Calvinists alike – as Robert Derathé puts it in
his notes in the Pléaide edition, ‘aucun chapitre de *Contrat social* n’a suscité autant de
polémiques et de protestations au XVIIIe siècle que celui sur la religion civile’ (OC: III,
1499), and it was largely on the basis of the views expressed here that the treatise was
banned in Geneva. In modern times, the chapter is hardly less controversial, and is often
cited by those hostile to Rousseau as proof of his illiberalism and totalitarian credentials.

To appreciate the premises of the chapter, we must begin by considering Rousseau’s
broader views on fanaticism. At first blush, he appears to share the commonplace
Enlightenment view of the dangers and cruelties associated therewith: in *Émile*, for
example, he writes that ‘le fanatisme ose la contrefaire et dicter le crime en son nom’ (OC:
IV, 601), whilst the first draft of *Du contrat social* (the so-called ‘Geneva Manuscript’)
carries the line ‘La terre entière regorgeroit de sang et le genre humain périrait bientôt si la
Philosophie et les lois ne retenoient les fureurs du fanatisme’ (OC: III, 285). On closer
inspection, however, we find a degree of ambivalence on the issue, particularly as set over
and against atheism and irreligion. In an important footnote to the ‘Profession du foi’ in
*Émile*, for instance, Rousseau reflects that though fanaticism is ‘sanguinaire et cruel’ it is
also ‘une passion grande et forte qui élève le cœur de l’homme […] et qu’il ne faut que
mieux diriger pour en tirer les plus sublimes vertus’ (OC: IV, 632-33). Atheism, on the
other hand, only serves to concentrate ‘toutes les passions dans la bassesse de l’intérêt
particulier’ and so quietly saps ‘les vrais fondemens de toute société’ (OC: IV, 632). Thus
he goes on in a subsequent paragraph to suggest that ‘[a]insi le fanatisme, quoique plus
funeste dans ses effets immédiats que ce qu’on appelle aujourd’hui l’esprit philosophique,
l’est beaucoup moins dans ses conséquences’ (OC: IV, 632-33).
The point made here – and the one Robespierre follows to the letter – is that despite the obvious dangers of fanaticism, a society is better founded on religion than secular reason. What underlies this is essentially the same conviction that prompts his call for the establishment of festivals, namely that a state requires greater social cohesion than can be provided by law alone, and that the legislator must thus find additional ways of binding the citizens to the patrie. That religion might be a potential vehicle for this is a notion that Rousseau had clearly held for some time prior to the writing of Émile and Du contrat social – in the Lettre à Voltaire, for instance, he alludes to the idea that there should be a civil profession of faith consisting of ‘les maximes sociales que chacun seroit tenu d’admettre’ (OC: IV, 1073), and closes by inviting Voltaire to turn away from the subtleties of metaphysics and to write the code for this. Towards the end of Du contrat social, Rousseau takes up the challenge himself, sketching a model of how the religious zeal that elevates the heart and inspires selfless devotion might be reoriented so as to produce a form of ‘civic fanaticism’ conducing to political virtue.

The chapter opens with a pseudo-historical reconstruction of the separation of political and theological identities, and a discussion of how, to Rousseau’s mind, this ‘double puissance’ has given rise to a ‘perpétuel conflit de jurisdiction qui a rendu toute bonne politie impossible dans les États chrétiens’ (OC: III, 462). Only Hobbes, Rousseau suggests, has recognised the fatal consequence of this division of authority and the potential remedy in the proposal to ‘réunir les deux têtes de l’aigle, et de tout ramener à l’unité politique’ (OC: III, 463). Yet where he supposes that Christianity might be subordinated to secular authority, Rousseau refutes the suggestion on the grounds of its ‘esprit dominateur’ that ensures that ‘l’intérêt du Prêtre seroit toujours plus fort que celui de l’État’ (OC: III, 463). Thus although no state has ever been founded without religion serving as a base,

57 I explore this aspect of Rousseau’s thought in further detail in the later chapter on Kleist’s Die Herrmannsschlacht.
58 This term has been coined by Zev Trachtenberg in his essay ‘Civic Fanaticism and the Dynamics of Pity’, in Rousseau and l’Infâme (see Scott, ‘Pride and Providence’), pp. 203-23. Of particular interest is his discussion of how, in the process of editing the ‘Geneva Manuscript’ and writing the final draft for publication, Rousseau deliberately obscures this connection by decoupling the terms ‘fanatic’ and ‘civic’.
59 It is a point worth noting that Rousseau wrote the chapter on the civil religion on the reverse of that on the Legislator. As Derathé explains, ‘Si Rousseau a écrit ce chapitre au verso du chapitre sur le législateur, c’est parce qu’il en constitue le complément naturel. La fin du chapitre sur le législateur aborde le problème des rapports de la religion et de la politique, problème auquel la religion civile apporte une solution. En formulant “une profession de foi purement civile”, Rousseau se propose, en réalité, de renforcer l’autorité des Lois par celle de la religion’ (OC: III, 1498).
Christian law is not, to Rousseau’s mind, a viable option, being, in his words, ‘plus nuisible qu’utile à la forte constitution de l’Etat’ (OC: III, 464).

How else then might the two heads of the eagle be re-joined? To broach this, Rousseau begins by distilling from his reflections two main types of religious belief ‘considerée par rapport à la société’:

La première, sans Temples, sans autels, sans rites, bornée au culte purement intérieur du Dieu Suprême et aux devoirs éternels de la morale, est la pure et simple Religion de l’Evangile, le vrai Théïsme, et ce qu’on peut appeler le droit divin naturel. L’autre, inscrite dans un seul pays, lui donne ses Dieux, ses Patrons propres et tutelaires: elle a ses dogmes, ses rites, son culte extérieur prescrit par des loix; hors la seule Nation qui la suit, tout est pour elle infidelle, étranger, barbare; elle n’étend les devoirs et les droits de l’homme qu’aussi loin que ses autels. Telles furent toutes les Religions des premiers peuples, auxquelles on peut donner le nom de droit divin civil ou positif.60 (OC: III, 464)

The second of these – which Rousseau later terms the ‘religion du citoyen’ – is good in that it unites religious practice and state authority, and encourages identification with the patrie and obedience to its laws, to the extent that ‘mourir pour son pays c’est aller au martyre, violer les loix c’est être impie’ (OC: III, 465). In this perspective, it appears almost tailor-made to serve as the seedbed for a form of civic fanaticism. Ultimately, however, Rousseau rejects the doctrine on two main counts: firstly, on the grounds that as it is founded on ‘l’erreur et […] le mensonge’ it makes citizens ‘crédules’ and ‘superstitieux’, and drowns ‘le vrai culte de la divinité dans un vain cérémonial’; and secondly because it might too readily become ‘exclusive et tirannique’, and so make the people ‘sanguinaire et intolérant; en sorte qu’il ne respire que meurtre et massacre, et croit faire une action sainte en tuant quiconque n’admet pas ses Dieux’ (OC: III, 465). This then leaves the first option, the private cult of the ‘religion de l’homme’. Clearly, there is no such threat of violence and intolerance here – this is a ‘religion sainte, sublime, véritable’, through which all men in being ‘enfans du même Dieu, se reconnoissent tous pour frères’ (OC: III, 465). The merits of this are manifold, and Rousseau indeed suggests that in a purely spiritual sense this is a perfect form of religious belief. Within the realistic-utopian frame of Du contrat social, however (‘en prenant les hommes tels qu’ils sont, et les lois telles qu’elles peuvent être’

60 Rousseau does refer to a third kind here – ‘la religion du Prêtre’ – but this is immediately signalled as ‘bizarre’, and in the following paragraph we are told that it is ‘si evidemment mauvaise que c’est perdre le tems de s’amuser à le démontrer’ (OC: III, 464).
(OC: III, 351)), this interior cult is, in Rousseau’s eyes, simply too perfect, in that its universal and other-worldly creed not only exposes society to the mercy of a single hypocrite – a ‘Cataline’, for example, or a ‘Cromwell’ – who might usurp authority and subject his ‘pieux compatriotes’, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, dissolves allegiance to the state, leaving the laws with ‘la seule force qu’elles tirent d’elles-mêmes sans leur en ajouter aucune autre’ (OC: III, 465). Thus although the ‘religion de l’homme’ might appear morally attractive and the best imaginable solution to the problem posed, Rousseau nonetheless dismisses it as failing to adequately serve the political interests of the state.

It is at this point that he finally turns to detailing his own preferred alternative in the form of the ‘foi purement civile’ (OC: III, 468). The intention, it seems, is to provide a model that takes on the positive values of the ‘religion du citoyen’ without the negative – one which commands loyalty to the patrie and makes the citizen love his duty, but which does so without intruding on personal beliefs or advancing exclusive violence. To this end, the tenets of the faith are established not so much as ‘dogmes de religion’ but rather as ‘sentimens de sociabilité, sans lesquels il est impossible d’être bon Citoyen ni sujet fidelle’ (OC: III, 468). These are, moreover, to be kept ‘simples’ and ‘en petit nombre’: ‘l’existence de la Divinité puissante, intelligente, bienfaisante, prévoyante et pourvoyante, la vie à venir, le bonheur des justes, le châtiment des méchants, la sainteté du Contract social et des Loix’ (OC: III, 468). To this Rousseau adds a single, crucial ‘dogme[.] negatif[.]’ – total hostility towards ‘intolérance’ (OC: III, 469).

Set out in these terms, the creed of the civil religion barely seems as disquieting as it is often taken to be. To be sure, from our modern perspective we might baulk at the first four of these clauses, but the demand that citizens affirm belief in God was very much a commonplace of seventeenth- and eighteenth century thought. 61 The inclusion of intolerance as a negative dogma is, moreover, no mere fig-leaf – aware that ‘il n’y a plus et […] il ne peut plus y avoir de Religion nationale exclusive’, Rousseau accepts religious variance as an ineludible aspect of modern life, and so insists that ‘on doit tolérer toutes celles qui tolerent les autres, autant que leurs dogmes n’ont rien de contraire aux devoirs du Citoyen’ (OC: III, 469). And though this apparent concession to pluralism may be circumscribed by the sinister-sounding threat of banishment for non-believers, it ought to

be borne in mind that this is a political rather than religious decree – the transgressor is to be expelled ‘non comme impie, mais comme insociable’ (OC: III, 468). Set in the fuller context of the treatise as a whole, what this boils down to is the same commitment to respect self-made laws discussed earlier in relation to the idea of ‘forcing to be free’ – again, hardly a mandate for totalitarianism.

This is not, however, to say that the chapter is entirely without its difficulties, and there is one aspect above all that remains somewhat troubling and deserves to be treated as such. This relates to the insertion, amongst the articles of faith of the civil religion, of a provision for the death penalty – as a corollary to the above punishment, Rousseau prescribes that:

Que si quelqu’un, après avoir reconnu publiquement ces mêmes dogmes, se conduit comme ne les croyant pas, qu’il soit puni de mort; il a commis les plus grand des crimes, il a menti devant les loix. (OC: III, 468)

The severity of this judgement seems shocking, and it comes as little surprise that this single principle has, in the words of one prominent critic, ‘become the greatest stumbling block perhaps in the whole of Rousseau’s work’. 62 The major problem, as far as I can see, is that Rousseau does not spell out how exactly one is to judge such an infraction. Yes, he makes clear that this is again a punishment for conduct (‘conduire’) rather than belief, but there is no attempt to enumerate a list of acts warranting the sanction, 63 and by failing to specify procedural guidelines, and leaving the verdict at the discretion of the general will, he clearly treads on dangerous ground. Where this becomes all the more acute is in the context of the broader economy of violence implied by the model. For despite its tolerant

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63 One might see a clue to this in the specific wording ‘il a menti devant les loix’ which implies (but no more) that the sentence concerns offences against the fifth tenet of the creed – ‘la sainteté du contrat social et des loix’. Should we accept this, then Rousseau would appear to be merely recapping a point made earlier in the chapter ‘Du droit de vie et de mort’: ‘[T]out malfaiteur attaquant le droit social devient par ses forfaits rebelle et traître à la patrie, il cesse d’en être membre en violant ses Loix, et même il lui fait la guerre. Alors la conservation de l’Etat est incompatible avec la sienne, il faut qu’un des deux périsse, et quand on fait mourir le coupable, c’est moins comme Citoyen que comme ennemi. Les procédures, le jugement, sont les preuves et la déclaration qu’il a rompu le traité social, et par conséquent qu’il n’est plus membre de l’Etat. Or comme il s’est reconnu tel, tout au moins par son séjour, il en doit être retranché par l’exil comme infracteur du pacte, ou par la mort comme ennemi public; car un tel ennemi n’est pas une personne morale, c’est un homme, et c’est alors que le droit de la guerre est de tuer le vaincu’ (OC: III, 376-77). In the following paragraph, he goes on to insist that only he might be put to death who cannot otherwise be saved ‘sans danger’. Execution is, then, a last resort, and so presumably only to be imposed for the most serious crimes. Viewed in these terms, the sanction for the death penalty becomes more understandable in its historical context as a strictly legal process.
attitude towards personal belief, the creed Rousseau presents is very much primed to combat violence through violence – it is a telling sign that his objections to the ‘religion de l’homme’ refer, above all, to its refusal to admit to violence and its consequent inability to defend itself against both internal and external threats of fanaticism. To help us to understand this further, we might consider the following important passage from the *Lettre à d'Alembert*:

Le fanatisme n’est pas une erreur, mais une fureur aveugle et stupide que la raison ne retient jamais. L’unique secret pour l’empêcher de naître et de contenir ceux qui l’excitent. Vous avez beau démontrer à des fous que leurs chefs les trompent, ils n’en sont pas moins ardents à les suivre. Que si le fanatisme existe une fois, je ne vois encore qu’un seul moyen d’arrêter son progrès; c’est d’employer contre lui ses propres armes. Il ne s’agit ni de raisonner ni de convaincre; il faut laisser là la philosophie, fermer les Livres, prendre le glaive et punir les fourbes. (OC: V, 28-29)

This insight is absolutely central to Rousseau’s system of political thought, and enables us to understand more fully why it is that he looks to make of his citizens ‘fanatics’. The lines are written in response to Voltaire’s anti-fanatical stance in his play *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le prophète* and form part of a broader critique of Enlightenment values – in the introduction to his English translation, Allan Bloom suggests that the whole treatise might be read ‘like a morality play, entitled the “The Spirit of the Enlightenment versus the Spirit of Republican Virtue”’. Here Rousseau breaks rank with the orthodox Enlightenment faith in the power of reason to dispel the forces of violence, and argues instead for a rather more barbarous policy of fighting fire with fire. It is for this reason that he urges in *Du contrat social* (and the *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne*) the fostering of a civic fanaticism after the fashion of Sparta and Rome – one which not only bonds the citizens to the patrie, but which is also capable of withstanding and reciprocating acts of violence against the state, whether from within or without. In the chapter on the civil religion, this implicit link between patriotism and fanaticism, between public opinion and violence not only becomes especially evident (particularly in the ‘Geneva Manuscript’), but is also overwritten with both a stark secular-religious impulse and a mandate for systematic expulsion and execution for crimes against the patrie – a potentially explosive mix strikingly similar to that which fuelled the ideology of the Terror. Not that this is to suggest

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that Rousseau had anything of the kind in mind – far from it, in fact, as when he writes in Book 2, Chapter V that ‘la fréquence des supplices est toujours un signe de foiblesses ou de paresse dans le Gouvernement’ (OC: III, 377), we are clearly a long way from the daily operations of the guillotine. Nor is it to pursue the claim that his prescriptions point inexorably in this direction – insofar as Robespierre may have traduced aspects of the ‘religion civile’, he did so selectively and in a context entirely removed from the abstract ideal of Du contrat social where the general will never errs, and so it would be both misguided and unjust to submit that Rousseau might be held to blame for the horrors committed in his name. All this notwithstanding, however, there is no gainsaying that the provisions of the civil religion amount in sum to a prescription for the eradication of the other, and in failing to expressly stipulate the limits of violence and toleration that attend the creed, he does present a frame of reference that readily lends itself to being invoked to legitimate ruthless political terror. In this respect at least, then, we might say that Rousseau does, in fact, go some way to conniving at his own revolutionary fate.

Turning back to Das Erdbeben, there are, I believe, two ways in which this discourse is echoed in the narrative. The first is relatively straightforward and can be swiftly dealt with. It involves Rousseau’s critique of established forms of religion, and the degree to which Kleist draws on this in his framing of the three sections of story. If we begin with the episode in the valley, for example, we might initially note how the scene retains an evident religious element, not only through the direct reference to the ‘Tal von Eden’, but also via frequent – if often subversive – allusion to other biblical images and motifs. With the spatial move away from traditional sites of worship, however, the sense of religious devotion here takes a form quite different to that which prevails in the opening scenes in Santiago – it is, to speak with Rousseau, a mode of religion which is literally ‘sans Temples, sans autels, sans rites’ (OC: III, 464). The parallels to the ‘religion de l’homme’ are strikingly close: here too, contact with God is suggested to be more private and internal (witness, for example, how Jeronimo and Josephe creep away ‘in ein dichteres Gebüsch, um durch das heimliche Gejauchz ihrer Seelen niemand zu betrüben’ (DKV: III, 201)), whilst the foundation appears to be provided by a universal morality that encourages the survivors of the earthquake to view each other as brothers, or in Kleist’s own terms,

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makes of them ‘eine[.] Familie’. Should we consider how this utopian modality is exposed in the final scenes, moreover, we can see how Kleist plays on and plays up one of the essential defects of the ‘religion de l’homme’, namely its inability to withstand the abuses of a single ‘ambitieux’ or ‘hypocrite’ who usurps divine authority to become ‘la verge dont Dieu punit ses enfants’ (OC: III, 466). With his highly-charged, vindictive sermon, the Chorherr of Kleist’s tale fulfils this particular role to a tee.

This connection might be enlarged upon if we likewise regard the similarities between the alternate ‘religion du citoyen’ and the form of religion we observe in the opening and closing stages of the narrative. In contrast to the ‘religion de l’homme’, the ‘religion du citoyen’ has ‘ses dogmes, ses rites, son culte extérieur prescrit par des lois’ (OC: III, 464), all of which would appear to apply – as we would expect – to the established Catholic theocracy in Santiago. What is of perhaps greater interest, however, is the list of objections and criticisms Rousseau raises, and how these correspond to Kleist’s presentation of the lynching scenes in the church. Clearly, the thanksgiving service is a form of ‘vain cérémonial’ – a pretext upon which the Chorherr is able to consign Jeronimo and Josephe to public vengeance in a move to restore the pre-existing social order. The manner in which the citizens of Santiago so easily fall prey to these manipulations would, moreover, suggest that their religious conditioning has indeed made them ‘crédules’ and ‘superstitieux’. And there can be no overlooking the fact that the creed delivered by the canon renders the people ‘sanguinaire’ and ‘intolérant’, or that in executing the murders of Jeronimo and Josephe, they believe themselves to be carrying out an ‘action sainte’. Of course, one might protest that what all this amounts to is little more than a standard Enlightenment attack on religious fanaticism, and that the various links detailed here are too vague and tenuous to establish any necessary connection to Rousseau. If viewed in isolation, then this is doubtless a valid objection, and Kleist surely does draw on the broader arsenal of the Enlightenment campaign against ‘l’infâme’. 66 Taken together, however, and set alongside the earlier similarities between the valley scene and the ‘religion de l’homme’, the parallels are to my mind too many and too close to be dismissed as mere coincidence, and thus I would suggest that Kleist makes the chapter on the ‘réligion civile’ an important, if by no means exclusive, point of reference for his representation and critique of religious forms in the narrative.

66 Jochen Schmidt, for example, suggests the influence of Voltaire’s arguments in his Traité sur la tolérance and Dictionnaire philosophique portatif (cf. Schmidt, Die Dramen und Erzählungen, pp. 22-27).
The second issue here is altogether more critical, and relates to a particular variation Kleist develops so as to offer a slightly different angle on the Rousseauian model. For where Rousseau, in detailing the flaws of the ‘religion du citoyen’, focuses principally on the intolerance that places the state ‘dans un état naturel de guerre avec tous les autres’ (OC: III, 465), Kleist internalises this concern, concentrating on the consequences of fanaticism at an intra- rather than inter-state level. In doing so, he effects an important shift that recasts critical focus on the central controversy of Rousseau’s own solution to the dilemma of connecting social order and religion – the justification and validity of the death penalty.

The verdict is, of course, passed on Josephe not once but twice, and a comparison of the two instances does much to illustrate the continuities and discontinuities between the opening and closing phases of the story. On both occasions, the penalty reflects on the oppressive excess of the Catholic Church, and both involve, as we have seen, similar mechanisms of execration, sacrifice and vengeance. There is, however, one particular, crucial difference which was mentioned in passing earlier, and which can now be focused on in its fuller relevance. This concerns the exact manner in which the sentences are ordered and executed in the two scenes respectively. In the first case, Josephe’s punishment is sanctioned by the official machinery of the state – she is tried and prosecuted in accordance with the rigours of the established legal system. In the second instance, however, the verdict is passed not by any institution or affiliate, but rather by the demands of public (popular) opinion – it is the ‘ganze im Tempel Jesu versammelte Christenheit’ with its united cry of ‘steinigt sie! steinigt sie!’ (DKV: III, 217) that ultimately condemns both Josephe and Jeronimo to death. This is not the same point as made by Wolff, for the distinction here does not relate to motivation or moral justification, but solely to the alternate ways in which the selfsame legal and ethical codes are brought to bear under two different sets of conditions – the fact that these are now enacted through popular rather than institutional violence by no means rehabilitates Santiagan society as any kind of lesser evil. Nor is it to reprise the argument that the canon plays only a limited role in proceedings, for even if he does not expressly call for the sacrifice of Jeronimo and Josephe, his sermon nonetheless agitates towards this particular course of retributive justice and certainly prompts the outburst of brutality. What is meant, rather, is to call attention to the fact that in delineating the violence in the church, Kleist invokes the agency of the mob not only as an easily-swayed, destructive menace, but also as a vehicle for political action and power – a
dual aspect that recurs at a number of central points throughout his body of narrative and
dramatic work.\textsuperscript{67}

The full significance of this point can be brought out particularly well if we consider
it alongside Girard’s reading of the text in relation to the links between violence and the
sacred. For in mapping the fundamental dynamics of sacrifice in the story, Girard is, I feel,
quite justified in deducing a parallel to the mythical sequence of ‘Krise – Opfer – Lösung’,
and in characterising the murders of Jeronimo and Josephe as a collective action that
polarises violence against the other so as to ensure ‘die Wiederherstellung der
gesellschaftlichen Ordnung’.\textsuperscript{68} In this context, one might indeed read the story as a
‘Versuch […], die versteckten Hintergründe der Gewalt, die den Ursprung aller Mythen und
Rituale ausmachen, darzustellen’.\textsuperscript{69} Where the problem lies, however, is, as we have seen,
in the suggestion that the victims of this scapegoating mechanism are selected arbitrarily,
and we might here expand on this point. For in isolating the mythical element and failing to
register the crowd’s intent to exact retribution on those specifically accused of evoking
God’s ire, Girard reduces the violence of the ‘Opferritual’ in not one but two ways – firstly,
by overlooking the extent to which the act is embedded in a framework of justice, law and
morality, and then secondly, by misreading the crucial role of public opinion as arbitrating
agency. Together, the two points provide an essential corrective to any legitimating view of
the sacrifices, as the text not only presents the violence as being founded on a cruel and
oppressive legal-moral codex, but also focuses attention on the fallibility of public opinion
as a political force, revealing it on the one hand to be nothing but the product of the canon’s
manipulations, and, on the other, exposing its proneness to error:

Nun traf es sich, daß in demselben Augenblicke der kleine Juan, durch den
Tumult erschreckt, von Josephens Brust weg Don Fernandos Arme strebte.
Hierauf: er ist der Vater! schrie eine Stimme; und: er ist Jeronimo Rugera! eine
andere; und: sie sind die gotteslästerlichen Menschen! eine dritte; […]. (DKV:
III, 203)

The irony is here inescapable, communicated by the threefold stress on the ‘sein’ forms.
For though Don Fernando is the father of Juan, he is not Jeronimo, and nor is he one of
those who stands accused of blasphemy. What makes this all the more biting (and

\textsuperscript{67} A closer examination of this point is provided in the following chapter.
\textsuperscript{68} Girard, ‘Mythos und Gegenmythos’, p. 137.
\textsuperscript{69} Girard, ‘Mythos und Gegenmythos’, p. 144.
ultimately tragic) is that these lines are immediately followed by the call for stoning, and through this direct coupling the dangers of public opinion and popular violence are cast into particularly sharp relief. On this point, the text critically engages the central problematic of the discourse on the civil religion, and of *Du contrat social* more generally, by demonstrating how, in reality, the general will – as an expression of the people and definition of sovereign justice – is not always right and can indeed err. This, in turn, must be seen in connection to the experiences of the Revolution and particularly the nightmarish excess and injustice of the Terror as at once both an official policy prompted from above (one thinks of Robespierre’s famed ‘denunciations’) and a popular articulation of the ‘volonté punitive’. Here then I suggest we find an example of the complementary discursive practices outlined in the previous chapter, as Kleist both draws on Rousseau’s theories as a means to explore revolutionary dynamics and, at the same time, uses the historical optic of the Revolution to expose the potential dangers inherent in Rousseau’s theories. Again, we need not take this to entail any attribution of blame or personal responsibility: if we credit Kleist with having been a careful and discerning reader of Rousseau’s writings, then we might assume he was aware that *Du contrat social* deals with an abstraction of right, not political fact, and that the provisions were not intended for implementation, certainly not in France, and most definitely not during a period of violent popular revolution – in which case his critique may have more to do with revolutionary misappropriation than with the ideas themselves. That said, the text nonetheless lays bare the dangerous exigencies that lie, partially masked, at the root of Rousseau’s political-religious doctrine, exploiting the example of revolutionary violence as a particularly graphic precedent. By linking this together with our other lines of inquiry, and with the broader narrative framework of the novella, we can see how the chapter on the ‘réligion civile’ offers a singular foil for a reading of the violence in the final scenes of *Das Erdbeben*, providing the material for an anatomy of fanaticism that not only figures as an Enlightenment critique of religious intolerance, persecution and calumny, but which also opens up the connections between patriotism, terror and sacrifice and so presents a fertile field for an examination of revolutionary politics and ethics.
If the theme of revolutionary violence is situated at an abstract remove in *Das Erdbeben in Chili*, it has a far more direct textual bearing in *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*. Here again we are dealing with the tragic story of star-crossed lovers, as the ‘Verlobung’ of the story’s title between Swiss nobleman Gustav von der Ried and the young Mestiza Toni is played out against the backdrop of the latter stages of the slave rebellion on Haiti in 1803. The up-to-date setting is atypical – Kleist’s tales and dramas usually avoid the particular reality of contemporary events and are, instead, displaced to earlier times. With *Die Verlobung*, however, he opts to abandon this temporal distancing, quoting a chapter from current European history and underscoring the direct causal connections to the Revolution.

The narrative of the slave uprising is by now familiar, and can be very briefly outlined here.\(^1\) Long-since established as France’s most lucrative overseas colony, Haiti became a locus of intense political debate after 1789, as revolutionary faith in new concepts of liberty and equality sparked heated discussions concerning the rights and status of colonial slaves. In 1791 the French National Assembly proclaimed equality for mulattoes, and three years later the National Convention passed a decree emancipating all slaves from bondage. In late 1801, however, Napoleon decided to rescind these egalitarian measures and sent an expeditionary force led by General Leclerc to re-conquer the island and reintroduce slavery. In the conflict that ensued, the French enjoyed initial success, forcing the Blacks to capitulate and incarcerating their general, Toussaint Louverture. In the meantime, however, vast numbers of Leclerc’s troops succumbed to a decimating yellow fever epidemic, and a renewed Black uprising under the leadership of General Dessalines led to the defeat of the French forces in November 1803. On 1 January 1804, Haitian independence was officially declared, with Dessalines appointed Governor of the island.

Critical opinion remains divided as to Kleist’s intentions in availing himself of these events as the setting for *Die Verlobung*. For a long time, led by Toni’s final words ‘Du hättest mir nicht mißtrauen sollen!’ (DKV: III, 259), the tendency was to consider the

\(^1\) The classic account is still C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938).
historical material a mere backcloth for a tragic narrative on the familiar themes of love, trust and faith. From the mid-1970s through the 1990s, however, it was the complex social and political issues evoked by the specific situation that came to dominate attention, with a whole series of studies channelling interest squarely towards questions of imperialism and colonialism, race and gender. Recently, a smaller number of critics have, in reaction to this focus on ideological and discursive formations, put forward an alternative – and to my mind more satisfactory – view of the text as one in which the existential and political horizons intersect through the mimetic embedding of the love story within the context of violent revolutionary struggle. Clearly, the political and intercultural milieu of the tale serves, on the one hand, to intensify the situation of conflict and the exploration of the unmistakeably Kleistian complex of a failure of trust and perception – what Anthony Stephens has termed Gustav’s ‘misreading of the text of reality’. At the same time, however, it is through the shaping of individual destinies that Kleist explores the political and ethical implications of revolutionary action, in a manner which, in many ways, anticipates the narrative practice of later revolutionary tales such as Eichendorff’s *Das Schloß Dürande*, Balzac’s *Un épisode sous la Terreur*, and Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*.

4.1 Imperialism, Colonialism, Race: A Battleground of Political Discourse

The debate concerning the exact design of Kleist’s political commentary in *Die Verlobung* is one which has, over the past thirty years or so, been carried out with a quite peculiar level

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of involvement and fervour. What explains this is the fact that whereas in *Das Erdbeben* he employs the stylistic metaphor of the earthquake as a means to explore the impact of sudden social change, the shift of focus to political conditions in *Die Verlobung* raises the issue of the legitimacy of revolutionary violence and slave rebellion, and so the question of where Kleist’s sympathies lie becomes freighted with a particular significance. The dominant trend throughout this period has been on a liberal positioning on the side of the blacks. Peter Horn set the tone for this in his reading of the text as a critical treatment of race and slavery,\(^6\) and his views have been taken on, with various emphases, by Sigrid Weigel, Paul Michael Lützeler, Barbara Gribnitz and Susanne Zantop.\(^7\) Ruth Angress, in her 1977 essay, drives the political element a step further, arguing that the tale carries a sustained attack on imperialism and tyranny that vindicates the violence of the rebels as legitimate acts of resistance.\(^8\) For Bernd Fischer, the text likewise constitutes a ‘politische Dekonstruktion’ that censures Gustav’s apparently enlightened, humanistic perspective on the colonial struggle,\(^9\) whilst Ray Fleming extends this line to suggest that the implicit critique of Eurocentric racism is deliberately accentuated by the conspicuous absence of a counter-exposition from the viewpoint of the dispossessed colonial Other.\(^10\) Aligned against this consensus, a smaller number of critics provide a rather less liberal verdict: Gonthier-Louis Fink, who submits that the violent excess of the Black insurrection is designed to warn Kleist’s contemporaries of the dangers of radical social change and revolution;\(^11\) Herbert Uerlings, who maintains that the text offers neither a consistent position against colonialism and slavery, nor an enlightened criticism of racial stereotypes;\(^12\) Rémy Charbon, who, whilst denying it to be necessarily racist, nonetheless asserts that Kleist’s perspective

\(^6\) Cf. Horn, ‘Hatte Kleist Rassenvorurteile?’.


\(^8\) Cf. Angress, ‘Kleist’s Treatment of Imperialism’.


\(^12\) Cf. Uerlings, ‘Preußen in Haiti?’. In a recent article, Ricarda Schmidt offers an interpretation that, focusing on Kleist’s underdeveloped representation of Babekan’s physical reality, likewise argues against a postcolonial reading of the text (cf. Ricarda Schmidt, “‘Odd Bodies’: Kleist’s Körperdarstellungen im Kreuzpunkt widersprüchlicher Diskurse’, in *Patterns of Knowledge in the 19th Century*, ed. by Ricarda Schmidt and Gert Vonhoff (Münster: MV Wissenschaft, [forthcoming] 2010)).
on events is strictly that of the (white) European;\textsuperscript{13} and Hans-Jakob Werlen, who insists that the political aspect of the tale does, in fact, convey a primarily racist viewpoint.\textsuperscript{14}

In order to come to terms with these arguments, one must first get to grips with three particular issues and assumptions that underlie the popular pro-Black angle. The first relates to a growing awareness and understanding of structures of irony in Kleist’s fiction. In the older research, the natural tendency was to equate the author’s attitude with that of his narrator, who begins his account with the apparently partial contextualisation of the situation as a period during which ‘die Schwarzen die Weißen ermordeten’ (DKV: III, 222).\textsuperscript{15} Over the opening two paragraphs of exposition, such tacit moral judgements abound: Congo Hoango is ‘furchtlerlich’ (DKV: III, 222) and ‘grimmig’ (DKV: III, 222); his campaign is driven by ‘unmenschliche Rachsucht’ (DKV: III, 223); whilst the steps taken by the National Convention which triggered the outbreak are condemned as having been ‘unbesonnen’ (DKV: III, 222) – all of which would, from a traditional angle, point towards an orthodox critique of black violence. With the emergence of more sophisticated theories of narrative from the mid-twentieth century, and following the important initial applications of such concepts to Kleist by Wolfgang Kayser\textsuperscript{16} and John Ellis,\textsuperscript{17} critics have, however, become increasingly alive to the presence of conflicting perspectives in the text, and so tended to draw attention to an apparently subversive dissonance between the subjective accounts of the (implicitly white) narrator and Gustav on the one hand, and Congo Hoango’s and Babekan’s authentic experiences of suffering and brutality on the other. No doubt, the examples of arbitrary cruelty on the part of the colonists undermine the obvious black-white opposition informing the narrator’s take on events, which initially suggests a straightforward moral tale setting enlightened European civilisation against a primitive barbarism. To infer from this that all stricture of the violence perpetrated by the former slaves might be subtracted to the account of an ironic treatment of racial and cultural prejudice is, however, premature, and, as I shall argue presently, overlooks the manner in

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Werlen, ‘Seduction and Betrayal’.
\textsuperscript{15} Diethelm Brüggeman has made the interesting point that, grammatically speaking, both ‘die Schwarzen’ and ‘die Weißen’ might be read as nominative or accusative, in which case the formulation might be taken in the sense of it being the Whites who are murdering the Blacks (cf. Diethelm Brüggemann, \textit{Kleist: Die Magie} (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004), p. 377). The possibility of a deliberate ambiguity or plurivalence here would certainly fit with what I consider to be the more balanced perspective on events suggested by the overall narrative framework of the text.
which the narrative form lends itself to a rather more complex treatment of the political issues at play in the text.

A second central strand of recent scholarship has revolved around the specific theme of white-black colonialism. In this context, the question of political and ethical standards becomes even more acute, as the point at issue is no longer just whether Kleist is to be identified as a liberal or conservative, but rather, as we have seen, whether or not his work expresses a fundamental racism. As suggested in the above – and in keeping with a modern view of Kleist as an inveterate critic of contemporary cultural and ideological assumptions – the current leaning is very much towards a reply in the negative, some commentators even going so far as to assign to the text an early postcolonial vision. Two aspects, at least to my mind, put such a reading into question, however. The first, from a general theoretical point of view, concerns the validity of assuming a nineteenth-century tale might embody and anticipate a modern twentieth-century paradigm, and the potential risk of a misleading anachronism in approaching the text through the demands of contemporary political correctness. The second, rather more specific, concerns the thematic status of race and colonialism within the narrative, and the question of whether, in asserting their intended primacy, critics take as read what ought perhaps first to be proven, namely that the adoption of a contemporary setting necessarily reflects a greater concern with the actualities of the historical context than in Kleist’s other fictional and dramatic works. In other words, does the Haitian setting indicate a central interest in the specific ethical and political implications of the colonial struggle between black slaves and white masters, or is it rather the case that Kleist draws on the poetological and aesthetic potentialities of this particular historical constellation in order to explore the deeper political and moral dilemmas of his time? For my part, I rather incline to the latter view, and feel that we ought not to take too narrow or blinkered an interest in the precise significance of the colonial aspect of the work. This is not, by any means, to suggest that race plays an insignificant role in the novella: skin colour serves a crucial function as both a cultural marker and index to individual and collective morality which governs the actions of the central characters; and a desire to challenge complacent notions of white cultural

superiority may well have contributed to Kleist’s decision to adopt the contemporary setting. The manner in which the historical material is handled, however, particularly the way in which complexities and ambiguities are stripped back to a dichotomous (aesthetic) struggle which spotlights class distinctions between masters and slaves, suggests that the interest lies beyond an accurate reconstruction of events, and this, coupled with the opening up of the spatial context through allusions to the wider European stage, seems to point to a broader orbit of socio-political reference. Working on this basis, it would appear that the Haitian setting is perhaps best looked upon as a semi-fictional framework and projection which, combining the sharpened critical perception afforded by geographical distance with a contemporary immediacy, allows Kleist to cast a range of current ideas relating to freedom and slavery, revolution and human emancipation, into particularly sharp relief.

The third aspect to consider here, and perhaps the most relevant to the argument I shall subsequently develop, concerns the extent to which a parallel might be drawn between the anti-colonial struggle on Haiti and the political situation in Prussia under Napoleonic occupation from 1806. Ruth Angress was the first to pursue this link in detail in her reading of *Die Verlobung* across the lines of the anti-Napoleonic message of *Die Herrmannsschlacht*, submitting the view that both texts are undergirded by a code of ethics that holds slavery as an ‘ultimate evil’ and liberty as an absolute moral imperative.

Clearly, the two pieces do invite comparison, in that both are closely concerned with the dialectic of freedom and slavery, and the ethics of violent revolution. That said, there are nonetheless a number of issues which militate against a direct assimilation of moral order, and which suggest instead a shift in priority and interest. A first point to note is that where Angress assumes Kleist to have begun work on *Die Verlobung* in 1807 (i.e. around the time he was becoming more directly engaged with contemporary politics and the fight for liberty

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20 The conflict on Haiti did not just pit white colonists against black slaves, but was rather marked by a series of clashes between all three social groupings on the island – whites, blacks and mulattoes – in various configurations and with frequent switches of allegiance. Nor were the three groups necessarily uniform in their loyalties: accounts of the revolution reveal that there were whites on the island who fought for the abolition of slavery, black slaves who at various stages in the conflict supported French attempts to regain control of the island, and factions of mulattoes who at times found themselves battling one another (cf. James, *The Black Jacobins* and Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, TE: University of Tennessee Press, 1991)). Whilst we cannot, unfortunately, be entirely certain of the extent of Kleist’s familiarity with these complexities, there nonetheless does appear to be a conscious streamlining into a strict black-white binary in the novella.

21 Cf. Angress, ‘Kleist’s Treatment of Imperialism’.

22 Many of these have been picked up on by Uerlings, ‘Preußen in Haiti?’.
from French tyranny), there is, in fact, no documentary evidence to support this – we only know that the piece was published in 1811, all else is speculation. A presumption of similarity on the basis of chronological proximity thus seems somewhat tendentious. Secondly, we might consider the particular focus drawn to the fact that it is, specifically, ‘eingedenk der Tyrannei, die ihn seinem Vaterlande entrissen hatte’ (DKV: III, 222) that Congo Hoango puts a bullet in the head of his apparently benevolent master, Herr Villeneuve. As Uerlings notes, ‘Vaterland’ is Kleist’s ‘entscheidendes Leitwort’ in his political writings of 1808/09, set in opposition to ‘Tyrannei’ and ‘Sklaverei’, and linked to an unconditional struggle for liberty. Viewed in this light, it would seem that Angress is perhaps justified in drawing a parallel to that other committed freedom fighter, Herrmann. Closer scrutiny, however, fails to bear out the point. For where Herrmann is, without doubt or ambiguity, the absolute political actor willing to sacrifice all, even his own family, in the fight against the Romans, the same is not true of Hoango who, when later confronted with the same dilemma, puts his own safety and that of his children before political considerations (cf. DKV: III, 255). Nor is it the case, as Fleming suggests, that Babekan embodies a total, revolutionary commitment to freedom, and in fact, as I shall go on to discuss at greater length in due course, there is scarce reference in the text to any collective liberatory cause whatsoever. For many, this is of scant consequence, as the principle of freedom from tyranny can be inferred from the historical context – in spotlighting the year (1803) in which the slaves decisively defeated the French, Kleist tacitly evokes, so the argument goes, the success of the rebellion and the subsequent declaration of independence, perhaps in an attempt to remind the German populace that Napoleon was not quite the invincible force many held him for. As plausible as this may sound, however, I nonetheless share with Uerlings the view that to use this point to establish a direct link to the ethics of Die Herrmannsschlacht and Kleist’s other political writings is to overlook the fact that the Haitian revolution was not, in the first instance, an uprising against a ‘Fremdherrschaft’ or an ‘ausländischen Usurpator’ but rather against a legitimate, if violently cruel, system of authority. In this regard, the dynamics of freedom and slavery in the text seem to align more closely with the moral politics of Michael Kohlhaas, only

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here the complex issues of social injustice, revenge and rebellion are recast in a broader socio-political framework. Drawing all this together, it seems clear enough that what we are dealing with here is not an affirmative statement on the absolute principles and imperatives of national liberation, but rather a more differentiated exploration of the ethics and psychologies of popular revolutionary violence.

4.2 Between Revolution and Reform: The Ethics of Popular Violence

In order to contextualise this field of inquiry, we ought then, I suggest, to look a little more closely at Kleist’s political attitudes in the Spannungsfeld between the French Revolution and the anti-Napoleonic drive for war and national freedom. As alluded to in Chapter Two, debate on this issue tended for a long time to a tug-of-war between liberal and conservative interpretations that obscured certain tensions and ambiguities only now being given due consideration. On the one hand, there appears, at first sight, compelling evidence of a disapproving attitude towards revolutionary events on Kleist’s part: the negative impression of post-Revolutionary Parisian society captured so vividly in his letters from 1801; the consistent expression of anti-French sentiments, ranging from youthful hostility during the coalition wars to a virulent ‘Franzosenhaß’ in the propagandistic writings of 1808-9; and the raging hatred for Napoleon and his expansionist regime articulated in both his personal correspondence and a series of political tracts, all point towards a distinctly adverse outlook. On the other hand, however, we find in his fictional works – particularly the Erzählungen – a range of radical critiques of corruption, injustice and social ills which, together with his various treatments of structural violence and tyranny, seem to accord with the general ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. As Dirk Grathoff notes, in considering this question we are thus confronted with a ‘verwirrende Vielzahl von Anti-Haltungen’27 which defy any attempt to delineate either a clear-cut conservative or liberal perspective. With this in mind, it seems appropriate at this point to briefly revisit those few passages where Kleist directly broaches the issue of revolution, reform and emancipation, in an attempt to map out the broad patterns which might frame and inform the exploration of revolutionary processes in Die Verlobung.

The Paris letters of 1801 provide a convenient starting point, and offer a number of valuable insights. For as discussed in both the previous chapters, what emerges most plainly here, certainly with regard to our concern, is the image of post-Revolutionary French society as a perversion of the original credos of the movement. The disenchantment Kleist feels at this is marked and deep, reflected in both his account of the Bastille Day celebrations (cf. DKV: IV, 240-41), and, as Stephens observes, in the visual image of the polluted river which stands as a dual emblem for nature and the pure revolutionary spirit, both of which have, in his view, been done to death by the French (cf. DKV: IV, 264).\(^{28}\) It is, expressly, this sense of profanation that carries his despondency, and here already we find a distinction drawn between original ideals and historical realities. To be sure, the experience of Paris seems to have fed Kleist’s growing scepticism concerning Enlightenment values of progress, but it would be misguided to think that this prompts a conservative rebuttal of the original revolutionary doctrine. It seems rather more likely the case that, combined with his historical perspective on the course of events between 1789 and 1801, the shock of the moral degeneracy of the Parisians drove home the problematic character of liberalism and egalitarianism, and sharpened his awareness of the vexed relationship between theoretical idealism and practical politics – a point perhaps reflected in his fictional preoccupation with the obstacles that bar the route to social, political and moral advancement.

These concerns were, of course, very much at the forefront of political debate in the German states throughout Kleist’s lifetime. Whilst most intellectuals had embraced the outbreak of revolution in 1789 as an attempt to eliminate traditional impediments to liberty and equality and realise advanced moral and political tendencies, the execution of the king and the advent of the Terror had led to a growing tide of scepticism and censure.\(^{29}\) Alongside criticism of revolutionary demagogues who had deliberately steered the people


towards violence and slaughter, many observers felt the root of the problem to lie with the ‘Unmündigkeit’ of a populace ill-equipped to cope with the sudden procurement of political liberty and prone to manipulation. Kleist, it must be said, never comments directly on these events, either in his letters or minor writings. A survey of his work suggests, however, that he too shared this concern, as the violent potential of the undisciplined ‘Pöbel’ is a recurrent trope throughout. Instances of mob brutality are encountered, or alluded to, in Die Familie Schroffenstein, Die heilige Cäcilie, Michael Kohlhaas, and, most famously (or notoriously), Das Erdbeben in Chili. In each of these scenarios, the eruption of violence is the result of the actions of an external agent: in Die Familie Schroffenstein, Rupert commands that Jeronimus be beaten to death (cf. DKV: I, 194); in Die heilige Cäcilie, it is the Prädikant who incites the planned iconoclastic riot (which actually never materialises due to the extraordinary effect of the music on the four brothers) (cf. DKV: III, 287); whilst in Das Erdbeben in Chili, as we have seen, it is the rabble-rousing sermon of the vengeful Chorherr which precipitates the orgy of violence in the final scene (cf. DKV: III, 215). The situation in Michael Kohlhaas is slightly different in that provocation does not stem from such a singularly malevolent source, yet the outcome is ultimately the same – Kohlhaas is able to attract a band of followers willing to commit violence in the name of his crusade for justice (cf. DKV: III, 66-68). A further variation on the same theme can be observed in Die Herrmannsschlacht, where the German tribesmen are dexterously manipulated by an expert in the art of political agitation, who, desperate to protect the existence of the German people, looks to incite a furious rebellion against Roman tyranny. The agents responsible for instigating instances of popular violence in Kleist’s works are thus motivated by quite diverse moral and political intentions, but in each case the manipulability of the broad masses remains a notable constant.

This issue of the violent potential of the populace provides a major bridging point between the discourses of the French Revolution and Prussian Reform Movement. For recognising how the energy discharged by the revolutionary masses had revitalised French society by destroying outdated institutions, the reformers sought to stimulate a similarly powerful, though in this case carefully controlled and harnessed, impulse in Prussia in the

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30 In two later episodes, it is a pair of rather more dubious characters, Meister Himboldt and Nagelschmidt, who provide the stimulus for further public acts of violence which, whilst ostensibly enacted to further Kohlhaas’s cause (though without his bidding), trigger a backlash of public opinion against him.

31 This is also suggested in the satirical ‘Lehrbuch der Französischen Journalistik’, where Kleist identifies the two fundamental principles of French journalism to be: ‘Was das Volk nicht weiß, macht das Volk nicht heiß’ and ‘Was man dem Volk dreimal sagt, hält das Volk für wahr’ (DKV: IV, 462).
hope of turning the state into an effective instrument for social change. In his *Rigaer Denkschrift* from September 1807, Karl August von Hardenberg acknowledges the progressive impact of the Revolution, which has given the population ‘einen ganz neuen Schwung’ and awakened ‘schlafende[,] Kräfte’, but criticises the destruction and violent excess. As a bloodless alternative for an effective reorganisation of the state, he proposes a ‘Revolution im guten Sinn, […] durch Weisheit der Regierung und nicht durch gewaltsame Impulsion von Innen oder Außen’ – in other words, an orderly ‘revolution from above’ that might stave off the volatile threat of untamed popular insurrection. Central to the reformist plans for modernisation was the process of emancipating the peasantry, and in late 1807 the so-called *Oktoberedikt* was passed proclaiming the abolition of serfdom and promising that by St. Martin’s Day 1810 there would be only ‘freie Leute’ within Prussian boundaries. In a short article published in the *Berliner Abendblätter* under the title ‘Über die Aufhebung des laßbäuerlichen Verhältnisses’ in December 1810, Kleist takes advantage of the recent passing of this deadline to comment on the implications of the ‘Bauernbefreiung’ and the respective merits of abrupt and gradual social change. In the opening paragraph, he acknowledges the beneficence of the proposed measures, suggesting general support for the plans to abrogate feudal relations. This apparently liberal outlook is, however, hedged by an anxious concern regarding the peasantry’s capacity to cope with such a sudden and radical change to the foundation of social life. According to the views articulated in the piece, such a change ought not to be introduced ‘plötzlich und mit Einem Schlag’ (DKV: III, 507), but rather gradually and cautiously, thereby reducing the risk of widespread civil unrest, insubordination and violence:

Jede Beschränkung der Freiheit hat die notwendige Folge, daß der Beschränkte dadurch in eine Art von Unmündigkeit tritt. Wer seine Kräfte nicht gebrauchen darf, verliert das Vermögen, sie zu gebrauchen, und zwar, wenn es geistige Kräfte sind, noch rascher und sicherer, als wenn die Beschränkung sich auf bloß körperliche Kräfte erstreckt. Wenn nun die Schranken, die diese Kräfte hemmten, niederfallen: entsteht dadurch auch plötzlich wiederum, wie durch den Schlag einer Zauberrute, das Talent, davon die Zweckmäßigste Anwendung

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zu machen? Keineswegs! Vielmehr durch die lange Dauer einer solchen Beschränkung kann der Mensch so zurückkommen, daß er gänzlich die Fähigkeit dazu einbüßt, und sich durch Aufhebung des Zwanges weit unglücklicher fühlt, als durch den Zwang selbst. [...] Kurz, wird ein Mensch, dem so lange der Gebrauch gewisser Kräfte untersagt war, in deren freien Gebrauch wieder eingesetzt, so muß er erst lernen, von dieser Freiheit Gebrauch zu machen, so wie ein Blindgeborner, der durch die wohltätige Hand des Arztes sein Gesicht wieder erhielt, allmählich sehen lernen muß. (DKV: III, 507-8)

Due to the satirical nature of much of Kleist’s journalistic writing, many critics have, not without good reason, been reluctant to grant these lines any particular revelatory value, and to instead read into the piece a subtly ironic comment on conservative principles. And yet there is a correlation here to the treatment of related issues in his fictional works, not least Das Erdbeben where, as we have seen, the chain of events that follows upon the earthquake demonstrates how the moral and cultural conditioning of a people is such, that genuine social change cannot occur via a sudden ‘Umsturz’. From this it would seem to follow, as Fink suggests, that Kleist supports an evolutionary rather than revolutionary agenda, wary of the prospect of violent anarchy and disorder. It ought to be borne in mind, however, that one need not necessarily be of a stubbornly conservative disposition to harbour such concerns, and if we couple this aspect with his constant attacks on arbitrariness and corruption, and his obviously keen awareness of the extent to which oppression, inequality and injustice can engender an intense desire for retribution and vengeance, we begin to get a sense of a more ambiguous and divided political attitude on Kleist’s part. It is this that allows him, in Die Verlobung, to offer what I believe to be a particularly reflective treatment of revolutionary violence – one which is, to enlarge upon a point made earlier, mediated by the narrative form. For although the structures of irony and interpolated stories do, clearly, break down and undermine the narrator’s slanted viewpoint by furnishing evidence of earlier cruelties and injustice, these do not necessarily tilt the moral scales in favour of the blacks – though the insurrection is shown to be an understandable response to earlier colonial atrocities, the text stops some way short of ethically condoning their own


37 As Saine notes, such anxieties also became commonplace in liberal circles in the wake of the chaos that enveloped France between 1792 and 1794 (cf. Saine, Black Bread – White Bread, p. 53).
violent methods. In fact, by presenting the experience of revolutionary conflict in oppositional modalities (i.e. from the perspective of both oppressed and oppressor) Kleist denies the reader the comfort of clear-cut moral judgements – the narrative breaking of the black-white dichotomy accords with the point that the political violence cannot be interpreted in similarly defined terms.\textsuperscript{38} Instead, the economy of brutalisation and suffering is shown to be equal on both sides, the distinction between victims and perpetrators is blurred and a relative balance of sympathies (as far as these come into play at all) is crafted. Thus rather than advancing a clear moral position, what Kleist here offers is a candid sketch that places the violence in context, lays bare its ideological complexities and ambiguities, and so encourages a more critical and dialectical view of revolutionary ethics.

4.3 ‘La liberté même est trop chere à ce prix’: Rousseau as Prophet of Revolution

It is within this framework that we can begin to trace the lines of what I believe to be an implicit dialogue with Rousseau’s philosophical views which has previously gone unnoticed. In much of the older literature on the subject, attention inevitably centred on the apparent nature-civilisation and instinct-reason antinomies, as commentators sought to establish a connection between Kleist’s characterisations and Rousseau’s portraits of social and ‘savage’ (i.e. pre-political) man.\textsuperscript{39} The temptation to draw such parallels is not hard to fathom, but precise examination reveals any link to be limited at best. For one, despite the

\textsuperscript{38} Klaus Müller-Salget alights on this point when he writes, ‘Die Entgegensetzung von Schwarz und Weiß in der Verlobung in St. Domingo [...] steht [...] als Metapher für die von Kleist verurteilte Vereindeutung der Welt in schlichtem Entweder-Oder-Denken’, (DKV: III, 839).

\textsuperscript{39} According to Xylander, the text revolves around the ‘Gegensatz zwischen dem guten Naturmenschen, der dem Gefühl folgt, und dem verdorbenen Zivilisationsmensch, der sich in ihm beirren läßt’. Within this schema, Toni is seen as the ‘reine Verkörperung des naturhaft Guten, “wie es aus der Hand des Schöpfers hervorgeht”’, or as the ‘vom Geiste Rousseaus mitbestimmten Wunschkilde des nur seinem Gefühl folgenden Mensch’. The conclusion Xylander draws from this is that the current strife on Haiti is presented as the inevitable outcome of man’s ‘Abkehr von der Natur’, which has led to the establishment of master-slave relations (cf. Oskar von Xylander, \textit{Heinrich von Kleist und Jean-Jacques Rousseau} (Berlin: Ebering, 1937), pp. 347-9). Hans M. Wolff takes up a similar theme, submitting that the target of Kleist’s criticism is a society which forces individuals to organise themselves into particular social groupings, which in turn causes deep-rooted divisions. Like Xylander, Wolff also centres attention on the concept of the ‘Naturmensch’, but develops his argument in the opposite direction, maintaining that it is Congo Hoango, rather than Toni, who represents this figure. On the basis of a divergent reading of his position in relation to the ‘Gefühl’-’Verstand’ antimony, Wolff contends that the Rousseauian angle of such a figure is critical rather than laudatory – as a ‘Naturmensch’, Congo Hoango does not possess the rational capacity necessary to quell his destructive desire for vengeance (cf. Hans M. Wolff, ‘Heinrich von Kleist als politischer Dichter’, \textit{Modern Philology}, 27 (6) (1947), 343-521 (pp. 378-79)). More recently, Marcel Krings has again invoked the analogue between Rousseau’s exploration of ‘vorzivilisatorische Zustände’ in his philosophical works and Kleist’s representation of the ‘Wilden auf Haiti’ (cf. Marcel Krings, ‘Natururschuld und Rechtsgesellschaft: Kleists romantische Rousseauamodifikationen’, \textit{Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik}, 1 (2005), 13-27 (p. 13)).
common association, Rousseau never actually employed the term ‘noble savage’, nor did he impute to pre-political man any particular moral attributes. Having not yet experienced the corruption and depravity of social life, the primitive individual may be disinclined towards vice, but he nonetheless remains an amoral, animalistic brute. The same can hardly be said of the blacks of St. Domingo who, far from living in a pre-social haven, inhabit a site of intensified social inequality and stratification. Master-slave relations are not just metaphorical here (as in the ‘slavery of despotism’ familiar from Enlightenment discourse) but rather actual, and, as Gustav reveals, have been so for centuries (cf. DKV: III, 233). The blacks have thus become habituated to a life of cruelty and oppression, and have evidently learnt a great deal from their colonial masters – they are certainly not the uncultivated innocents of Rousseau’s speculative history. There is a strict moral code in place on the island, whilst the rebels also exhibit a good deal of cunning and deceit in their political strategies. By the end of the story, Toni may appear to embody certain character traits commonly associated with the myth of the noble savage, notably a willingness for self-sacrifice, but it seems more prudent to connect this with the construction of a parallel to Mariane, demonstrating that virtue is in no way reliant on race and highlighting Gustav’s inability to recognise this. In this regard, it is perhaps interesting to note that in a footnote attached to the end of the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*, Rousseau briefly touches on the problems involved in relating skin colour to morality: sketching an anthropological history based primarily on accounts of explorations to the New World, he identifies a series of physical, intellectual and cultural differences between indigenous peoples, but warns against the inference of moral inequalities (cf. OC: III, 208-14). Of course, given his faith in the natural goodness of man and his insistence that immorality is a social accretion, one ought perhaps to expect nothing other than a refutation of skin colour as moral indicator. Be that as it may, it is nonetheless conceivable that his observations may have served as a point of reference and stimulus for Kleist’s critical treatment of an ethical physiognomy in *Die Verlobung*.

The intention here, however, is to shift focus to a more political connection on the theme of revolution. As mentioned above, ideological debates concerning the problematic nature of freedom and emancipation occupied a central position in political and philosophical deliberations around the turn of the nineteenth century, fired by events in revolutionary France. The origins of this lie, however, in a pre-existing discursive heritage that can be traced through the decades leading up to 1789, when such keen political
observers as Montesquieu, Rousseau and Kant were already grappling with the tensions between liberal conceptions of individual freedom and communitarian ideals of order. The inclusion of Rousseau in this list may, at first sight, seem somewhat surprising, as he is not commonly assumed to belong to the same tradition of ethical rationalism as the other two figures, but more often cast in the role of revolutionary spokesman. As we have seen elsewhere, however, the popular impression seldom does justice to the true nature of his thought, and his views on freedom, slavery and revolution are, in fact, a good deal more complex than many would suggest.

Perhaps the first point to make – briefly recapping the outline provided in the opening chapter – is that it is the prized ideal of liberty that, for Rousseau, lies at the root of the fundamental problem of politics. In the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*, he describes how man’s natural freedoms have been eroded by a fraudulent social contract which has sanctified inequality and created enduring chains of servitude; in his subsequent writings, he addresses how this situation might be rectified and liberty re-acquired. As we have established, he assuredly does not seek a solution via a return to pre-political conditions, but rather by way of a radical reorganisation of social and governmental structures, in keeping with which he rejects the idea of a *laissez-faire* ‘natural liberty’ as incompatible with the ideal of a just and legitimate socio-political community. In *Du contrat social*, he thus insists that in order to facilitate the creation of such a community, natural liberty must be forsaken in favour of a ‘moral liberty’, determined by the general will of the populace, which will restore social equality by arbitrating a balance between the requirements of the individual and the retention of social order (cf. OC: III, 364-5).

It is via the terms of this dialectic of freedom and human liberation that we recognise the moral and political continuities that unify Rousseau’s writings, particularly the *Discours* and *Du contrat social*. And yet in spite of this, there nonetheless remains a certain ambiguity regarding the movement between the two works. The earlier piece closes with a depressing vision of despotism that represents the final stages of inequality, where private individuals in fact become equals again, ‘parce qu’ils ne sont rien’ (OC: III, 191). By way of contrast, the latter work opens at a point at which man has already exited this state and is ready to implement prescriptive change. The evolutionary line constructed in the *Discours*, which traces human development step-by-step, is thereby broken – *Du contrat social* does not operate within the same historically-determined space, but rather
within an abstract dimension.\textsuperscript{40} By means of this break in continuity, Rousseau sidesteps the practicalities of abolishing the despotic system and arriving at a state of freedom under equals, creating an interpretive quandary which has divided critical opinion. For many interpreters, particularly those inclined to a Marxist or Hegelian world view, the final pages of the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité, in which the oppressed masses rebel against tyrannical rule, identify Rousseau as a proponent of popular uprising – the ‘Negation der Negation’ which will transform inequality into a higher state of harmony.\textsuperscript{41} For others, however, particularly those that see Rousseau as a more rationalist thinker, the transition from unjust to just social order can only be effected via the type of educational process outlined in his pedagogical writings.\textsuperscript{42}

The course of this debate has been decisively shaped by the historical tendency to cast Rousseau as prophet and architect of the Revolution. From the outset, revolutionary figures were keen to claim philosophical and intellectual legitimacy, and of all the great Enlightenment thinkers, it was to Rousseau’s authority that they appealed most powerfully. Beginning with the first debates of the Constituent Assembly between August and September 1789, his presence became ubiquitous: many of the earliest proposals for the drafting of the Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen quoted him verbatim, whilst such key revolutionary actors as Mirabeau, Marat, Saint-Just and Robespierre (together with countless others) were all to invoke him as an ideological hero at various times. In October 1790, his bust was installed in the Assembly Hall alongside a copy of Du contrat social, and four years later the remains of his body were ceremoniously transported to the Panthéon. During the Jacobin republic, Robespierre in particular gave voice to an apostolic cult of Rousseau which saw him firmly established in the public mind as the intellectual and spiritual patron of the Revolution, whilst the essential political ideas and ideals of this period – from universal suffrage and direct democracy to the concept of public civic virtue – were all seen to reflect the lessons of Rousseau’s political philosophy. Thus it comes as


\textsuperscript{41} For the classic Marxist interpretation of Rousseau see Friedrich Engels, Anti-Dühring (Zurich: Hottingen, 1886).

little surprise that the image of Rousseau as ‘author of the Revolution’ has become an accepted premise of political history.

The legacy of this association is double-edged, reflecting the controversies and paradoxes of the historiographical debate on the Revolution. In accordance with the ‘classic’ interpretation which sees the Revolution as a force for progress, Rousseau has been extolled as a liberal champion of social equality, universal human rights and emancipation from prejudice. At the same time, however, there is a long interpretive tradition – traceable via Taine and Hegel to Burke and Madame de Staël – that locates the origins of the Jacobin dictatorship and the Terror in the abstract and tantalising ideology of *Du contrat social*. The historical and philosophical paradigms underlying these two approaches are clearly opposed to one another, yet from divergent perspectives they both ultimately evince the same diagnosis of Rousseau as the thinker who did most to inspire and direct the Revolution. It is this persistent identification which has proven the most profound and enduring aspect of Rousseau’s legacy, and if we wish to understand the true nature of his views on revolution, we must first, however briefly, confront this historical nexus.

The key issue to be negotiated here is the relationship between intelligibility and causality. Was *Du contrat social* the book of law for the revolutionaries, or was it the Revolution, as Joseph Lakanal famously declared, that explained *Du contrat social*?

43 This popular phrase is thought to have originated in Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s *De J. J. Rousseau considéré comme l’un des premiers auteurs de la Révolution*, 2 vols (Paris: Buisson, 1791).


another way, did revolutionary spearheads begin with a desire to put Rousseau’s theoretical principles into practice, or did his political philosophy provide a medium through which the logic of the Revolution could be articulated and, more importantly, justified? To begin with, let it be stated that the rhetoric of the Revolution incontrovertibly bears the immediate imprint of Rousseau’s language – many of the broad and abstract themes which dominated revolutionary discourse, such as popular sovereignty and the idea of the general will, were drawn directly from the stock of *Du contrat social*. Yet in terms of precisely articulated ideas and detailed prescriptions there is little fidelity to Rousseau’s thought, and by committing themselves to the foundation of a representative government, the revolutionaries pursued a doctrine that ran directly counter to one of his most fundamental political convictions. For Rousseau, the will of the people is inalienable and cannot be transferred or represented (cf. OC: III, 368); for the revolutionaries, on the other hand, representative government is a necessary feature of modern politics. This incongruity is of intrinsic significance to our understanding of the linkage between Rousseau and the Revolution, as with the principle of the *volonté générale* thus violated, it becomes both inappropriate and inaccurate to regard the form of the revolutionary government as a faithful practical exposition of Rousseau’s philosophy. The Jacobin dictatorship and the Committee of Public Safety were not the logical consequence of his political teachings but of a quite different concept of representation, and though the legislative procedures and constitutional formulas adopted between 1789 and 1795 were drafted in the fiery light of his rhetoric, they time and again contradict traits which lie at the root of his political theory. Whether this provides evidence of a wilful misreading prompted by expedience and opportunism, or whether it reflects genuine widespread ignorance of the precise content of Rousseau’s works, is hard to say; but either way, we can concur with François Furet’s apposite conclusion that ‘in the final analysis, there is not much of the Social Contract in the French Revolution’.  

This in itself does not, however, disprove all suggestion of causality. For though Rousseau’s works may not have provided any definite political methods, the essential spirit of his project did play a central role in shaping the revolutionary mentality. His radical analysis of history as a process of degradation, his condemnation of the *ancien régime* as corrupt and redundant, and his prescriptions for moral regeneration and radical political  

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reform, all did much to inspire the emotional ethos of the revolutionary consciousness, and thus his relation to the Revolution cannot be treated as a mere misunderstanding sustained by borrowed language and imagery. As discussed in the previous chapter, the spirit that fostered the Terror might also be seen to find its equivalents in aspects of Rousseau’s doctrine, notably in his apparent intolerance of political dissension and his prescription that those who transgress against the laws of the patrie be put to death as enemies of the state (cf. OC: III, 376-7), though there are, it must be noted, procedural constraints that apply here, and there is nothing in his work to suggest that he saw terror as an inevitable emanation of virtue, or that he would have ever approved Robespierre’s assumption of quasi-dictatorial powers. Taking all this together would thus appear to confirm the view, most recently summarised by Bronislaw Baczko, that Rousseau’s influence on the Revolution was in effect exerted through a symbolic or mythical frame of reference, as although revolutionary leaders took inspiration from his ideas and spirit, they absorbed little of the theoretical and constitutional detail of his doctrine.47

All of this underlines the importance of distinguishing between what Rousseau says and what others might have him say. For despite his popular image as revolutionary idealist, and despite the provocative and inflammatory quality of his rhetoric, much of his thought is actually characterised by a strikingly cogent pragmatism. The ethics of his thought are categorical: slavery is an evil, freedom an imperative. Yet despite this he never advocates revolution as a strategy for redressing social ills – commenting on bloody civil struggles witnessed in Geneva in 1737, he writes in the Confessions, ‘Ce spectacle affreux me fit une impression si vive, que je jurai de ne tremper jamais dans aucune guerre civile, et de ne soutenir jamais au dedans la liberté par les armes, ni de ma personne ni de mon aveu’ (OC: I, 236). Ironically for one whose name has become so synonymous with the turmoil of popular revolution, and particularly the appalling carnage of the Terror, Rousseau abhorred violence and disorder: in a famous letter to the Countess of Wartensleben from September 1766 he declares that ‘le sang d’un seul homme est d’un plus grand prix que la liberté de tout le genre humain’ (CC: XXX, 112), whilst in the eighth of the Lettres de la Montaigne, he writes, ‘dans la misere des choses humaines quel bien vaut la peine d’être acheté du sang de nos freres? La liberté même est trop chere à ce prix.’ (OC: III, 836). Like Kant after him, he thought Enlightenment could only progress slowly, and that popular revolution would

never produce a true reform in the way of thinking.\textsuperscript{48} For this reason, he counselled gradual reform over radical upheaval. Granted, the \textit{Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité} does conclude with a vision of an overburdened people succumbing to revolutionary change, but this is far from an endorsement of insurrection. For though the violent overthrow of the tyrant is, he insists, a legitimate act,\textsuperscript{49} the outcome is decidedly bleak – a new state of nature and equality based on an excess of corruption rather than original purity and simplicity.\textsuperscript{50} Despite being an effective strategy for removing a despot, popular revolution thus cannot, to Rousseau’s mind, procure a new sense of justice and civil order, and instead leads invariably to a perpetuation of injustice, violence and tyranny:

Les Peuples une fois accoutumés à des Maîtres, ne sont plus en état de s’en passer. S’ils tentent de secouer le joug, ils s’éloignent d’autant plus de la liberté; que prenant pour elle une licence effrenée qui lui est opposée, leurs revolutions les livrent presque toujours à des séducteurs qui ne font qu’aggraver leurs chaînes. (OC: III, 113)\textsuperscript{51}

It is this scepticism concerning the efficacy of revolution which determines Rousseau’s pragmatic stance on social reform. Whilst he loathed the corruption and injustice he observed in most existing political states and longed for the eradication of inequality, he feared that prolonged exposure to oppression and inequality would dispossess a populace of the capabilities to withstand the euphoria of instant liberation, and therefore argues against

\textsuperscript{48} It is interesting – and perhaps surprising – to note that, in the early years in particular, Rousseau was frequently invoked on this point by conservative opponents of the Revolution, who published pamphlets carrying such titles as \textit{J.-J. Rousseau, aristocrate} (cf. McNeil, ‘The Cult of Rousseau’).

\textsuperscript{49} Cf. ‘Il n’est point à réclamer contre la violence. L’émeute qui finit par étrangler ou détrôner un Sultan est un acte aussi juridique que ceux par lesquels il dispose de la vie des vies et des biens de ses Sujets. La seule force le maintenoit, la seule force le renverse; toutes choses se passent ainsi selon l’ordre Naturel’ (OC: III, 191).

\textsuperscript{50} Cf. ‘C’est ici le dernier terme de l’inégalité, et le point extrême qui ferme le Cercle et touche au point d’où nous sommes partis: C’est ici que tous les particuliers redeviennent égaux parce qu’ils ne sont rien, et que les Sujets n’ayant plus d’autre Loi que la volonté du Maître, ni le Maître d’autre règle que ses passions, les notions du bien, et les principes de la justice s’évanouissent de rechef. C’est ici que tout se ramène à la seule Loi du plus fort, et par conséquent à un nouvel Etat de Nature différent de celui par lequel nous avons commencé, en ce que l’un étoit l’Etat de Nature dans sa pureté, et que ce dernier est le fruit d’un excès de corruption’ (OC: III, 191).

\textsuperscript{51} In Book II, Chapter 8 of \textit{Du contrat social}, Rousseau does acknowledge certain historical precedents of successful revolutions, but considers these rare exceptions to a more general rule: ‘Ce n’est pas que, comme quelques maladies bouleversent la tête des hommes et leur ôtent le souvenir du passé, il ne se trouve quelquefois dans la durée des Etats des époques violentes où les révolutions font sur les peuples ce que certaines crises font sur les individus, où l’horreur du passé tient lieu d’oubli, et où l’Etat, embrasé par les guerres civiles, renait pour ainsi dire de sa cendre et reprend la vigueur de la jeunesse en sortant des bras de la mort. Telle fut Sparte au temps de Lycurgue, telle fut Rome après les Tarquins; et telles ont été parmi nous la Hollande et la Suisse après l’expulsion des Tirans. Mais ces événemens sont rares; ce sont des exceptions dont la raison se trouve toujours dans la constitution particulière de l’Etat excepté’ (OC: III, 385).
the immediate enfranchisement of an enslaved population. In order to substantiate his concerns, Rousseau turns to one of his favourite illustrative examples from history, Rome:

Le Peuple Romain lui-même, ce modèle de tous les Peuples libres, ne fut point en état de se gouverner en sortant de l’oppression des Tarquins. Avili par l’esclavage et les travaux ignominieux qu’ils lui avoient imposés, ce n’étoit d’abord qu’une stupid Populace qu’il fallut ménager et gouverner avec la plus grande sagesse; afin que s’accoutumant peu à peu à respirer l’air salutaire de la liberté, ces ames énervées ou plutôt abruties sous la tyrannie, acquissent par degrés cette séverité de mœurs et cette fierté de courage qui en firent enfin le plus respectable de tous les Peuples. (OC: III, 113)

Whilst underscoring his distrust of the moral immaturity of the masses, this example also provides an insight into Rousseau’s own favoured approach to redressing inequitable social relations. For though he distances himself from revolution, he never gives up on the ideal of freedom – it is rather the case that his recognition of the tensions between theory and practice elicits a prudential approach geared towards a gradual realisation of liberty. Nowhere is this more evident than in his Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne. Though clearly inferior (both theoretically and rhetorically) to Du contrat social, this work is an important document, representing as it does Rousseau’s only sustained excursus into what might be termed applied politics. Here he designs a programme for social reform which, bridging the span between the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité and Du contrat social, addresses the problem of how to move towards the just modern (nation) state. The overriding message of the project is clear – for progress to be effective, reform of social institutions must be preceded by a reform of moral sensibilities and values:

Je sens la difficulté du projet d’affranchir [les] peuples. Ce que je crains n’est pas seulement l’intérêt mal entendu, l’amour-propre et les préjugés des maîtres. Cet obstacle vaincu, je craindrois les vices et la lâcheté des serfs. La liberté est un aliment de bon suc mais de forte digestion; il faut des estomacs bien sains pour le supporter. Je ris de ces peuples avilis qui, se laissant ameuter par des ligueurs, osent parler de liberté sans même en avoir l’idée, et, le coeur plein de tous les vices des esclaves, s’imaginent que pour être libres il suffit d’être des mutins. Fièrre et sainte liberté! si ces pauvres gens pouvoient te connaitre, s’ils savoient à quel prix on t’acquiert et te conserve, s’ils sentoient combien tes loix

52 Cf. ‘[I]l en est de la liberté comme de ces aliments solides et succulens, ou de ces vins généreux, propres à nourrir et fortifier les temperaments robustes qui en ont l’habitude, mais qui accablent, ruinent et envoient les faibles et délicats qui n’y sont point faits’ (OC: III, 112-13). Rousseau employs the same image in his Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne : ‘La liberté est un aliment de bon suc mais de forte digestion; il faut des estomacs bien sains pour le supporter’ (OC: III, 974).
This plea for caution and discretion does not signal loyalty to any prevailing social orthodoxy, nor does it constitute a justification of, or demand for tolerance of, master-slave relations. For Rousseau, serfdom is the basest manifestation of social inequality, and in *Du contrat social* he denounces the right of slavery as illegitimate, absurd and meaningless. Despite his emancipatory ideals, however, he was nonetheless concerned that though the violent impulse of revolution may effectively abolish the physical restrictions of tyranny and oppression, it fails to replace them with new moral constraints, thereby exposing society to the threat of violent excess, mob rule and renewed injustice – a state he considered just as inimical to genuine freedom as institutionalised despotism. The fruit of popular revolution – irrespective of how legitimate the motivation – is, in his view, license rather than liberty, and in order to avoid the risk of anarchy and vengeful chaos, an enslaved populace must, therefore, be first prepared for incipient freedom via a cautious evolutionary development of morals and ideals.

4.4 ‘Freiheit’ or ‘Rache’? The Dynamics of the Black Rebellion

The contours of this position on revolution, in encompassing both Enlightenment ideals of liberty and a fear of violence and renewed tyranny, provide a useful map to the political terrain of *Die Verlobung*. The narrative commences at a point during the conflict when the occupying French troops have been forced to beat a retreat to Port-au-Prince, where they await imminent onslaught from the black rebels. The insurrection has, it seems, been successful: the colonial system has been overthrown, and established power relations on the island have been turned on their head. Closer inspection, however, suggests that the nature

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53 Cf. ‘Ainsi, de quelque sens qu’on envisage les choses, le droit d’esclave est nul, non seulement parce qu’il est illégitime, mais parce qu’il est absurde et ne signifie rien. Ces mots esclavage, et, droit sont contradictoires; ils s’excluent mutuellement. Soit d’un homme à un homme, soit d’un homme à un peuple, ce discours sera toujours également insensé. Je fais avec toi une convention toute à ta charge et toute à mon profit, que j’observerai tant qu’il me plaira, et que tu observeras tant qu’il me plaira’ (OC: III, 358).
of this success requires qualification, and a number of ambiguities come into particularly sharp focus when viewed under the double aspect of Rousseau’s theories and the historical experience of the Revolution.

The basis for a more critical take on revolutionary dynamics lies in the structures of violence that constitute the political space of the tale. In its essential form, the anti-colonial rebellion imparts a fundamental shift, replacing the systematic violence of oppression with the counter-violence of resistance and leading, ultimately, to all-out war. What emerges from the narrative, however, is the sense of a new tyranny of the revolution, raising itself upon the ruins of the old order. This manifests itself in two particular forms. First, there is the retributive threat to external enemies – to all those either directly or indirectly implicated in the old colonial regime whose collective lives have, it seems, been declared forfeit. In this regard, the text can be seen to revisit a central problematic which, as Grathoff has shown, recurs at various points across Kleist’s oeuvre, most notably in *Michael Kohlhaas* – that of the revolutionary dialectic of violence ‘die den Menschen den Subjektstatus versprach, um […] doch wieder Objekte zu produzieren’. Perhaps even more pertinent, however, is the internalisation of this aggression that now imperils anyone suspected of betraying the black campaign and failing to respect new moral codes, as signalled by the proclamation fixed to the door in Congo Hoango’s home forbidding all blacks, on pain of death, from offering aid or protection to the whites (cf. DKV: III, 242).

The implication of this seems apparent: the revolutionary cause has been elevated to the level of absolute moral imperative to which all other concerns must be subordinated, with anyone not absolutely committed to extreme principles – in this case the precept that all whites, irrespective of individual guilt, must be massacred – exposed to murderous threats. Placed in its historical context, it seems likewise clear to my mind that this deliberately reflects the radicalisation of policy that fed into the Terror, as the Revolution’s ‘cannibal

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54 Cf. Babekan’s response to Toni’s plea that Gustav should be spared due to a lack of individual guilt: ‘Die Alte […] fragte, was der junge Portugiese verschuldet, den man unter dem Torweg kürzlich mit Keulen zu Boden geworfen habe? Sie fragte, was die beiden Holländer verbrochen, die vor drei Wochen durch die Kugeln der Neger im Hofe gefallen wären? Sie wollte wissen, was man den drei Franzosen und so vielen andern einzelnen Flüchtlingen, vom Geschlecht der Weißen, zur Last gelegt habe, die mit Büchsen, Spießen und Dolchen, seitdem Ausbruch der Empörung, im Hause hingerichtet worden wären?’ (DKV: III, 241).

set upon its recent friends – a point supported by the echo of ideological polarisations in the various allusions to ‘Treue’ and ‘Verrat’ when Hoango and Babekan later come to question Toni’s allegiances.

Of course others take an entirely different view on these points, and instead link the aspect of total commitment and political terror in a largely ‘positive’ sense to Kleist’s unconditional ethics of (national) liberation. This returns us to one of the central issues raised earlier, namely the question of the political motivation for the violence. In Die Herrmannsschlacht, this is self-evident – the primacy of the national cause is at the fore throughout. In Die Verlobung, however, things are, as I have suggested, far less straightforward and more complex. To gloss this, we might look more closely at the nexus of liberty and vengeance as it appears in the two texts respectively. In the drama, the German battle cry ‘Empörung! Rache! Freiheit!’ (DKV: II, 511) outlines successive stages in Herrmann’s master plan for national liberation – he deliberately incites a raging desire for revenge as a means to call forth an uprising that will see the defeat of Roman tyranny.

Applying the same model to the novella, we find ample reference, from all sides, to the first two conditions, but the third is conspicuously absent – there is, as far as I am aware, no mention of this being part of a fight for ‘Freiheit’. Critics who favour a subversive reading may very well explain this away via reference to narrative bias, and/or point, as we have seen, to the historical narrative of Haiti to show that this is a necessary stage in the desperate struggle towards liberty. Yet to rely so heavily on extra-textual material in relation to so central an issue seems, to my mind, somewhat dubious, and we might point out here that in fact, post-1804 developments on Haiti saw the slave rebellion become something of a touchstone for abolitionist debates, often used to highlight the pitfalls of

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abrupt change. This is not to suggest that Kleist’s text must necessarily be viewed in this light, but it does show how approaching the political aspect in terms of the historical framing raises as many problems as it solves. Nor, we might add, is it possible to deduce a national cause from the reference to ‘Vaterland’ in connection with Hoango’s actions, as this merely reveals that what compels him to murder Villeneuve is the memory of the tyranny that initially ripped him from his homeland – it does not provide evidence that he is now fighting for Haitian independence. As Uerlings notes, ‘Vaterland’ is, in Die Verlobung, ‘kein politisches Konzept’, and the formation of a collective national liberty appears to be deliberately excised from the narrative. Instead, as we see in the example of Hoango, focus is placed above all on a burning – and by no means unjustified – desire for retribution as the primary motor for the current brutalities.

This point might be developed if we turn to the two other principal agents of black violence in the text – Babekan and the negress who deliberately infects a former lover with yellow fever. In both cases, the overriding motive of revenge is prominent. For Babekan, this stems from her experience at the hands of both the French merchant Herr Bertrand, who fathered Toni only to then callously deny paternity in court, and Villeneuve, who had subsequently – and in spite of Babekan’s innocence – sixty ‘Peitschenhiebe’ (DKV: III, 232) administered as punishment. It is this history of maltreatment that accounts for what appears to be a seemingly unconditional and indiscriminate thirst for vengeance against all whites. A subtle textual allusion underscores this, as just after Toni’s outburst in the morning following the ‘Liebesnacht’, when she declares that she would rather die than allow Gustav to come to harm, Babekan, we are told, places herself down at a ‘Spinnrocken’ (DKV: III, 242). The reference is dropped in casually, but may be seen to carry important associations, recalling as it does the image of the Greek Fates who spin and measure the thread of life. Later, Dickens was, of course, to exploit the same mythological icon in his portrayal of Madame Defarge who, whilst appearing to knit peacefully, is in fact all the while compiling a coded ‘black list’ of revolutionary enemies. Like Defarge, Desalines was a tyrannical ruler, who not only ordered the mass execution of all whites remaining on the island (despite initially promising them immunity), but also reintroduced the plantation system and imposed incredibly harsh working conditions (cf. Laurent Dubois, Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004)). Though again we cannot be entirely sure how much Kleist knew of this, Uerlings has pointed out that the ‘Unreife’ argument regarding the revolution can be found in most of the texts he is commonly supposed to have consulted, including those by Dubroca, Rainford and Zschokke (cf. Uerlings, ‘Preußen in Haiti?’, pp. 189-92).
Babekan too appears as a ruthless incarnation of vengeance, perhaps even figuring as an allegory for the blind, consuming fury of the Revolution. That Toni happens to be standing, at this moment, by the door to which the proclamation alluded to earlier is affixed, is hardly accidental, and rather rounds out the fuller implications of the scene – as she sits at her spinning wheel, Babekan is, one assumes, not only measuring the thread of Gustav’s life as revolutionary enemy, but also that of Toni as suspected traitor.

The tale Gustav relates of the negress is likewise one of sexual ill-treatment and revenge. Three years prior to the eruption of violence she had, we are told, been treated harshly by a former master piqued by her spurning of his advances. Upon learning that the culprit is sheltering nearby, and knowing herself to be sick of yellow fever, she deliberately tempts him into a liaison so as to infect him with the disease. Again, what we have is an act of highly personalised vengeance – though the negress taunts the planter, ‘mit dem Ausdruck wilder und kalter Wut’: ‘geh und gib das gelbe Fieber allen denen, die dir gleichen’ (DKV: III, 233), the very fact of revealing what she has done makes clear there is no political motive here. The oxymoronic coupling of ‘wild’ and ‘kalt’ is particularly apt, precisely capturing a sense of both raging emotion and cool calculation which might, I submit, be applied more generally to the vista of revolutionary violence. A useful parallel can be established here with the Thusnelda episode in Die Herrmannsschlacht. Deceived by Ventidius, she too succumbs to a primitive lust for vengeance, conceiving an elaborate and ruthless plan that involves luring the Roman legate to a fateful rendezvous with a ravenous she-bear. Angress, in her analysis, imputes political relevance to this, suggesting that her betrayal turns Thusnelda ‘rabadly anti-Roman’, though this hardly seems the case – her sole concern, it appears, is with exacting personal revenge. Rather more convincing is the view put forward by Klaus Müller-Salget, amongst others, that Thusnelda’s ‘Bekehrung’ provides a snapshot of Herrmann’s success as political persuader. For the whole scenario is, by and large, the product of his manipulations – yes, Ventidius is a

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62 An element of this might also be seen in the character of Penthesilea who, as Inge Stephan has shown, approximates the Amazon figures of the Revolution such as Olympe de Gouges and Théorigne de Méricourt, the latter of whom was, of course, famously diagnosed as suffering from ‘revolutionary fever’ (cf. Inge Stephan, “‘Da werden Weiber zu Hyänen ...’: Amazonen und Amazonenmythen bei Schiller und Kleist’, Feministische Literaturwissenschaft, ed. by Inge Stephan and Sigrid Weigel (Berlin: Argument, 1984), pp. 23-42). The crucial point here, however, is that where Penthesilea appears as a sublime figure, ‘halb Grazie, halb Furie’, Babekan is an altogether more straightforward character, embodying the ‘Furie’ of revolutionary violence with none of the ‘Grazie’.

63 Angress, ‘Kleist’s Treatment of Imperialism’, p. 29.

charlatan with no genuine interest in Thusnelda, but it is Herrmann who reveals this to her, and who actively prompts her to the vow of vengeance which he, tellingly, greets with the words ‘Nun denn, ist der erste Sieg erfochten!’ (DKV: II, 521). Insofar as the episode may carry any political significance, then, it does so not in and of itself, but rather solely as part of Herrmann’s broader scheme.

A comparison of these two instances thus opens up one of central variances between *Die Verlobung* and *Die Herrmannsschlacht*. For although both texts are, clearly, concerned with acts of violent retribution committed in the revolutionary arena, there are nonetheless several key differences to note. A first relates to the fundamental nature of the urge for vengeance. In *Die Verlobung* this issues, as we have seen, from personal exposure to the inhumanity and injustice of the colonial system, which has instilled in the blacks an intense and organic sense of indignation. In *Die Herrmannsschlacht*, on the other hand, the German Volk has not had the same direct experience of anguish and suffering, and in fact, Herrmann has to go to extraordinary lengths to artificially compel them to a course of revenge via a campaign of atrocity propaganda. This, in turn, has a major bearing on the dynamics of revolution in the two texts, for where, in the drama, Herrmann is able to control and direct the agency of vengeance in line with his broader objectives, the highly personalised nature of the black desire for retribution robs their campaign of the same inner cohesion and determination. This does not mean that the revolution is necessarily disorganised or unstructured – the fact that Dessalines is marching on Port-au-Prince at the head of an army of 30,000 men provides ample evidence that the former slaves have organised themselves into a daunting military force. It is nonetheless the case that, as characters in the novella, neither Dessalines nor Hoango exert anything like the same level of control over events as Herrmann, nor do they provide the same kind of focused leadership. In fact, the black rebellion retains throughout something of the air of an unplanned mass initiative, and pitting this against the obvious fastening on the question of leadership in *Die Herrmannsschlacht* suggests quite strongly that the two works are concerned with two distinct revolutionary paradigms: a spontaneous revolution from below in the novella, and a controlled mobilisation of people and resources in the drama. Where this distinction manifests itself most clearly is in the relation between liberty and revenge, for where, in *Die Herrmannsschlacht*, the latter is a means to the former, it appears in *Die Verlobung* to

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65 The fact that Hoango was ‘einer der Ersten, der die Büchse ergriff’ (DKV: III, 222) suggests in itself that the initial conflagration of violence was more spontaneous than planned.
be rather the conferment of freedom which affords the opportunity for vengeance, as is suggested by Gustav’s response when questioned by Toni as to how the whites have incurred such hatred on the island:

[…] durch das allgemeine Verhältnis, das sie, als Herren der Insel, zu den Schwarzen hatten, und das ich, die Wahrheit zu gestehen, mich nicht unterfangen will, in Schutz zu nehmen; das aber schon seit vielen Jahrhunderten auf diese Weise bestand! Der Wahnsinn der Freiheit, der alle diese Pflanzungen ergriffen hat, trieb die Negern und Kreolen, die Ketten, die sie drückten, zu brechen, und an den Weißen wegen vielfacher und tadelnswürdiger Mißhandlungen, die sie von einigen schlechten Mitgliedern derselben erlitten, Rache zu nehmen. (DKV: III, 233)

While one cannot, of course, rely on Gustav for an impartial verdict on events, and even though one must here contend with his equivocations and attempts at partial justification, his overall assessment of the situation nonetheless strikes one as true. The ‘Wahnsinn der Freiheit’, that is the frenzy sparked by abrupt emancipation (cf. DKV: III, 846), has unchained a burning desire for violent retribution amongst the blacks, and what we now see, much like during the Terror, is a brutal vision of total social revenge in action. This link is reinforced through the anecdote of Mariane’s sacrifice in Strasbourg, and the parallel that might be drawn to Toni’s tragic death at the story’s conclusion. The connection lies in the exposure of two regimes which, though initially driven by idealistic impulses (‘die unbesonnenen Schritte des National-Konvents’ (DKV: III, 222)), have become so dogmatic and violent that both Mariane and Toni are forced into acts of dissimulation in which they appear to reject Gustav in order to save him from the wrath of the revolutionaries. In both cases, popular revolution has occasioned renewed structural violence and tyranny: much as the blacks threaten non-adherence to new moral tenets with death, so too must the revolutionaries in Strasbourg have a victim for any transgression against new public codes, and it is with ‘unerhörte[r] Leichtfertigkeit’ (DKV: III, 237) that Mariane is carted off to the guillotine as a scapegoat for Gustav’s reckless comments criticising the Revolutionary Tribunal.66 In this respect, Kleist’s choice of name appears to carry particular relevance, as the ‘Marianne’ was, of course, a central detail of revolutionary iconography, female personification of the new political order and emblem of liberty, equality, fraternity, reason

66 It is also worth noting that Gustav refers to the revolutionaries as ‘[u]nmenschlich[,]’ (DKV: III, 238) and ‘ungeduldige[,] Blutmenschen’ (DKV: III, 238) – terms which echo the narrative account of the black rebellion.
and virtue. Her execution at the hands of the revolutionaries thus acquires double significance, as it is not merely an innocent victim that succumbs to the vengeance of the Terror, but, by extension, the original ideals and pure revolutionary spirit as well – a case of Saturn devouring its children, if you will. Tracing the implied association, we find the same to be true of the black rebellion on Haiti, where the unrestrained energy released by the insurrection – compounded by an absence of controlled leadership – appears to have likewise led to a clouding of goals, with a rapacious lust for revenge supplanting any ideological commitment to liberty as the new moral centre of the revolutionary dynamic.

The flipside to this parallel, which may, in the first instance, appear to reiterate racial conventionalities, is, in fact, to open up the racial-moral axis of the tale. For in striking such a close homology to the Terror, Kleist demonstrates quite conclusively that the current violence on Haiti is not explicable in terms of a ‘black’ barbarism – the point being, rather, that any popular revolution driven by social resentment and a thirst for retributive justice, whether on a Caribbean island or in the centre of civilised Europe, is likely to yield a new cycle of tyranny and brutality. This links back to what was said earlier regarding Kleist’s refusal to construct the novella on the simple opposition between victims and perpetrators, or between objects of pity and objects of condemnation. Though now descended into a maelstrom of vengeance, the black rebellion is presented as an explosive response to injustice and oppression, understandable, if scarcely defensible. As Müller-Salget notes, ‘schon das Wort “Rache” setzt […] ein vorangegangenes Unrecht voraus’ (DKV: III, 838), and though he does not condone their strategies, Kleist clearly does make an issue of exposing the reader to the psychological processes which motivate the former slaves, taking pains to show how the rage and resentment driving the revolution is very much a product of the institutionalised structures and practices of the colonial regime. In doing so, he may tacitly acknowledge the ideological legitimacy of the rebellion – the critical presentation of current dynamics by no means invalidates the initial cause of liberty. At the same time, he also provides a context that helps explain the current black strategy of total counter-violence: having been subjected to violent colonial rule for so long, it comes as little surprise that the revolutionaries are ill-equipped to do anything other than retaliate

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67 Cf. Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne au combat: L’imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1789 à 1880* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979). This insignia was widely applied from 1789 onwards, with numerous sculptors and painters depicting the Marianne figure as a civic allegory for the values of the revolution. Given its popularity and influence, it is unthinkable that Kleist should not have been familiar with the motif, and he must almost certainly have encountered it in one form or another during his time in Paris.
in like fashion and repeat familiar practices. This cyclical pattern is confirmed – in another ironic twist – by Babekan’s disclosure to Gustav that all whites (and ‘creolische Halbhunde’ (DKV: III, 228)) remaining on the island are now subject to the mercy of Hoango’s ‘Willkür und Gewalttätigkeit’ (DKV: III, 228). Though the alignment of ‘creoles’ such as herself and Toni with the whites is a deliberate intrigue, later developments in the text bring the validity of her comments regarding the fate of the whites to bear. Arbitrariness and violence, the two principal criticisms levelled against the colonists in the text, have not been eradicated by the insurrection, but have rather become defining characteristics of the new black regime. Picking up on a specific element of Rousseau’s discourse, Kleist thus presents a Janus-faced profile of revolution, on the one hand giving full weight to the ideals of liberty and emancipation from oppression, yet on the other demonstrating how popular violence tends to be self-perpetuating, leading not to genuine moral change or progress but rather to new forms of tyranny and brutality.

4.5 “Ich bin eine Weiße!” Toni’s Self-Realisation Between Ethics and Aesthetics

Up to this point, attention has been directed primarily to how Kleist portrays the conflict on Haiti at the level of the collective so as to raise the question of the legitimacy of popular violence and the revolutionary concept of freedom. In this final section, however, I should like to look a little more closely at how such issues are coupled with an experimental inquiry into the possibilities of moral-aesthetic education and humanising reform that emerges out of the struggle between the situative narratives of love and politics, and takes shape through the tragic unfolding of Toni’s relationship with Gustav.

In a good deal of the secondary literature, the latter does not, perhaps unsurprisingly, come off at all well. Stephens, for instance, noting the apparent lack of foresight that impairs his actions, submits that Kleist here ‘exploit[s] the device much used in horror fiction since Bram Stoker’s Dracula, namely the stupidity of the good’. 68 Others, meanwhile, take an altogether more sinister view of his motives – both Michael Perraudin and Hans-Jakob Werlen, for example, accuse him of a deliberate seductive effort and campaign of domination over Toni,69 whilst Paul Michael Lützeler, in similar fashion, reads

into the terms of the ‘Verlobung’ a stark critique of the mechanisms of European colonialism.\textsuperscript{70} Hans-Peter Herrmann, on the other hand, offers a counter perspective to this view, pointing out a number of textual instances that show how, far from being the innocent victim of Gustav’s solicitations, Toni is, in fact, very much an active partner in the relationship,\textsuperscript{71} whilst Hilda Brown likewise rejects the idea that Gustav is cast as a particularly calculating figure, preferring to see him as a ‘rather ordinary mortal, more passive than active, very easily swayed by external stimuli’.\textsuperscript{72} Clearly, there are grounds upon which he might be censured: he is, as both Stephens and Brown suggest, gullible and easily influenced, not very bright or discriminating, and lacking in prudence. Not to mention, of course, the lack of trust and perception that prompts him to brutally murder his lover in an unmitigated – and unmitigable – act of retribution. That said, it is nonetheless important, I believe, to assess these flaws and confusions against the backdrop of the situation in which he finds himself – a ‘Fremder’ in hostile territory, exposed and vulnerable, lacking orientation, surrounded by mistrust and deceit,\textsuperscript{73} and (rightly) fearing for his life.

These anxieties find two particular outlets. On the one hand, they manifest themselves in an apparent need for physical contact – Gustav is forever reinforcing his entreaties or looking for assurance through kisses and touching of hands.\textsuperscript{74} On the other, and rather more critically, they lead him to seek refuge and certainty by clinging to a rigid system of morality based on racial difference. From the moment he arrives at the plantation and asks Babekan ‘seid Ihr eine Negerin?’ (DKV: III, 223), Gustav’s actions and decisions are dictated by the associations of this black-white division. Thus it is that, even when admiring her beauty, he finds the ambiguous yellow tinge in Toni’s face ‘anstößig’ (DKV: III, 235) – a casual indicator that foreshadows the story’s desperate end. For it is in Gustav’s failure to transcend the limitations of such arbitrary moral judgements that the root of the tragedy lies. Although he claims to have learned the ‘Inbegriff aller Güte und

\textsuperscript{70} Cf. Lützeler, \textit{Napoleons Kolonialraum}.

\textsuperscript{71} Cf. Herrmann, ‘\textit{Die Verlobung in St. Domingo}’, p. 124.


\textsuperscript{73} For this reason it is hardly surprising that both Bernhard Böschenstein (cf. ‘Kleist und Rousseau’, \textit{Klb} (1981/2), 145-56) and Christian Moser (cf. \textit{Verfehlte Gefühle: Wissen, Begehren, Darstellen bei Kleist und Rousseau} (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993)) draw heavily on \textit{Die Verlobung} in their respective explorations of transparency, trust and innocence in relation to Rousseau – the Haitian setting almost seems a paradigmatic opposite to the open, ideal world of Clarens in \textit{La Nouvelle Héloïse}.

\textsuperscript{74} Ilse Graham notes that within the narrative hands are either linked or stroked no fewer than twenty-one times (cf. Ilse Graham, \textit{Heinrich von Kleist: Word into Flesh} (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1977), p. 132).
Vortrefflichkeit’ (DKV: III, 237) from Mariane’s selfless sacrifice, his inability to free himself from the disabling restraints of cultural prejudice means he is unable to recognise the same in Toni’s actions. When she remarks earlier to Babekan that Gustav’s imagination was so full of ‘Mohren’ and ‘Negern’ upon arrival that ‘wenn ihm eine Dame von Paris oder Marseille die Türe geöffnet hätte, er würde sie für eine Negerin gehalten haben’ (DKV: III, 230), we have little inkling of the tragic prophecy of her words, as when she later strives to elevate herself to the same moral plane as the heroic (white) Frenchwoman, all Gustav sees is her counterpart, the treacherous negress, thus prompting the appalling denouement. Set against the background of the violent intercultural conflict, Kleist might again be seen to be wielding a double-edged sword here, on the one hand taking up the familiar theme of the potential vicissitudes of human behaviour under intense stress and tension, and, on the other, deliberately exposing the shortcomings and contradictions of a mode of European racial thinking which, as Herrmann suggests, ‘sich selbst ad absurdum führt’.

This latter point becomes even more explicit if we set Gustav’s actions against Toni’s development over the course of the novella. This is presented in the narrative line as a successful self-realisation: initially a willing, if unreflecting, accomplice to the black campaign of violence, Toni is pressed by her encounter with Gustav to reflect for the first time on the ethical implications of her role as seductress, and so embarks on a journey towards a new sense of moral autonomy. The key turning points are provided by the two anecdotes relayed concerning first the negress, then Mariane. Upon hearing the first, and being asked by Gustav the deliberately loaded question of whether she would be capable of such treachery, Toni replies ‘Nein!’, we are told, but does so lowering her eyes, ‘verwirrt’ (DKV: III, 234). Where previously she has uncritically accepted prevailing black standards, she is here suddenly faced with a different perspective that prompts her to call such values into question, hence her all too understandable confusion. In the tale of Mariane’s sacrifice, meanwhile, she finds a perfect counter-example of feminine virtue which clearly has a powerful impact on her sensibilities, all the more so when Gustav notes ‘eine wunderbare Ähnlichkeit’ between the two women (DKV: III, 237). In the scenes that follow, the passing to Toni of the cross once owned by Mariane becomes an emblem of growing self-identification with her courage and suffering – from this point she has, it seems,

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symbolically adopted the role of Gustav’s former fiancée. Therefore it is that over the course of the action in the text she comes to reject the ingrained, unconditional ethics of the blacks in favour of a new moral identity which is founded on both loyalty to her newly-betrothed and a desire to emulate Mariane’s heroism, and which later leads to her declaring a quite definitive shift of allegiance with the vow ‘ich bin eine Weiße’ (DKV: III, 256).

These words have in recent times troubled critics, seeming as they do to indicate a weighted distinction between black and white morality. As a result, it has become customary to play down Toni’s transformation, either by suggesting that she merely exchanges one set of values for another, or else to read from the tragic close a deconstruction of Enlightenment ethics and aesthetics, often cast in relation to the Schillerian terminology of ‘Anmut’, ‘Würde’ and the ‘schöne Seele’. In response to the first of these contentions we might object that to read Toni’s character in such terms is to overlook the more nuanced confusion she experiences and the greater complexity in her reaction to various incidents, as well as to deny the tragic dimension that carries the overriding tone of the piece. If it were the case that she merely swapped one moral doctrine for another, then, given that prejudice on the island is shown to be reciprocal, it would surely follow that all blacks would, when viewed through this new ethical lens, cease to be individuals and become a wicked collective – which is clearly not the case. For even when devising her plan to rescue Gustav, Toni continues to exhibit concern for the welfare of Hoango and Babekan, eliciting from Herr Strömli the promise that both should, as far as remains possible, be spared (cf. DKV: III, 254). The process of moral self-realisation she undergoes is thus quite real, and it is in this burgeoning ability to rise above racial prejudice that her heroism resides – a heroism which crystallises not only against Gustav’s failure to match her development, but also against Babekan’s indiscriminate morality of vengeance. For it is the latter’s inability to interpret actions in terms other than absolute loyalty (‘Treue’) and total betrayal (‘Verrat’) that compels Toni to eventually declare allegiance to the whites in such a forthright fashion. Thus it is that rather than signalling a simple

reversal of values undertaken of her own volition, her words identifying with the whites appear to stand, above all, as a searing indictment of a social and political ethics that knows no room for individual moral autonomy.

Of course, the ultimate, tragic irony of all this is that, having overcome the cultural conditioning of her upbringing and declared loyalty to her lover, Toni discovers that there is no place for her amongst the whites either. Fleeting, we get a glimpse of a possible happy ending as she enters Gustav’s room led by Herr Ströml and with Seppy on her arm – a striking image suggesting a reconciliation across racial lines. Unfortunately, however, Gustav fails to take heed of the visual trigger, still seemingly blinded by the ambiguous hue of her physiognomy and the rage of presumed betrayal. Thus the tale closes by casting a shadow over Toni’s moral education, though this need not necessarily be considered part of a deliberate deconstruction of humanist ideals in the narrative. Instead, the tragic outcome might be seen as a critical reflection on pressing social and political issues, not only opening up the paradoxes of Enlightenment discourse on race and gender, but also the complex ethics of revolution and emancipation. The fate of Toni does not devalue or disparage the kind of educational process she undergoes, but rather, on the contrary, suggests the broader need to put aside prejudice, resentment and violent moral codes. For in keeping with his balanced portrayal of political ethics, Kleist shows Toni’s development to be assaulted from both sides: by the seething anger and renewed tyrannical energy of the blacks on the one hand, and by complacent notions of white cultural and racial superiority on the other. It is in this sense, I believe, that we can draw a further direct link to Rousseau who, when discussing the dilemmas of emancipation in the *Considerations sur le gouvernement de Pologne*, stresses that the problem lies in the ingrained prejudice of both oppressors and oppressed alike. Freedom and slavery are, he insists, mental states as well as physical ones, and until the psychological barriers of prejudice are worn down on both sides, social progress is impossible. In *Die Verlobung*, Kleist takes on this specific theme as part of his own inquiry into revolutionary ethics, graphically exposing its manifestations through both the broad panorama of political violence, and the interplay between the central characters, particularly Toni, Gustav and Babekan. Bearing in mind what was said in the

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previous chapter on *Das Erdbeben*, we might, of course, also see in the treatment of revolutionary dynamics a latent critique of the more dangerous elements of Rousseau’s theories, though this appears to fit far less readily within the narrative framework of this tale. It rather seems to be the case that in here shifting focus to the legitimacy of popular violence, Kleist turns attention more towards Rousseau’s pragmatic views on revolutionary ethics and politics, providing a creative refraction of the twin message – confirmed by the historical experience of the Revolution – that moral reform must precede radical social change, and that if freedom is granted to an enslaved populace whilst prejudice and resentment still run high, then license and disorder is the inevitable outcome, with unrestrained passions capable of transforming even the most idealistic crusade for liberty into a bloodbath of violent retribution and vengeance.
CHAPTER FIVE

Die Herrmannsschlacht

As touched upon in the previous chapter, Kleist’s 1808 drama *Die Herrmannsschlacht* is directly and principally concerned with the question of national liberation and the fight against French imperialism. In contrast to *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*, the text is clearly determined for and by a specific moment of historical crisis: in a letter to Karl Freiherr von Stein zum Altenstein from January 1809, for instance, Kleist states that the play is ‘auf keinem […] entfernten Standpunct gedichtet’ and falls directly in ‘die Mitte der Zeit’ (DKV: IV, 426-27), whilst a month later he writes to Heinrich Joseph von Collin that this particular work is ‘mehr, als irgend ein anderes, für den Augenblick berechnet’ (DKV: IV, 429). Conceived as a response to the current political situation under Napoleonic occupation, the drama parallels Prussia’s position with the historical precedent of the ancient Germans in their relation to the Roman Empire, invoking the myth of Arminius the Cheruscan who, in 9 A.D., led a coalition of Germanic tribes to victory over Quinctilius Varus’s Roman legions at the Battle of Teutoburg Forest, thereby halting the relentless march of Roman conquest and securing liberty for the German people. Using the material provided by this foundational narrative, Kleist constructs a thinly-veiled drame-à-clef through which he voices an appeal for cooperation against the imperial foe, and sketches a ‘scenario of conduct’ 1 demonstrating how a superior foreign military power might be repelled and defeated by smaller groups of less sophisticated combatants in a brutal, no-holds-barred war of total national defence.

To understand the radical – and controversial – political message of the text, we must begin by sketching in some of the background detail. Following the catastrophic defeats inflicted by French troops at Jena and Auerstädt in 1806, and the humiliating spectacle of Napoleon’s triumphant entrance into Berlin a fortnight later, the political situation in Prussia had reached an embarrassing nadir with the harsh territorial annexations and crippling demands for reparations prescribed by the Treaties of Tilsit, ratified in July 1807. Recognising the threat which occupation and the enormous war indemnity posed to

the very existence of the state, a cadre of prominent ministers centred around Freiherr Karl vom und zum Stein and Karl August von Hardenberg embarked upon an ambitious programme of legislative and procedural reform designed to revitalise the Prussian system. Targeting internal political and social structures, Stein and Hardenberg initiated a series of measures intended to boost cohesion and state efficiency, whilst all the while working towards a clear and resolute long-term objective – to prepare for a future reckoning with the French that would hopefully witness the defeat of Napoleon and the resurrection of the state.

Before these aspirations could ever hope to be realised, serious military reform would first have to be undertaken. The ignominious defeats at Jena and Auerstädt had exposed deep-rooted deficiencies in the once proud Prussian army, debunking the infantry’s fearsome reputation for iron discipline and ruthless efficiency, and revealing it to be hopelessly ill-equipped to cope with the demands of modern warfare. Out-thought, outfought and outmanoeuvred by Napoleon’s fierce, mobile troops, it was clear to the reformers that a radical overhaul was long overdue. Impressed by the French ability to mobilise the nation’s entire human resources, they sought to modernise the Prussian army along similar lines, introducing universal conscription modelled on the *levée en masse*, whilst at the same time training soldiers in the skirmishing tactics (*tirailleur*) employed to such devastating effect by the French infantry. Yet with the terms of the Treaties of Tilsit restricting the military to a maximum force of 42,000 men, the reformers recognised that irrespective of the rigour and success of internal modernisation they could not possibly defeat Napoleon’s *Grande Armée* alone. The resources for such a campaign could only be provided by cooperation with other German states, particularly Austria, in a war supported by national insurgency, and so Prussia became the focus for the cultivation of a new moral bond of nationally-oriented patriotism intended to prepare the ground for a pan-Germanic uprising against imperial occupation.

From the outset, literature was seen as a powerful vehicle for imparting this patriotic message. For events in revolutionary France had demonstrated the effectiveness of mass propaganda, not only as a medium through which political ideals could be communicated, but also as a means of inspiring popular action; and those at the fountainhead of the drive to foster a collective German identity were keen to exploit the new-found power of the written word in their efforts to unite and mobilise the nation. In both political and cultural spheres there was a conscious drive to politicise literature in the name of the national cause: Stein,
for instance, actively encouraged and coordinated the activities of patriotic writers;\(^2\) Ernst Moritz Arndt called on the Germans to replicate the propaganda campaigns that saw a wave of pamphlets and leaflets flood France during the Revolution;\(^3\) whilst August Wilhelm Schlegel cast an appeal for a ‘wache, unmittelbare, energische und besonders eine patriotische Poesie’.\(^4\) The result was the emergence of a tide of patriotic literature designed not only to arouse national consciousness but to also enflame popular feeling against Napoleon, with many of the most well-known examples, penned by the likes of Arndt, Theodor Körner and Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, calling on the German Volk to rally for a bloody and brutal fight to the death against the evil oppressor.

It is against this backdrop that we must consider the implications of Kleist’s turn to direct political activism from mid-1808 onwards. In many respects, his conversion into a fully engaged political writer must strike one as something of a volte-face, coming as it does on the heels of the politically innocuous Das Käthchen von Heilbronn, the first version of which was probably completed at some point in spring 1808 (cf. DKV: II, 860). There is, however, a strong patriotic thread running throughout his letters from late 1805 onwards, and his decisive move towards political writing is in fact prefigured by a long-standing concern for the fate of the nation and an even longer-standing enmity towards Napoleon and his plans for European domination.\(^5\) That this patriotic spirit suddenly erupts in the early summer of 1808 is presumably owing to the decisive shift in the political climate generated first by the sensational intelligence of the Spanish Dos de Mayo uprising and the French defeat at Baylén, and then by the subsequent resolution of the Austrian war party to plan a resumption of hostilities for spring 1809. Kleist, it seems, had an inside line on Austrian intentions (probably via his contacts with the delegate Joseph Freiherr von Buol-Mühlingen, whom he had met in Dresden),\(^6\) and buoyed by the hope that the moment

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\(^3\) Cf. Ernst Moritz Arndt, ‘Geist der Zeit’, in Werke: Auswahl in zwölf Teilen, 12 vols, ed. by August Leffson and Wilhelm Steffens (Berlin: Bong, 1912), xii, p. 149.


\(^5\) In fact, Kleist’s antagonism towards Napoleon might be regarded as a useful barometer of his political mood, with the ever more virulent terms of reference – from the ‘Aller-Welts-Consul’ of 1802 (DKV: IV, 299), through the ‘Wüterich’ of 1806 (DKV: IV, 364), to the ‘der Hölle entstiegenen Vatermördergeist’ of 1809 (DKV: III, 485) – corresponding to an increasing hostility towards relentless French expansion, which in turn foments an ever stronger patriotic counter-instinct.

might be ripe for a successful challenge to Napoleonic hegemony, he threw his full weight behind the war effort, contributing a series of rhetorical, often violent, propaganda pieces intended both to inspire Austrian military forces, and to encourage the other German states, particularly Prussia, to join a national insurrection.

5.1 Patriotic Hatred and Nationalist Politics

In light of its transparent links to the politics of the time, it comes as little surprise that Die Herrmannsschlacht has traditionally been regarded as a straightforward ‘Tendenzstück’ reflecting a clear and unequivocal ideological position. Read as a direct and emphatic expression of nationalist politics and patriotic hatred, its critical fortunes have tended – as one might expect – to follow the ebb and flow of contemporary nationalist and patriotic currents (cf. DKV: II, 1087-1100). Initial response amongst those with contiguous experience of the historical context was largely positive, with Ludwig Tieck, Karl Ferdinand Solger, Wilhelm von Schütz and Matthäus von Collin all, to varying degrees, passing approving verdicts. From the late 1820s through to the 1860s interest in the play appears to have waned, but it was to flourish once more in Wilhelmine Germany on the back of the patriotic upsurge that followed the Franco-Prussian war and the formation of a unified nation. In 1913, the centenary of the ‘Völkerschlacht’ at Leipzig was celebrated with a performance attended by Kaiser Wilhelm II, whilst the outbreak of war offered further opportunities for consolidation as a national festival piece. Inevitably, and with serious repercussions for its subsequent reception, the Nazis too wasted little time in exploiting the drama’s political import for their own ideological ends, with Alfred...
Rosenberg proclaiming as early as 1927 that Herrmann ought to serve as the Germans’ ‘Weggefährte’, and the play subsequently became one of the most frequently staged classical dramas of the period, with 146 performances in 1933 and 1934 alone (cf. DKV: II, 1094).

The outcome of this association with Nazi ideology was, predictably, a widespread sense of critical unease in the period following 1945, and for some good thirty years or so the play was effectively exiled to the margins of Kleist studies. Since the late 1970s, however, the pendulum has swung back the other way, and Die Herrmannsschlacht has gradually come to be recognised again as an integral part of Kleist’s literary corpus. Where once dismissed as a regrettable lapse, it is now increasingly acknowledged as an important waystation in his literary career, marking the move towards political drama which would later climax in the fashioning of Prinz Friedrich von Homburg. For some, it nonetheless remains something of a singular case in that it lacks the characteristic complexity of his other major works – in a recent article, Klaus Müller-Salget, for instance, suggests that, in pursuing such a self-evident political agenda, Kleist here forces himself ‘zu einer ihm im Grunde wesensfremden Eindeutigkeit’. Others, however, take a different view and read the drama as an altogether more typically Kleistian literary experiment, replete with all the usual ambivalences and tensions, some even going so far as to posit subversive intent on the author’s part: Barbara Kennedy, for example, suggests that Herrmann’s calculating manipulation of Hally and Thusnelda casts such doubt on his character as to connote a proto-feminist censure of chauvinistic nationalism; Christine Künzel argues, largely on the basis of a detailed study of Hally’s rape, that the play offers a critique of war propaganda and rhetoric; whilst Rachel MagShaimhráin, in the introduction to her recent translation, submits that the play ought not to be read in the established sense as an inflammatory call-to-arms but rather as a ‘cunning linguistic device designed to deconstruct language’ and an ‘abstract, theoretical treatment of political argument, divorced from political purpose’.

Given what we know of Kleist’s preoccupations during the period, this kind of overarching subversive reading seems, to my mind, unlikely. In terms of conception and

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intent, *Die Herrmannsschlacht* is a piece of propaganda, the first in a series of attempts to impart a political message through literary means for immediate effect. In line with this, there is, at the textual level, a reduction in trademark ambiguities and intricacies – compare, for example, the blurred distinction of victims and perpetrators in *Die Verlobung* with the clearly fixed delineations here. That said, recent studies have, I believe, nonetheless alighted on a number of points that suggest there might be woven into the drama a more complex line of inquiry that goes deeper than the obvious level, and which perhaps engages rather more critically with the political ethics of revolution, nationhood and war. Particularly useful in this regard have been the contributions of critics who have attempted a broader contextualisation of the text – those who have looked beyond the immediate frame of reference defined by the ideas of the Prussian reformers and set the drama against other aspects of Kleist’s political and philosophical culture.\(^\text{12}\) Two studies in particular warrant mention as being especially relevant to my approach here. The first is Pierre Kadi Sossou’s ‘palimpsestuous’ cross-reading of the drama with Cicero’s *De officiis* and Ovid’s *Ars amatoria*,\(^\text{13}\) the merit of which is essentially twofold. First, Sossou makes a convincing case that, despite the obvious situation of the text in relation to contemporary politics, this does not necessarily preclude reference to other pertinent discourses, and in fact, by extending the scope of inquiry, we might come across further constellations which offer a new angle on the political and ethical questions at issue. By placing this under the conceptual rubric of Genette’s palimpsest, moreover, he introduces a second key idea which I shall likewise take up here, namely the question of whether, given the overt propagandistic content and purpose of the drama, it might perhaps be by way of a subtle nexus of contextual and intertextual allusions that Kleist opens up – for the informed reader – the terms of a more critical and discursive political subtext.

The other study of note is Hans-Jürgen Schings’s recent essay in which he explores the importance of the Revolution as a historical index for certain of the violent ‘Grausamkeiten’ encountered in Kleist’s work.\(^\text{14}\) With regard to *Die Herrmannsschlacht*, he


begins by linking the Hally episode to reports of the call made by the Dantonist Legendre, on the occasion of Louis XVI’s trial, that the king’s body be dismembered and a section of the corpse sent to each of the 83 revolutionary départements. Tracing the historical threads further, he proceeds to offer a precise reading that situates a good deal of the text’s political economy in the context of revolutionary ideology and practice, from the focus on hatred and revenge, through the calls for total popular war, to Herrmann’s deliberate extinguishing of pity and his systematic linking of virtue and terror. Here too, then, the Revolution clearly remains an essential reference point – one which has, as Schings suggests, been unduly neglected. One reason for this, one suspects, is the common tendency, across various disciplines, to set the newly-emergent German political nationalism in direct contrast to the Revolution, not only on account of its shrill anti-French motif, but also with regard to its ethno-cultural and exclusivist values. In Kleist’s case, this difference appears particularly pronounced, and it is perhaps unsurprising, given the apparent tension with the earlier ideals of, say, the ‘Aufsatz, den sichern Weg des Glücks zu finden’, that his violent political writing is frequently cited as an example of the intellectual shift in German Romanticism after 1806, as resentment at occupation prompts a fateful rejection of cosmopolitan Idealism – and, by extension, an abandonment of allegiance to the Revolution – and a turn towards a conservatively-coloured nationalism. Two points might, however, be raised in objection to this view. One is that it overlooks the more complex overlap and interplay of Enlightened and Romantic elements in the various expressions of anti-Napoleonic nationalism, not only in terms of the reformers’ political agenda (for which one historian has recently coined the phrase ‘enlightened nationalism’), but also in the writings of Fichte, Arndt and Kleist, each of whom might, for all the apparent chauvinism of their appellations, be seen to be reacting first and foremost to a threat to an Enlightenment ideal of self-determination and identity. The other, meanwhile, is that it

15 The view that Kleist’s political writings mark a split with Enlightenment and cosmopolitan tendencies has been and remains very much the dominant perspective on the subject, most recently re-stated by Jens Reichenbach who writes that these texts signal an ‘endgültige Abkehr von den weltbürgerlichen und aufklärerischen Idealen seiner Jugend und die Hinwendung zu einer neuen Auffassung von der Nation’ (cf. Jens Reichenbach, Die nationale Stimme Heinrich von Kleists: sein politisches Wirken im Dienst der deutschen Nation (1808-9) (Saarbrücken: Müller, 2007), p. 2).
17 With regard to Kleist, two critics have, to my knowledge, provided sustained arguments along these lines, submitting that his ‘nationalist turn’ is, in fact, consistent with his earlier cosmopolitan ideals (cf. Beda Allemann, ‘Der Nationalismus Heinrich von Kleists’, in Nationalismus in Germanistik und Dichtung, ed. by Benno von Wiese and Rudolf Henß (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1967), pp. 305-11, and Elystan Griffiths,
fails to take heed of the Revolution’s own affinity with nationalist sentiment – the fact that the movement of 1789 was, amongst all else, an assertion of national sovereignty, and that the creation of the nation une et indivisible was to become something of a model aspiration for incipient German nationhood. Viewed in this light, it seems only to be expected that we find a number of continuities with revolutionary ideology, both in the general historical context and with specific reference to Kleist, most evident, as Schings notes, in the common emphasis on the untapped potential of the masses, the effectiveness of popular war, and the capacity of hatred and revenge to activate national consciousness and commitment. To add one further point to this, I would suggest we might also take into account the specific precedent of the brutal oratory of the Brissotin deputies who, from late 1791, were actively looking to drive France to war on a tide of nationalism, Austrophobia and nihilism, providing a successful exemplary standard and counterfoil both for German attempts (including Kleist’s) to mobilise the nation and, in its parallel context, the all-or-nothing, ‘Sieg-oder-Untergang’ rhetoric that likewise dominates Herrmann’s political discourse.

It is with these perspectives in mind that I hope to offer a fresh reading of the text here. On the one hand, drawing on Schings’s insights, I shall be looking at how, by placing it in the fuller context of revolutionary experience and ideology, we might open up new avenues for exploring the drama’s key issue: the relationship between political violence and the struggle for national identity and liberation. On the other hand, following the general lines of Sossou’s inquiry, I will also be exploring how Kleist’s treatment of this and related aspects is cued by an ongoing dialogue with elements of Rousseau’s political theory. At first sight, this latter point may seem somewhat doubtful, and it can be readily admitted that any sense of linkage is perhaps not immediately obvious – hence the common view that


18 In his thoroughgoing account of the origins of the revolutionary wars, Tim Blanning draws from National Assembly records the following three examples which pre-empt the fanatical tone of German nationalist rhetoric, including that of both Kleist and the character of Herrmann: ‘Be ready to fight, to die, even to disappear entirely from the face of the earth rather than put on our chains again … Bring back the nobility? Ah! Rather bury ourselves a thousand times under the ruins of the walls which surround us’ (Isnard); ‘Yes, She [the French nation] will disappear from the face of the earth rather than violate her oath’ (repeated applause) (Mailhe); and ‘If there is an attempt to terrify you into submission or to a capitulation unworthy of you, you must implement the oath you have sworn: the Constitution or death!’ (Applause) (Brissois) (cf. T. C. W. Blanning, The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars (London: Longman, 1986), p. 112).
with this play, Kleist moves decisively away from his earlier Rousseauism. Leaving aside, for a moment, his sceptical attitude towards popular violence and revolution, there appears, no doubt, a sharp division separating Rousseau’s moral idealism and Herrmann’s brutal pragmatism – if, as many do, we see in the in the former’s demands for universal mutual respect and recognition a precursor to Kantian ethics, how are we to reconcile this with the latter’s political strategy, which not only involves the brutalisation of the enemy, but also the instrumentalisation of his own people? The ethical imperative that human life is sacred is for Herrmann a dead letter: he not only reckons on ‘Feuer, Raub, Gewalt und Mord’ and ‘alle Greuel des fessellosen Krieges’ (DKV: II, 504), but at one point also threatens to set the whole of the Teutoburg aflame in an effort to incite hatred against the Romans (DKV: II, 505) – all of which seems a far cry from Rousseau’s dictum that the blood of a single individual is too high a price for the liberty of mankind (cf. CC: XXX, 112). And yet despite his committed idealism, there is rooted within Rousseau’s political doctrine a thread of Realpolitik that demonstrates a willingness to make concessions on universal principles of freedom, legitimacy and justice, and which at various points carries with it the correlative problematic of ‘necessary violence’. This reveals itself foremost in two distinct yet closely related areas. The first is in that aspect of his work that directly engages the political ethics of nationhood and war, principally in the Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne, but also in the constitutional programme for Corsica (Projet de constitution pour la Corse), the fragment on the state of war (L’état de guerre), and the two essays relating to the Abbé de Saint-Pierre’s project for perpetual peace (Projet du paix perpétuelle and Jugement sur le projet du paix perpétuelle). In these texts, Rousseau broaches a number of issues that were to subsequently emerge as essential components of both French and German political nationalism in the Revolutionary Age: the value of

19 As alluded to in Chapter Two, one of the dominant tendencies in the existing literature on the Kleist-Rousseau relationship has been to regard Die Herrmannsschlacht as marking a turning point at which Kleist splits with Rousseau’s political and philosophical ideas – Hans M. Wolff, for example, argues that here ‘die Ideologie Rousseaus ist […] restlos aufgegeben’ (Hans M. Wolff, ‘Heinrich von Kleist als politischer Dichter’, Modern Philology, 27 (6) (1947), 343-521 (p. 482)), whilst Hans Mayer concludes in a similar vein that Kleist ‘tut mit barbarischer Härte alle Restbestände des Rousseauismus von sich ab’ (cf. Hans Mayer, Heinrich von Kleist: Der geschichtliche Augenblick (Pfüllingen: Neske, 1962), p. 45). Siegfried Streller offers a more differentiated view in his 1962 essay, arguing that the representation of charismatic leader and blind populace may be read as being consistent with the central theory set out in Du contrat social, but he too nonetheless considers the ethical code at the core of the text to signify a distinct departure from Kleist’s earlier ‘Rousseaubild’ (cf. Siegfried Streller, ‘Heinrich von Kleist und Jean-Jacques Rousseau’, Weimarer Beiträge, 8 (1962), 541-66 (p. 560)). Otherwise, any ongoing relevance is generally seen to be limited to the basic patterning of simple, virtuous Germans against civilised yet corrupt Romans (cf. Oskar von Xylader, Heinrich von Kleist und Jean–Jacques Rousseau (Berlin: Ebering, 1937), pp. 306-9, and Bernhard Böschenstein, ‘Kleist und Rousseau’, KJb (1981/82), 145-56 (p. 156)).
patriotism and civic virtue, for instance, the importance of public education towards patriotic-national loyalty, the development of a people’s militia and the demands of total war, even the uneasy pairing of cosmopolitan and nationalist ideals – all of these are, in one way or another, prefigured in these works, and all bear some or more relevance to Kleist’s own nationalist ideology and the politics of Die Herrmannsschlacht. The other area in which this more pragmatic, realistic strain of thought is evident is in Rousseau’s wider discussion of the performative function of violence in the processes of state- and nation-founding, particularly in his characterisation of the great political legislator and the arsenal of rhetorical and gestural strategies he might employ to ‘force men to be free’ and to habituate them to think solely in terms of the ‘volonté générale’ and the common good. It is by focusing attention on these two elements that I aim to show in what follows how, far from turning away from Rousseau, Kleist in fact maintains in Die Herrmannsschlacht a close and important critical Auseinandersetzung with certain of his political ideas. Tracing this under the twin historical aspect of the Revolution and the fight against French imperialism, we are, I suggest, able to locate a mode of discourse that sheds new light on the vision and status of nationhood and liberty in the text, and which, at the same time, also encourages us to look a little deeper to the standpoint that Kleist adopts towards both his main character and the presentation of central political and ideological issues.

5.2 ‘Einen Krieg, bei Mana! will ich Entflammen’: Nationhood, Liberty and Partisan War

To begin with, then, let us consider the legislative projects for Corsica and Poland – the two works in which Rousseau attends most fully to questions of nationhood and national identity. In his major writings, i.e. those considered to constitute the core of his political philosophy, the concept of the nation is at most a marginal concern, touched upon but never examined in full detail. Focusing primarily on domestic rather than foreign policy, and in particular on idealised conditions of citizenship, Rousseau spurns the nation as a framework for political unity in favour of the small republic or city-state (ancient Rome, Sparta or modern-day Geneva), where citizens are able to assemble more readily without the need for representation.20 With the projects for Corsica and Poland, however, he finds himself

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20 For just two noteworthy examples, see the dedicatory letter to the republic of Geneva with which Rousseau prefaces the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité (OC: III, 111-21), and also Book 2, Chapter IX of Du contrat social, in which he discusses the optimal size of the body politic (OC: III, 386-88).
charged with the applied task of proposing a plan of legislation for existing national communities,\textsuperscript{21} and so what we find on both occasions is a sustained attempt to bring abstract principles of civic statehood into congruence with a practicable theory of national politics.

For the purposes of our inquiry here, it is particularly significant to note how the proposals outlined in these two works revolve around ideas of national survival and self-determination. At the time Rousseau was approached to draft the respective constitutional programmes, both Corsica and Poland had recently been embroiled in determined struggles to preserve independence from the threat posed by an aggressive foreign force, and in this regard we can see a contextual bridge that links to the political situation in Prussia after 1806. This sense of parallel is particularly striking in the case of Poland, which Rousseau characterises as a moribund hulk of disunited and disjointed member states lacking collective identity and common objective, and therefore especially vulnerable to attack from surrounding military powers (cf. OC: III, 953-54, 959-60). In response to these conditions, his reform proposals aim to serve a twofold purpose as both blueprint for national consolidation and union, and handbook for survival in the face of imperial aggression and tyranny; and it is in this light that they emerge as a highly relevant point of reference – and possible source – for Kleist’s political thinking in the works of 1808-9.

The first rule of Rousseau’s national strategy is that of ‘caractére nationnal’ (OC: III, 913), by which he appears to mean a patriotic spirit of fraternity and communal interest. As we have seen elsewhere, patriotism or ‘amour de la patrie’ is very much the bedrock of Rousseau’s concept of civic virtue – as a ‘sublimated form of amour-propre’,\textsuperscript{22} it acts as a counterpoise to man’s natural passions, re-focusing the gaze of private self-interest onto the civic body and occasioning a realignment of moral priorities from the individual to the collective. In so doing, it consolidates the bonds of union between citizens, which in turn helps to foster the social cohesion needed to sustain stable civic life. With the Polish project comes an inevitable shift in the locus of loyalty from the civic state to the nation, but the fundamental principle remains the same: it is the ‘vertu de [les] citoyens’ and their ‘zéle

\textsuperscript{21} The Corsican project, which Rousseau began in 1764 and never completed, was written in direct response to an appeal from Matthieu Buttafoco – claiming to speak for Corsican rebel leader Pasquale Paoli – to propose a new liberal constitution for a soon to be independent Corsica. The considerations on Poland, which Rousseau did complete in 1772 and which were published posthumously in 1782, were the outcome of a similar request, this time from Count Wielhorski, a member of the Confederation of the Bar – a body dedicated to the protection and assertion of Polish independence.

patriotique’ (OC: III, 960) that will determine national character and vitality, and so Rousseau calls on political leaders to raise ‘amour de la patrie’ to its highest possible pitch via a system of national education involving both a formal patriotic curriculum and informal public spectacles that focus individual attention on the common good (cf. OC: III, 966-70). By enlisting such educational supports, the wise legislator (to whom we will return in due course) will be able to instil in the populace a distinctive ‘physionomie nationale’ (OC: III, 960) that will not only set the Poles apart from all other people, but will also encourage them to execute patriotic duties ‘par gout et par passion’ rather than ‘par devoir ou par intérest’ (OC: III, 961).

This tenor of patriotic devotion is, Rousseau insists, the only weapon the Poles have at their disposal in the fight to protect national autonomy. Incapable of offering sustained resistance to external military threats due to the lasting effects of anarchy, division and ill-discipline, any hope of preserving freedom rests squarely on the force of national spirit inscribed in the hearts and souls of the citizenry. For it is here, rather than in political institutions or territories, that Rousseau sees the ‘vrai sanctuaire’ (OC: III, 1013) of the nation and the ‘unique azile où la force ne peut ni l’atteindre ni la detruire’ (OC: III, 959) – a point he illustrates with an example drawn from Poland’s own recent history:

On vient d’en voir une preuve à jamais mémorable. La Pologne étoit dans les fers du Russe, mais les Polonois sont restés libres. Grand exemple qui vous montre comment vous pouvez braver la puissance et l’ambition de vos voisins. Vous ne sauriez empêcher qu’ils ne vous engloutissant, faites au moins qu’ils ne puissent vous digérer. De quelque façon qu’on s’y prenne, avant qu’on ait donné à la Pologne tout ce qui lui manque pour être en état de resister à ses ennemis, elle en sera cent fois accablée. La vertu de ses Citoyens, leur zèle patriotique, la forme particulière que des institutions nationales peuvent donner à leurs ames, voila la seul rempart toujours prêt à la défendre, et qu’aucune armée ne sauroit forcer. Si vous faites en sorte qu’un Polonois ne puisse jamais devenir un Russe, je vous réponds que la Russie ne subjuguera pas la Pologne. (OC: III, 959-60)

The theme of public spectacle as vehicle for political education and moral improvement is one which recurs at various points across Rousseau’s work. In the fragment Parallèle entre les deux Républiques de Sparte et Rome, for instance, he writes: ‘Ils [Sparta and Rome] établirent tous deux beaucoups de spectacles, d’assemblées et de cérémonies; beaucoup de Collèges et de sociétés particuliéres pour engendrer et fomenter entre les Citoyens ces douces habitudes et ce commerce innocent et désintéressé qui forment et nourrisssent l’amour de la patrie’ (OC: III, 542), whilst similar ideas are also expressed in Du Bonheur public (cf. OC: III, 509-15). As discussed in the earlier chapter on Das Erdbeben, Rousseau addresses the same issue from a different perspective in his Lettre à d’Alembert, arguing against the introduction of a theatre in Geneva, for fear that it may distract the citizens from finding pleasure in performing civic duties (cf. OC: V, 3-125).
From this it follows that Rousseau conceives of the nation as an abstract community that exists independently of institutional manifestations and hard structures – an impression borne out by the fact that he appears to employ the term ‘la nation’ more or less interchangeably with ‘la peuple’. What determines membership of this community is not, however, ascriptive ethnicity or genealogical descent, but rather adherence to a shared set of political, cultural and moral values. In this regard, Rousseau’s theory of nationalism appears to mediate a position between the (Enlightenment) contractual nation and the (Romantic) cultural nation: national character is principally defined by the prescribed social relation between the individual and the general will, but also draws on pre-political tradition, identity and culture as a vital supplement or support. What is of particular significance here, however, is the fact that the abstract conceptualisation of nation-as-people provides the framework for an ideal of national liberty that does not in the first instance relate to realisable political freedom or national independence, but rather to a psychological and sentimental perception of collective identity and self-determination. The law of the strongest – ‘la plus inviolable loi de la nature’ (OC: III, 1013) – dictates that Poland could never guarantee to protect its territories from invasion by a superior military power (cf. OC: III, 1013), and so Rousseau does not consider the breach of political frontiers to be of primary consequence, even urging the Poles to dispense with fortresses and border armies (cf. OC: III, 1018). It is rather the attitude shown in response to invasion that will determine whether liberty is retained, and by continually resisting tyranny and subjugation, the collective citizenry will succeed in re-asserting national freedom, no matter what the military outcome of the conflict.

The condition of national liberty is thus first and foremost collective national will, and Rousseau elevates this to the status of an end in itself. Yet despite this, he does not simply abandon the political state to its fate, but rather looks to channel the spiritual power engendered by this collective love of liberty and sense of patriotic attachment into an

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25 It is this pairing of citizenship and nationhood – coupled with his prescriptions for national education – that makes Rousseau such an important point of reference for the development of French revolutionary nationalism (see, for example, the Abbé de Sieyès’s pamphlet, ‘Qu’est-ce que le tiers-état?’ which, in its equation of nation and the Third Estate bears a clear mark of intellectual debt). It is, moreover, an aspect which ought to be taken into consideration, at least to my mind, far more regularly when assessing the values of German political nationalism after 1806 – indeed, the whole question of Rousseau’s relevance for the emergence of German nationalism is one which requires detailed review.
instrument of survival against foreign aggressors. This manifests itself most clearly in his plans for military reform. Regular troops, he asserts, are only ever good for offence and conquest, not for the purposes of national defence. If Poland hopes to develop genuine defensive power, the vocation of the soldier must be transformed from mercenary venture to civic duty via the abandonment of the royal army and the establishment of a free people’s militia (cf. OC: III, 1014-16). A war of national survival, particularly for an emasculated nation such as Poland, requires total commitment and maximum mobilisation of energies and resources, and only a popular national army – stripped bare of material interests and animated solely by an exalted yet fierce sense of patriotism and liberty – can fight such a war effectively. To complement the new exigencies of a defensive form of warfare, and in a radical break with traditional military thinking, Rousseau also urges the Poles to forget imitating the conventional tactics of professional armies and to focus instead on excelling in the strategies of irregular, guerrilla warfare:

Je ne voudrois point qu’elle imitât servilement la tactique des autres nations. Je voudrois qu’elle s’en fit une qui lui fut propre, qui dévoloppât et perfectionnât ses dispositions naturelles et nationnales, qu’elle s’exerceât surtout à la vitesse et à la légèreté, à se rompre, s’éparpiller, et se rassembler sans peine et sans confusion; qu’elle s’exerceât dans ce qu’on appelle la petite guerre, dans toutes les manoeuvres qui conviennent à des troupes légères, dans l’art d’inonder un pays comme un torrent, d’atteindre partout et de n’être jamais atteinte, d’agir toujours de concert quoique séparée, de couper les communications, d’intercepter des convois, de charger des arrière gardes, d’enlever des gardes avancées, de surprendre des détachemens, de harceler de grands corps qui marchent et campent réunis; qu’elle prit la manière des anciens Parthes, comme elle en a la valeur, et qu’elle apprit comme eux à vaincre et détruire les armées les mieux disciplinées sans jamais livrer de bataille et sans leur lasser le moment de respirer. (OC: III, 1017-18)

A patriotic war of mass resistance, fought in these terms, gives the Poles a chance – their only chance – of withstanding an onslaught from foreign aggressors. The unconditional morality of freedom as collective will thus becomes the (pre)condition for the political survival of the nation; and so when Rousseau writes that ‘une seule chose suffit pour la rendre impossible à subjuguer; l’amour de la patrie et de la liberté animé par les vertus qui

en sont inséparables’ (OC: III, 1019), he might be seen to refer to both aspects of a dialectic of moral and political freedom that underpins and drives his national strategy.

This paradigm of national freedom provides a useful ideological foil to Kleist’s dramatic rendition of the act of liberation in Die Herrmanusschlacht. As the opening scenes make clear, the initial problem Herrmann has to contend with is that the majority of his fellow chieftains understand freedom solely in terms of material circumstances. The community of Germanic tribes is, as a result, wracked by internal tensions and discord, as the blinkered pursuit of particular interests works counter to national cohesion and identity – witness, for example, the local agreements Fust, Gueltar and Aristan have made with Varus (cf. DKV: II, 449), or the dispute over territorial rights between Dagobert and Selgar that prompts Wolf’s telling lament: ‘Es bricht der Wolf, o Deutschland, / In Deine Hürde ein, und Deine Hirten streiten/ Um eine Handvoll Wolle sich’ (DKV: II, 450-51). If the yoke of Roman tyranny is to be cast off, Herrmann must find a way of bringing local and collective interests into alignment; in other words, he must instil amongst the German leaders that patriotic spirit of ‘fraternité’ and sense of common cause that Rousseau considers a necessary preliminary requisite for national survival. To do so, he employs a classic strategy of reverse psychology, deliberately challenging the chieftains to prove wrong his negative judgement concerning their ability to present a united front, and thereby inducing them to first argue the case for the possibility of mounting a collective military campaign against the Romans – it is Thuiskomar, for example, who, in response to Herrmann’s apparent fatalistic acceptance of Roman supremacy, counters:


In such a way, Herrmann scores a vital preliminary success in unifying the various tribes under the banner of the national community and establishing a new sense of collective solidarity and purpose. Yet there still remains the equally important – and arguably more challenging – task of convincing the other leaders of what he considers to be the real stakes involved in the fight against Rome. Initially, his arguments seem puzzling and oblique – he
professes to have no aim other than ‘jenem Römerkaiser zu erliegen’ (DKV: II, 457), and states that it is his express intention, ‘Alles zu verlieren’ (DKV: II, 459). Yet when Wolf, suitably confused, accuses him of planning to surrender without a fight, the response is indignant and emphatic:

HERRMANN: Behüte Wodan mich! Ergeben! Seid ihr toll?
Mein Alles, Haus und Hof, die gänzliche
Gesamtheit dess’, was mein sonst war,
Als ein verlornes Gut in meiner Hand noch ist,
Das, Freunde, setz’ ich dran, im Tod nur,
Wie König Porus, glorreich es zu lassen!
Ergeben! – Einen Krieg, bei Mana! will ich
Entflammen, der in Deutschland rasselnd,
Gleich einem dürren Walde, um sich greifen,
Und auf zum Himmel lodernd schlagen soll! (DKV: II, 460)

The key to resolving this apparent paradox lies in understanding the ethical and ideological basis of Herrmann’s own conception of freedom. That this differs markedly from the other chieftains’ concerns with protecting property is obvious from the exchange that occurs at the end of Act I, Scene 3, where Herrmann sets out the necessary conditions that must be met if he is to be recruited to lead the resistance against the occupying power:

HERRMANN sich losmachtend:
Kurz, wollt Ihr, wie ich schon einmal Euch sagte,
Zusammenraffen Weib und Kind,
Und auf der Weser rechtes Ufer bringen,
Geschirre, goldn’ und silberne, die Ihr
Besitzet, schmelzen, Perlen und Juwelen
Verkaufen oder sie verpfänden,
Verheeren Eure Fluren, Eure Herden
Erschlagen, Eure Plätze niederbrennen,
So bin ich Euer Mann –
WOLF: Wie? Was?
HERRMANN: Wo nicht –?
THUISKOMAR: Die eignen Fluren sollen wir verheeren –?
DAGOBERT: Die Herden töten –?
SELGAR: Unsre Plätze niederbrennen –?
HERRMANN: Nicht? Nicht? Ihr wollt es nicht?
THUISKOMAR: Das eben Rasender, das ist es ja,
Was wir in diesem Krieg verteidigen wollen!
HERRMANN abbrechend:
Nun denn, ich glaubte, Eure Freiheit wär’s.
Er steht auf. (DKV: II, 461-62)
The rhetoric employed in this sequence echoes arguments advanced by Kleist himself in a letter to Rühle von Lilienstern from December 1805; and a brief comparison may be useful here in helping to unveil the ideological framework in which Herrmann operates. Referring to Napoleon’s recent violation of Prussian neutrality, and dismayed by the king’s failure to respond, Kleist asks:


For Kleist, then, the struggle against imperial subjugation is nothing less than an existential fight for survival – a true case of to be or not to be. From this it can be adduced that much as Rousseau claims that for the individual to renounce his freedom is to ‘renoncer à sa qualité d’homme’ and ‘ôter toute moralité à ses actions’ (OC: III, 356), so he considers that to surrender autonomy to the bondage of alien rule is to forfeit existence as a self-determining moral agent. A free nation cannot be a nation of slaves, and so the preservation of selfhood is raised to the level of an absolute moral imperative that overrides all other concerns and must be fought for at all costs. If this means widespread destruction and devastation, so be it – in the final stanza of the ode ‘An Friedrich Wilhelm den Dritten, König in Preußen’, for example, Kleist writes ‘Und müßt’ auch selbst noch, auf der Hauptstadt Türmen, / Der Kampf sich, für das heilige Reich, erneun: / Sie sind gebaut, o Herr, wie hell sie blinken, / Für beßre Güter, in den Staub zu sinken!’ (DKV: III, 437), whilst in the original version of ‘Über die Rettung von Österreich’ he claims that victory in
the fight against Napoleon cannot come at too great a cost, ‘wenn auch der Wert des ganzen Nationalreichtums im Kampf vernichtet würde, und das Volk so nackt daraus hervorginge, wie vor 2000 Jahren aus seinen Wäldern’ (DKV: III, 500). Perhaps the sharpest account of the ideological stakes involved comes, however, in the final chapter of the ‘Katechismus der Deutschen’, which it is here worth quoting in full:

FRAGE: Aber sage mir, mein Sohn, wenn es dem hochherzigen Kaiser von Österreich, der für die Freiheit Deutschlands die Waffen ergriff, nicht gelänge, das Vaterland zu befreien: würde er nicht den Fluch der Welt auf sich laden, den Kampf überhaupt unternommen zu haben?
ANTWORT: Nein, mein Vater.
FRAGE: Warum nicht?
FRAGE: Gleichwohl ist, wenn der Zweck des Krieges nicht erreicht wird, das Blut vieler tausend Menschen nutzlos geflossen, die Städte verwüstet und das Land verheert worden.
ANTWORT: Wenn gleich, mein Vater.
FRAGE: Was; wenn gleich! – Also auch, wenn Alles unterginge, und kein Mensch, Weiber und Kinder mit eingezeichnet, am Leben bliebe, würdest du den Kampf noch billigen?
ANTWORT: Allerdings, mein Vater.
FRAGE: Warum?
ANTWORT: Weil es Gott lieb ist, wenn Menschen, ihrer Freiheit wegen, sterben.
FRAGE: Was aber ist ihm ein Greuel?
ANTWORT: Wenn Sklaven leben. (DKV: III, 491)

As Ruth Angress has shown, it is this same code of ethics, according to which freedom and slavery are absolute values, that is given voice through the character of Herrmann – hence his willingness to sacrifice everything, even his life, in the fight to resist foreign domination.\(^{27}\) Whether he lives or dies, or whether the act of resistance proves politically successful, is not the primary concern – what is more important is the moral imperative to collective active duty, which will in turn signal a reassertion of national freedom.\(^{28}\) Herrmann’s ideological morality – and, by extension, Kleist’s own during this period – is thus built on the same twin ideals of patriotic unity and love of liberty that lie at the crux of


Rousseau’s national strategy, and he likewise equates national freedom first and foremost with a collective will or spirit divorced from state and territory. This is revealed most clearly in Act IV, Scene 10 when, advised by Eginhardt to divert troops from the main battle to help protect Cheruskan settlements from destruction, he proclaims:

**HERRMANN:** Nichts, nichts, mein alter Freund! Was fällt dir ein?
Kämpfe ich auch für den Sand, auf den ich trete,
Kämpfe ich für meine Brust?
Cheruska schirmen! Was! Wo Herrmann steht, da siegt er,
Und mithin ist Cheruska da. (DKV: II, 520)

It is this same logic that accounts for Herrmann’s blithe response when later informed that the whole of the Teutoburg is lying in ‘Schutt und Asche’: ‘Mag sein! / Wir bauen uns ein schönes auf!’ (DKV: II, 551). Such utter disregard for territory and property, coupled with the later, apocalyptic vision of a Rome ‘ganz zerstört’ (DKV: II, 554), has led several critics to read an overriding sense of nihilism into the politics of the text – the argument being that the ultimate form of such transcendental freedom is shown to be total desolation and emptiness. Yet despite his professed resolve to yield to the Emperor and to ‘lose everything’, despite his willingness to wage a war that – so he repeatedly asserts – carries little or no chance of success, and despite his stated ambition to reduce Rome to a ‘Trümmerhaufen’ (DKV: II, 554), Herrmann is no ‘suicidal terrorist’. For although he does make an abstract form of freedom as selfhood and collective will an end in itself, this is, in fact, the central axis of his plan for achieving political freedom from the tyranny of Rome. Read by way of the *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne*, this dialectic emerges with sharp new clarity. What is initially at stake in the exchanges between Herrmann and his fellow chieftains is a preliminary mental freedom – to mobilise men, he must first mobilise minds. As Rousseau shows, a war of national defence requires a mindset marked by total commitment to the cause – only he who is willing to sacrifice all material values is an effective national freedom fighter. By abstracting nation from state, doing away with territory and property, and presenting war with Rome as an absolute ideological struggle for freedom, Herrmann thus realigns moral values in such a way as to

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create the preconditions for national survival, skilfully eliciting the spirit of self-sacrifice and devotion needed for the type of total warfare he envisions in Act I, Scene 3 (cf. DKV: II, 460). And though he is willing to die in the fight rather than risk enslavement, and though he places the moral emphasis on action rather than victory, he nonetheless believes that such a war, conducted with the utmost commitment and ferocity, might meet with success: his goal throughout, which he pursues with utter single-mindedness, is to unify the German tribes for an unconditional war of national survival that will see the Romans defeated and driven out of German lands.

5.3 ‘Entraîner sans violence et persuader sans convaincre’: Foundational Violence and the Performance of Nationalism

Having thus sketched the basis and character of Herrmann’s concept of freedom, we might now turn our attention to a more focused look at the specific implications and consequences of the nationalist view of ends and means, particularly with regard to the closing call for a destructive march upon Rome. As a first point, following on from the discussion in the previous section, we can say immediately that this apparent signal of bellicose intent overturns the equivalencies of Rousseau’s nationalism. For though often cited as the intellectual progenitor of the modern nationalist tradition and the militant nation-state, his theory of national politics actually eschews all forms of aggression or expansion – in the Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne, for example, he states quite plainly that ‘quiconque veut être libre ne doit pas vouloir être conquerant’ (OC: III, 1013), whilst a few pages earlier we read that the objective of national reform is to inspire in each citizen ‘un esprit martial sans ambition’ (OC: III, 1003). This is further confirmed in the essays Projet du paix perpétuelle and Jugement sur le projet du paix perpétuelle, where, in response to

the Abbé de Saint-Pierre’s grand plans for securing peace through a ‘world-state’ (‘à présent un projet bien absurde’ (OC: III, 600)), Rousseau presents an alternative, anti-utopian ideal of international politics in which a series of well-ordered states, content with their territory and equipped solely with defensive militias, come together to form enclaves of peace within the global state of war. Aggressive nationalism, in any form, would be fatal to this ideal, and so it seems that any attempt to cast Rousseau as a war-mongering nationalist is wrongheaded. In fact, time and again, he articulates his horror of war and violence, nowhere more so than in the fragmentary piece L’état de guerre, where he launches a searing assault on those philosophers who valorise war as a noble or sublime endeavour and whitewash the gruesome realities of conflict (cf. OC: III, 608-9). This does not, of course, mean we ought to consider Rousseau a pacifist – the hints at Roman-style blood-letting in Du contrat social are enough to put paid to that notion. It nonetheless seems clear, however, that to his mind, military action is never anything more than a most regrettable ‘necessary evil’ in defence of the patrie, and so it is that by having Herrmann make his aggressive proclamation, Kleist appears to countermand Rousseau’s understanding of a just war.

The question of the meaning of these closing lines has, particularly in recent years, contributed to quite a wide variety of judgements on the play’s central character. At one end of the spectrum we might place Wolfgang Wittkowski who sees little of any troubling note in Herrmann’s parole and so exhibits few qualms in justifying his policy of terror ‘als Mittel zu einem humanen Zweck’. At the opposite end, we find those who, with different emphases, draw from the final vision of annihilation and aggression a decidedly negative verdict on Herrmann’s politics, variously citing him not only as a nihilist who revels in wanton violence, but also as a murderous tyrant and enemy of liberty, and even as a new

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What lies at the heart of this disagreement is a profound difference of opinion regarding the psychology of the character and whether his apparent moral barbarism and belligerence is understood as an exceptional, temporary measure determined by political circumstance, or else is taken at face value as a reflection of his inner psyche. Or, put another way, are his actions all the while driven solely by a commitment to a humanist ideal of freedom and self-determination, or is there an instinct for hatred, violence, and/or nationalist (neo-colonial) aggression that also comes into play?

The task of determining such sharply-honed questions of motivation is, perhaps paradoxically, made challenging here by the fact that Herrmann never really evolves into the same kind of three-dimensional figure as, say, Penthesilea or Prinz Friedrich von Homburg. The principal reason for this is that where the Kleistian norm is to place his characters in situations of extreme stress and instability, Herrmann, by way of contrast, never has to deal with the workings of contingency – such is his control over events that he has even been likened to a puppet-master or omniscient narrator figure who not only plots the German uprising, but who carefully stage-manages it, step-by-step, in line with his own broader scheme. As a result, there is little of the usual access afforded to the tortured struggles of the self. That said, we are, nonetheless, provided with glimpses of an alternative, personal moral compass that lies in tension with his political agenda, most notably in the exchange with Thusnelda in Act IV, Scene 9:

**THUSNELDA mit steigender Angst:**
Du Unbarmherz’ger! Ungeheuerster!
So hätt’ auch der Centurio,
Der, bei dem Brande in Thuiskon jüngst
Die Heldentat getan, Dir kein Gefühl entlockt?

**HERRMANN:** Nein – Was für ein Centurio?

**THUSNELDA:**
Nicht? Nicht?
Der junge Held, der, mit Gefahr des Lebens,
Das Kind, auf seiner Mutter Ruf,
Dem Tod’ der Flammen mutig jüngst entrissen? –
Er hätte kein Gefühl der Liebe Dir entlockt?

**HERRMANN glühend:**
Er sei verflucht, wenn er mir das getan!
Er hat, auf einen Augenblick,

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Mein Herz veruntreut, zum Verräter
An Deutschlands großer Sache mich gemacht!
Warum setzt’ er Thuiskon mir in Brand?
Ich will die höhnische Dämonenbrut nicht lieben!
So lang’ sie in Germanien trotzt,
Ist Haß mein Amt und meine Tugend Rache! (DKV: II, 515)

From this it would seem that Herrmann is having to steel himself against contradictory
impulses which might threaten to weaken his political resolve – an impression that receives
further support from the ‘Bardenlied’ of Act V, Scene 14:

CHOR DER BARDEN fällt wieder ein:
Du wirst nicht wanken und nicht weichen,
   Vom Amt, das Du Dir kühn erhöht,
Die Regung wird Dich nicht beschleichen,
   Die Dein getreues Volk verrät;
Du bist so mild, o Sohn der Götter,
   Der Frühling kann nicht milder sein:
Sei schrecklich heut, ein Schlossenwetter,
   Und Blitze laß Dein Antlitz spein! (DKV: II, 538)

Set alongside one another, these two passages lay a trail that suggests the point that
Herrmann’s brutal stance vis-à-vis the Romans is not personal but political – an abstraction
of ideological logic, or, as Peter Michelsen puts it, ‘eine – im Dienste einer “großen Sache”
ganz blind’ (DKV: II, 474), is thus way off mark, for her husband is not in the grips of any
such personal emotion but rather acts with the clarity of purpose of a calculating political
ideologue. It is for this reason that the drama has frequently been compared to Brecht’s Die
Maßnahme – a point which, in itself, might go some way to resolving the dilemma of
assessing Herrmann’s motivation. For as Hans-Georg Werner notes, if we read Kleist’s
play along similar lines as a parable or political ‘Lehrstück’, as I believe we should, ‘dann
sind die Motivationen der handlungsbestimmenden Figuren vorgegeben; offen ist die Art
ihres Vorgehens zu einem nicht mehr in Frage stehenden Ziel’. To judge Herrmann’s
character against purely moral criteria outside the political (propagandistic) orbit of the

38 Peter Michelsen, “‘Wehe, mein Vaterland, dir!’ Heinrich von Kleists Die Hermannsschlacht’, KJb (1987),
115-36 (p. 130).
Politik – Öffentlichkeit – Moral: Kleist und die Folgen, ed. by Peter Ensberg and Hans-Jochen Marquardt
drama would thus appear out of place; as in Brecht’s play, the action here accords to a ‘Rationalität der Zielbestimmtheit’[^40] – in this case, the deliverance of a newly-emergent nation (or national people) from imperial tyranny – and the didactic rationale is, as Wittkowski suggests, that this end justifies all means. With this in mind, and in a direct parallel with his own political dictates, Kleist thus deliberately and knowingly replaces in his protagonist an individual ethics of humanity with an uncompromising collective ethics of success, founded on hatred and revenge, and valid, so Herrmann insists, ‘so lang’ sie [die Römerbrut] in Germanien trotzt’ (DKV: II, 515).

Of course this does not yet provide an answer to the quandary of the final scenes. For the very point at issue there is that despite the evident success of the insurrection in driving the Romans out of German lands, Herrmann nonetheless calls for a continuation of violence and aggression. On the one hand, this counterattack is legitimated by the suggestion that the Romans continue to pose a threat to German freedom from across the Rhine – in other words, there will be no genuine respite until the colonial superpower is destroyed. On the other, however, there is an obvious jarring here with Herrmann’s earlier vow of action, as well as a note of discord with his apparently cosmopolitan vision of a future confederation of autonomous and culturally diverse states united under ‘einem Königsszepter’ (DKV: II, 459). There are, as far as I can see, only two ways in which we might confront this: either we assume that Herrmann’s earlier pronouncements are but empty rhetoric, all part of his intended and enacted plan for destruction and aggression; or we accept that there is a genuine tension here that has to do with the unfolding of the dramatic action. A convincing reading along the latter lines has recently been provided by Peter Phillip Riedl who shows how although the rhetorical justification for violence within the play supposes a complete separation of ends and means to be possible, the denouement suggests otherwise, hinting, as history has shown, that the two are locked in a more dialectical relation, with the latter invariably, and often quite dramatically, impacting on the former.[^41] The question that poses itself at this point, then, is whether this is, as Riedl

suggests, a ‘symptom’ of the text (i.e. a meaning of which Kleist is himself unconscious), or whether there might be, as Seán Allan submits, an element of critical intent here?  

A clue to this might be found, I suggest, if we look more closely at the exact methods Herrmann employs in pursuing his political goal – this is, after all, what constitutes the central action of the drama. One of the most common points made in this regard is to draw attention to the Machiavellian aspect of the character, and his reliance on the fox-like qualities of deceit, cunning, intrigue and subterfuge. Riedl develops this aspect in his essay, arguing that, in contrast to the charismatic leadership of the title figure in Robert Guiskard, what we find in Die Herrmannsschlacht is a ‘dezisionistische Herrschaft […], die die absolute Macht instrumenteller Vernunft verkörpert’. Herrmann is, in his words, ‘der rationalistische Techniker der Macht’, a master strategist, ‘der ohne moralische Skrupel agiert’. In this Riedl sees a partial parallel not to Schiller’s Wallenstein, as is commonly proposed, but rather to his altogether more ‘realist’ creation Octavio Piccolomini. Given the specific focus on questions of founding and nationhood, however, I believe we might also add Rousseau’s legislator to this list of possible influences and reference points – a figure who not only shares a number of affinities with Machiavelli’s Prince, but through whom we might also open up some rather more direct insights to the performative dimension of Herrmann’s national politics.

First, some remarks are necessary on why and where Rousseau, as a champion of popular sovereignty, sees the need for any such authoritative founder figure. Put bluntly, the answer follows from the view that before it has a system of laws, institutions and


\[\text{43} \text{It is perhaps interesting to note that in his 1827 review of Tieck’s edition of Kleist’s collected works, young Hegelian H. G. Hotho already alights on this issue, arguing the point that Herrmann appears less as the idealist figure of national inspiration, and more as a political dissembler whose ‘eigentliches Geschäft die List gewesen sei’ (cf. H. G. Hotho, ‘Heinrich von Kleists gesammelte Schriften’, Jahrbuch für wissenschaftliche Kritik (1827), 684-724 (p. 711)). More recently, William C. Reeve has explored in detail the parallels between Herrmann and Machiavelli’s Prince in his In Pursuit of Power: Heinrich von Kleist’s Machiavellian Protagonists (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), pp. 23-111.} \]

\[\text{44} \text{Riedl, ‘Texturen des Terrors’, p. 34.} \]

\[\text{45} \text{Riedl, ‘Texturen des Terrors’, p. 39.} \]

\[\text{46} \text{At first sight, Rousseau and Machiavelli might seem unlikely bedfellows – the principled moral idealist versus the pragmatic realist. And yet to judge from the favourable references in Du contrat social, it would seem there were pragmatic theoreticians Rousseau admired more (cf. OC: III, 409, 1480). This relates, of course, to the fact already noted that his politics are a good deal more pragmatic than often assumed, and a number of his ideas show the mark of Machiavelli’s influence, particularly his concepts of the civil religion and the legislator – both of which are, tellingly, designed to promote social cohesion and unity. It seems quite likely to my mind that Kleist’s apparent interest in what we might term Machiavellian principles of power may very well have been mediated, at least in the first instance, by his reading of Rousseau.} \]
procedures, the populace is a ‘multitude aveugle’ (OC: III, 380) driven by personal interest and selfish passions, whereas legislation, by way of contrast, demands virtue, wisdom and political foresight of the highest order. Thus Rousseau writes in Book 2 of *Du contrat social*:

> Pour qu’un peuple naissant put goûter les saines maximes de la politique et suivre les règles fondamentales de la raison d’État, il faudroit que l’effet put devenir la cause, que l’esprit social qui doit être l’ouvrage de l’institution présidât à l’institution même, et que les hommes fussent avant les loix ce qu’ils doivent devenir par elles. (OC: III, 383)

What is brought out here is the fundamental ‘paradox of sovereignty’ subsequently theorised by, amongst others, Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida and, most recently, Giorgio Agamben – the view that at the (revolutionary) moment of founding, the will of the people lacks an institutional framework in terms of which it might be presented and articulated. In other words, at any stage of history the body politic will lack the requisite qualities to devise its own system of legislation. Rousseau’s response to this aporia is to create the fiction of the great legislator who comes to the fore as an embodiment of the general will (cf. OC: III, 380). His function is essentially threefold: firstly, he must recognise and understand the principles of political right; secondly, he must devise suitable institutions which protect and embody these principles; and thirdly, and most importantly, he must obtain the consent of the people to accept these institutions. This consent can only be gained, like any other law, through the free vote of the people – the legislator cannot claim any sovereign authority. Yet nor can he rely on rational argumentation to gain consensus in the manner of the traditional philosopher-statesman, as the lack of wisdom that renders the masses incapable of self-government will also prevent them from recognising the beneficence of the legislator’s new system of laws (cf. OC: III, 383). Thus unable to appeal to either force or reason, the legislator must have recourse to an alternative form of authority – one through which he can ‘traîner sans violence’ and ‘persuader sans convaincre’ (OC: III, 383).

The principal source of this alternative authority is religion – the legislator has to artfully foster the belief that he serves as an emissary of the Gods (cf. OC: III, 383-84). To achieve this, he must find a way to make the people *feel* his ‘grande âme’ (OC: III, 384), as

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it is public recognition of his sublime ethos that secures consent for his laws and institutions, and a desire to imitate him that engenders good citizenship. The vehicle for this manipulation – which functions directly through the psychological relation between leader and followers – is an aestheticised language combining oratory, gesture, symbol and imagery that has a deep and immediate impact on feeling and sentiment; a non-rational form of rhetoric, or ‘eloquence’ as Rousseau generally terms it, which has the power to ‘émouvoir le coeur’ and ‘enflammer les passions’ (OC: V, 377). As Bronislaw Baczko has shown, this mode of interaction raises the question of the ‘efficacité performatives’ of language – ‘persuasion’ serves as a means to ‘mettre systématiquement toute l’efficacité d’un langage spécifique au service de la politique’ and to ‘utiliser au maximum les fonctions performatives du discours pour mettre en condition ses destinataires’; it is, to all intents and purposes, a ‘théorie et [...] technique de la propagande’.

Turning back to Die Herrmannsschlacht, we can observe a pattern of parallels emerging here. As we have seen earlier, Herrmann, like his counterpart, is charged with the task of overcoming division and self-interest and pointing the people towards a communal ideal which they cannot perceive unaided – of imposing, from a position outside any institutional framework, a national character on a disoriented multitude. Under these conditions of paradox, he too turns to a model of performatives politics, revealing himself to be an expert in the art of political propaganda. This is borne out by the structural patterning which serves as the drama’s framework. In the opening scene, the morale of the Germans is shown to be at its lowest ebb – the first line spoken by Wolf, ‘Es ist umsonst, Thuskar, wir sind verloren!’ (DKV: II, 449), immediately conveys a mood of despair and dejection. From this starting point, the reader bears direct witness to Herrmann’s propagandistic talents, as he gradually realigns moral values and builds up morale until, at the end of Act IV, the Germans stand united in readiness for all-out war against the Romans (cf. DKV: II, 521).

This propaganda works in two directions. Whereas the legislator’s initial task is solely to ‘persuade’ a common unenlightened populace, Herrmann must first pass through

50 For an enlightening analysis of Herrmann’s propaganda techniques, see G. Mathieu, ‘Kleist’s Hermann: The Portrait of an Artist in Propaganda’, GLL, 7 (1953), 1-10.
an earlier phase of ‘convincing’ a set of misguided princes of the true meaning of freedom and the moral imperative to active duty. (This must surely be seen as a nod towards the contemporary political scene, reflecting Kleist’s belief that co-operation between states must precede any popular insurrection). In reality, in his dealings with his fellow chieftains, Herrmann actually employs a variety of strategies that cross the divide between the Rousseauian categories of ‘persuader’ and convaincre’, combining both pathos and logos. When he turns his attentions to the Volk, however – and it is here that accusations of moral dubiety are most often levelled – he relies exclusively on a mode of non-rational persuasion. This comes into sharp focus in Act IV, Scene 3 when he confides in Eginhardt:

HERRMANN: Kann ich den Römerhaß, eh’ ich den Platz verlasse,
In der Cherusker Herzen nicht
Daß er durch ganz Germanien schlägt, entflammen:
So scheitert meine ganze Unternehmung! (DKV: II, 504)

Here we have a disclosure that goes some considerable way to explaining Herrmann’s strategies for mobilising the masses: the reference to ‘Herzen’ indicates that he intends appealing to feeling rather than reason; the use of ‘entflammen’ suggests he will deliberately incite violent passions where none exist; ‘Römerhaß’ reveals the principal form such passions should take; whilst the last line underscores the total reliance of his broader scheme on the ability to unite and mobilise the Cheruskins in this way. Set out in these terms, we can see how Herrmann’s politics follow a precise logic in tune with his ethics of success, as he looks to exploit a mode of non-rational agitation in order to release the necessary resources for a ‘Totalkrieg’ against the Romans. We might also note just how closely the paradigm which underlies and shapes this strategy bears resemblance to Rousseau’s conception of political persuasion, right down to the direct echoing of specific images and phrases. For Herrmann too, it is a question of how best to ‘émouvoir le coeur’ and ‘enflammer les passions’, and, like the legislator, he is not above using intrigue and subterfuge to do so – witness, for example, the fabricated rumours he spreads in Act III, Scene 2, where three plundered villages are converted into seven, and a slain father is appended to a tale concerning the murder of a pregnant woman and her child (cf. DKV: II, 481-2). Such dissimulation also extends to the manipulation of religious sentiment, as he transforms the unintentional felling of a sacred oak tree into an attempt to force homage to

51 Cf. Mathieu, ‘Kleist’s Hermann’, p. 3.
Zeus (cf. DKV: II, 482), and smartly designates a religious holiday, the *Nornentag*, as the day on which to launch the attack against Varus’s legions. By further characterising the struggle against the Romans in eschatological terms and constantly enlisting Wotan’s authority to sanctify the war as an enactment of transcendental justice, Herrmann adorns the German cause with the aura of a religious crusade; and if, like the legislator, it is his intention to present himself as a prophet of divine will, his success is apparently proven by Luitgar’s awestruck response upon hearing the plan of battle: ‘O Herrmann! Wodan hat ihn selbst Dir zugeflüstert!’ (DKV: II, 478).

Taken together, these correspondencies suggest a conscious paralleling of Herrmann to the legislator figure. There is, however, one further, even more obtrusive signal of kinship that makes the connection all the clearer. This relates to an additional source of persuasive rhetoric available to the legislator – the symbolic visual act. In the *Essai sur l’origine des langues*, Rousseau writes:

Ouvrez l’histoire ancienne vous la trouverez pleine de ces manières d’argumenter aux yeux, et jamais elles ne manquent de produire un effet plus assuré que tous les discours qu’on aurait pu mettre à la place: L’objet offert avant de parler ébranle l’imagination, excite la curiosité, tient l’esprit en suspens et dans l’attente de ce qu’on va dire. […] Le langage le plus énergique est celui où le signe a tout dit avant qu’on parle’. (OC: V, 376)

Examples of such symbolic actions, cited both here and elsewhere, include Saul’s dismemberment of his oxen (cf. OC: V, 377), Brutus’s execution of his sons (cf. OC: III, 113, 506), and Marc Anthony’s public appearance with Caesar’s body (OC: IV, 647-48). Of greatest significance to our discussion, however, is the reference to the Levite of Ephraim, who, in seeking vengeance for his concubine’s rape and murder, had her corpse divided into twelve pieces and a segment sent to each of the tribes of Israel – an action that inspired the Israelites to unite and declare war on the offending Benjaminites (cf. OC: V, 377). As Anthony Stephens has noted, this seems to be the most likely immediate source for Kleist’s rendering of the Hally scene – an example designed to demonstrate the ‘superior eloquence of corporeal proofs over persuasive language’. Yet there may also be a further level of intertextual reference to be identified here, for such was Rousseau’s fascination with the figure of the Levite that he developed the biblical narrative of Judges.

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19-21 – one of the most brutal and bloodthirsty passages in the bible – into an idyllic prose poem, *Le Lévite d’Éphraïm*, of which he seems to have been profoundly fond and proud.\(^5\)

Though obscure, this piece nonetheless provides a number of valuable insights to Rousseau’s political thought, as not only was it originally designed to form part of a triptych (along with the *Essai sur l’origine des langues* and *De l’imitation théâtrale*) on the interplay between politics and language, but it also reformulates important ideas relating to nationhood and political unity. Indeed, the process of political union is very much the focal point of the first part of the narrative, and, much like in *Die Herrmannsschlacht*, it is this dynamic that determines textual structures. In the third paragraph of the opening canto, Rousseau writes:

> Dans les jours de liberté où nul ne régnait sur le peuple du Seigneur, il fut un temps de licence où chacun, sans reconnaître ni magistrat ni juge, étoit seul son propre maître et faisoit tout ce qui lui semblait bon. Israël, alors épars dans les champs, avait peu de grandes villes, et la simplicité de ses moeurs rendoit superflu l’empire des loix. Mais tous les cœurs n’étoient pas également purs, et les méchants trouvoient l’impunité du vice dans la securité de la vertu. (OC: II, 1208-9)

By the third canto, however, this collection of disunited tribes has been transformed into a national community conjoined by a determination to go to war to avenge the death of the Levite’s concubine:

> A l’instant il s’éleva dans tout Israël un seul cri, mais éclatant, mais unanime: Que le sang de la jeune femme retombe sur ses meurtriers. Vive l’Eternel! nous ne rentrerons point dans nos demeures, et nul de nous ne retournera sous son toit que Gabaa ne soit exterminé. (OC: II, 1216)

From this we can see how Rousseau’s poetic rendering of the scriptural story is first and foremost a narrative of political fracture and union, offering an account of a community

\(^5\) In the first preface to the text, Rousseau writes: ‘Quant au troisiéme [morceau], qui n’est qu’une manière de petit poème en prose, paraphrase des trois derniers chapitres des *Juges*, j’avoue qu’il me sera toujours précieux, et que je ne le relis jamais sans une satisfaction intérieure [...]. Si jamais quelque homme équitabe daigne prendre ma défense en compensation de tant d’outrages et de libelles, je ne veux que ces mots pour éloge: Dans les plus cruels moments de sa vie, il fit *Le Lévite d’Éphraïm*’ (OC: II, 1205-6). In Book 11 of the *Confessions* he adds: ‘*Le Lévite d’Éphraïm*, s’il n’est pas le meilleur de mes ouvrages en sera toujours le plus chéri’ (OC: I, 586).
discovering and asserting a unanimous general will. Within the structure of this narrative, it is the gruesome tableau of the mutilated female body that provides the stimulus for national unification – the Levite exploits the emotionally-loaded visual sign as a device for kindling widespread indignation and a collective desire for retributive justice against the offending tribe. In *Die Herrmannsschlacht*, Herrmann re-enacts this macabre gesture for his own propagandistic purposes, using the corporeal act in the same fashion as a call for collective mobilisation. His staging of this episode is masterful: the chance discovery of Hally, and the fate which has befallen her, affords one final opportunity to incite the German tribes to action – an opportunity he exploits to the hilt. Ignoring the fact that a form of justice has already been served by the summary execution of those responsible for the rape, Herrmann follows the Levite in having the body dismembered and a section sent to each of the fifteen German tribes as both a self-evident signifier of outrage and an iconic recuperative symbol for future national union. In effect, the act is invested with a dual performative function, for not only is the dispatchment of the corpse intended to bring about radical unity amongst the tribes, but the dismemberment itself, which Kleist re-works into a public spectacle, is an operation through which Herrmann aims to band his own men together for the German cause. On both counts, the success of the action is immediate and decisive: Act IV, Scene 6 – the scene in which Hally’s body is segmented – climaxes with the Cheruskans mobilising for war with a united cry of ‘Empörung! Rache! Freiheit!’, whilst in Act V, Scene 23, Wolf reports to Herrmann that the missive of the corpse ‘hat

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54 We can thus appreciate how and why the text might be read as a concise rendering of certain of Rousseau’s central political concerns. Thomas Kavanagh, for example, refers to the text as an ‘overdetermined symptom condensing into one short narrative elements at work in all the major works’ (cf. Thomas Kavanagh, ‘Rousseau’s *Leviit of Ephraïm* Synthesis in a “Minor” Work’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. by Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 397-417 (p. 404)).

55 In recent times, the Hally episode has increasingly come to be read under the aegis of Kleist’s concern with truth: Anthony Stephens, for example, whilst noting the *Essai sur l’origine des langues* as a probable source, nonetheless concludes that Kleist’s point is that ‘the currency of truth has become so debased that it makes no difference that the crime against Hally has already been punished by the Romans, and that it is her own father who has murdered her’ (Stephens, *The Dramas and Stories*, p. 168); whilst Nicholas Saul pursues a similar line, arguing that Hally’s body does not represent the iconic sign of authentic and authoritative truth, but is rather a ‘twice overwritten iconic palimpsest’, and that the notion of German unity is thus ‘based on a lie’ (Saul, *Body, Language, and Body Language: Thresholds in Heinrich von Kleist*, in *Schwellen: Germanistische Erkundungen einer Metapher*, ed. by Nicholas Saul (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999), pp. 316-32 (p. 330)). In drawing attention to the apparent distortion of truth involved in the scene, both critics are, I believe, quite correct, though I disagree with the view that we might here attribute a deconstruction to the text. I rather feel that greater account ought to be taken of the altogether more pragmatic attitude Kleist adopts towards truth in his political writings, where he defends and even advocates deception as a necessary concession to conditions of national crisis (see, for example, his poem ‘An Friedrich Wilhelm den Dritten, König in Preußen’ (DKV: III, 437)).
unsrer Völker Langmut aufgezehrt’ and that the whole of Germany is now united in arms ‘den Greuel zu strafen, der sich ihr verübt’ (DKV: II, 551).

Seen in this context, the whole of the Hally episode emerges in a new light that draws out the potential of the unmediated visual act as a vehicle for political mobilisation. Whether this exonerates the inclusion of such violence may remain open to debate, but it certainly encourages us to consider more carefully the common judgement that this is but a regrettable miscalculation on Kleist’s part that explodes all ideological and political boundaries. The same might be said of the Herrmann-legislator parallel more generally, the lines of which help to deepen our understanding of the psychology of Kleist’s hero by locating his violent rhetorical strategies in a broader politico-philosophical tradition. This, to my mind, takes us to the very core of the character, for though unflinching in his commitment to the national cause, Herrmann is (as has been frequently noted) cast more as an intellectual than a military hero – the mythical warrior of pagan antiquity is here converted into a ‘wortbegabte[r] Denker’ (DKV: II, 1107). Armed with words as his weapons, he reprises the analogue between the ‘soldier who fights’ and the ‘orator who speaks’ that filters from the classic accounts of Gorgias, Plato, Cicero and Quintilian, through Bernard Lamy’s L’Art de parler, into the Essai sur l’origine des langues;56 and through means of word and gesture he inflicts far greater injury on the enemy that could ever be achieved through sword alone. It is for this reason, one suspects, that Kleist has Marbod deliver the decisive military success over Varus, for to present Herrmann in traditional heroic pose in battle would be to run the risk of eclipsing his abiding heroism as strategic mastermind of the Roman defeat – an effect that would, as I shall argue presently, work counter to the intended function and meaning of the piece in its specific political context. In this regard there is, of course, a tension in respective subject matter between Rousseau’s concern with the theoretical conditions of founding and Kleist’s interest in contemporary realities – a fact that manifests itself in the sheer rhetorical extremes of hatred and vengeance which, drawing on the historical lessons of the Revolution, are clearly forged at the anvil of current anti-French attitudes and for which (the grimness of Le Lévite d’Éphraim notwithstanding) there is no sustained equivalent in Rousseau. To read Herrmann as a straightforward incarnation of the legislator would thus be misguided, for it would render irrelevant this all-important sense of historical specificity. That being said, the

parallels between the two are inescapable, and so it seems likely enough that in sketching the contours of his apparent political ‘Wunschbild’, Kleist has distilled, referenced – and promptly radicalised – a number of moral, rhetorical and performative elements from the stock of Rousseau’s own model state- and nation-founder.

5.4 ‘Wie, du Tyrann!’: The State of Exception and the Perils of Terror?

Reading Die Herrmannsschlacht across the lines of Rousseau’s views on freedom, nationhood and performative politics thus allows new and instructive light to be shed on recent debates concerning Herrmann’s ideological commitment to liberty and the relation between political violence and the construction of national identity. At the same time, the sharpened perspectives afforded on these issues may also go some considerable way to helping disclose and illuminate the primary intent of the text as a political ‘Tendenzstück’.

For the manner in which Kleist makes the reader/viewer privy to Herrmann’s artful strategies presents a major difficulty to viewing the drama as a piece of popular propaganda – as Peter Horn succinctly puts it, ‘[d]ie Demonstration der Methoden der Propaganda ist widersinning, wenn man sein Publikum agitieren möchte’. Of course this could be considered a simple misjudgement on the author’s part, in which case the work must be seen as something of a crude and offensive failure. Given Kleist’s mature mastery of the dramatic form, however, and his evidently keen grasp of propaganda techniques, this line of argument seems somewhat questionable, and I believe with Horn that we are far better served by reading the text not as an address to the masses but rather to the political elite – not as a popular ‘Aufruf’ or ‘Agitationsstück’ but rather as a primer on the deployment of mobilising propaganda and a strategy paper on the tactics of partisan war.

Establishing this specific political intent allows us, in turn, to speculate with a greater level of conviction on the possible implications of the closing scenes of the drama. On the one hand, the final call for destruction aligns consistently with the perspective of certain of Kleist’s other political writings of the period – we find a parallel and apparent

ideological mandate for such violence in the numerous ‘Totschlags-Parolen’ and ‘Sieg-oder-Untergang-Phantasien’ that recur throughout.\textsuperscript{60} One might also surmise, as Hans Joachim Kreutzer does, that under the current, exceptional conditions of duress, Kleist ‘hat sich ein militärisches nach außen aktives Deutschland […] vorgestellt’,\textsuperscript{61} which would again lend strength to the view that Herrmann’s final proclamation reflects a straightforward patriotic appeal for action. A similar line might likewise be taken towards the executions of Septimius and Aristan, both of which find legitimating support elsewhere, the former in the calls for revenge and annihilation in the ‘Germania’ ode (cf. DKV: III, 426) and the ‘Kriegslied der Deutschen’ (cf. DKV: III, 434), the latter in the fifteenth chapter of the ‘Katechismus der Deutschen’ (cf. DKV: III, 490-91). Viewed under this aspect, the whole of the post-battle sequence can very well be read as an extension of the dominant political message of the drama, presenting, in brutally graphic and honest fashion, further examples of the conditions which must be met, and particularly the moral sacrifices which must be made, if the nation is to survive the current moment of supreme crisis and cast off the yoke of imperial rule.

Yet as convincing and valid as this conventional reading is, it fails to offer any explanation for the apparent tensions in Herrmann’s actions, and with this in mind – and taking up the point raised earlier in relation to Sossou’s reading of the text as a palimpsest – I shall now look at how we might perhaps tease out the threads of a more critical subtext to the drama through various intertextual and contextual references to the twin themes of Rousseau and the Revolution respectively. As a starting point, I should like to return to and extend our discussion of the legislator figure, focusing on two related complexities, or rather potential dangers, which Rousseau himself acknowledges and declares openly. The first relates to the double-edged impact of persuasive rhetoric which, by tapping atavistic strains of the psyche and operating through its ability to ‘émouvoir’ and ‘enflammer’, not only inspires patriotic loyalty but also excites fanaticism. As discussed previously, this is, in itself, by no means wholly negative for Rousseau: the content of the civil religion, for instance, is, as we have seen, expressly geared towards putting the passions of fanaticism to political use as a means of sacralising laws and mores, and it is by way of persuasion, he insists, that great legislators such as Moses, Lycurgus and Numa successfully bound their

\textsuperscript{60} Cf. Müller-Salget, ‘Die Herrmannsschlacht’, p. 77.
citizens heart and soul to the *patrie* (cf. OC: III, 956-58). At the same time, however, he is keenly alive to the darker possibilities that attend this nexus of rhetoric and fanaticism, as signalled, for example, by the warning he gives in the preface to the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité* of the ‘interpretations sinistres et des discours envenimés dont les motifs secret sont souvent plus dangereux que les actions qui en sont l’objet’ (OC: III, 117). What makes this doubly dangerous in a political context is the fact that all ‘persuasion’ is essentially false – even the sublime rhetoric of the great legislator is ultimately a form of deliberate misrepresentation. The only distinction that legitimises this particular mode relates to specific object and purpose: like Plato, Rousseau distinguishes between a falsification motivated by personal gain or malevolence and one based on a profound sagacity that benefits all. As the relevant section in the original version of *Du contrat social* makes particularly clear, the eloquence of the legislator combines rhetorical fire (‘le feu de l’enthousiasme’) with the moral qualities of reflective wisdom (the ‘profondeurs de la sagesse’ and the ‘constance de la vertu’ (OC: III, 317)), and thus although the act of persuasion, as the agent of a particular interest, carries the inherent risk of misuse and abuse, the extraordinary character of the legislator – in theory at least – serves as a safeguard against this. An interesting parallel suggests itself here in the similarities and contrasts between Herrmann and the Chorherr in *Das Erdbeben in Chili*, both of whom show themselves to be experts in the art of mobilising rhetoric or persuasion (see the reference in the tale to the canon’s ‘priesterliche[.] Beredsamkeit’ (DKV: III, 215)). In effect, the two can be seen as obverse and reverse of the same coin, the only (crucial) difference, following Rousseau, being their respective motives and aims. Set against a common historical background of revolutionary oratory, we find further sign here of Kleist’s ongoing concern with the mechanisms and dynamics that have played out since 1789, albeit, in this regard, in a mainly positive tone of detailing how the Germans might employ the same potent means in the service of their own political end.

It is on this very question of the separation and control of ends and means, however, that things become, as Riedl has shown, somewhat more ambiguous and complex. Rousseau touches on the issue in Book 2, Chapter VII of *Du contrat social* where, despite voicing his faith in the ‘grande âme’ of the legislator, he nonetheless insists on a number of

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checks and balances designed to limit absolute power and place the use of persuasion under surveillance. In fact, as much as the discussion of the legislator provides a portrait of the ideal political leader, it also serves as a critical disquisition on the uses and abuses of power and control. Particularly acute in this respect is the injunction imposed confirming that his task is to found rather than rule: once having led his people into the world of the just patriotic community, he is to take no further part in political affairs, and he is most expressly not to exercise empire. Should the latter occur, Rousseau fears that the legislator may succumb to the temptation to fashion political institutions and pursue policies to suit his own ends; and so the strict division between ‘founding’ and ‘ruling’ thus serves as a procedural safeguard to insure against the threat of usurpation of power and evolution into self-serving tyranny. A structural analogy might be drawn here to Kleist’s drama where this specific division of labour – as far as it may be an issue at all – breaks down in the closing stages, at the moment that Herrmann, having successfully staged the foundation of the nation, accepts Marbod’s offer of the crown. Only after this point do we begin to see any sign of conflict with his earlier actions, or any evidence of his slipping into the mould of a ‘Tyrann’ (DKV: II, 555) – an accusation which, tellingly, he does nothing to deny. Whether Kleist deliberately makes this the pivot for an implicit inquiry into the legitimacy of power and leadership is, of course, difficult to say with any confidence, and it could just as well be the case that Herrmann’s acceptance of the crown is intended as an enticing glimpse of the rewards that may await the German leaders. Either way, however, a comparison under this double aspect of the legislator’s character does go some way to helping draw out an ambiguous shading to the central hero in the final scenes, and provides a measure of corroboration to the view that there is here a more complex tension that attends his politics of ends and means.

Further clues to this might be provided by other allusions, both explicit and oblique, to revolutionary events and politics. Two aspects can be noted here. The first is the fact, pointed out by Stephens, that the figure of Herrmann appears to correspond more closely to Kleist’s portrait of Napoleon than he does to any of the prominent leaders or generals on the Prussian or Austrian side. The irony of this seems striking, yet on reflection it can hardly come as a surprise. For despite his intense antagonism towards Bonaparte’s

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imperialist ambitions, Kleist was nonetheless able to admire his political acumen – in the same chapter of the ‘Katechismus der Deutschen’ in which he is described as a ‘der Hölle entstiegenen Vaterrabergeist’ (DKV: III, 485), it is also conceded that he has ‘viel Tugenden’, not least the ability to execute his policies with ‘List, Gewandtheit und Kühnheit’ (DKV: III, 485). As a vision of the ideal national leader driven solely by an ethics of success, it seems, if not necessarily inevitable, then at least entirely logical that Herrmann should embody certain of the characteristics of the most accomplished political ruler of the age. The same can be said of the various references and ideological parallels to the earlier years of the Revolution and the Terror, from the imposition of a polarising ‘friend-versus-enemy’ matrix, to the provocative linking of ‘Rache’ and ‘Tugend’ (cf. DKV: II, 515) and the echo Schings notes in Herrmann’s call for Septimius’s execution to the sanguinary sentiments of the Marseillaise – none of which are accidental, and all of which reflect on the point that Kleist sees in the committed, total politics of the revolutionaries an effective model to follow in the current struggle against tyranny.

The question that presents itself at this point, then, is whether, given the exceptional circumstances of conception and the direct programmatic intent of the drama, Kleist is here able to switch off his mind to the more sinister side of revolutionary politics, particularly the potential for internal oppression and the appetite for external aggression revealed first by the Jacobin, then the Napoleonic dictatorships? If we accept that the Revolution provides part of the discursive framing of the text, two questions appear to acquire particular relevance to its political economy: firstly, how one might control the violent potential of the masses under the conditions of total war; and secondly, how one might bring this ’Ausnahmezustand’ to an end and restore law, order and conventional morality. On the first point, Herrmann serves as a model, expertly directing, in line with reformist aims, a revolution from above that secures national liberty without descending into the indiscriminate violence of terror from below. When it comes to closing down the state of exception, however, we instead find a perpetuation of the same violent ethics and practice, firstly in the execution of Aristan as traitor and ideological other, and then in the calls for continued aggression towards Rome. The closing lines indicate that the putative struggle

for liberation has become a war of annihilation (though not necessarily one of conquest)\textsuperscript{67} – once again, we see a dialectical reversal of violent roles as victims become aggressors, and an idealist attachment to freedom evolves into new modes of brutality. If we assume Kleist’s mindset to be entirely affirmative here, one might be justifiably alarmed by the excesses of his rhetoric and rightly critical of his apparent blindness to the dangers he elsewhere lays bare with such an unerring touch. Set in the fuller context of his response to the Revolution, however, it becomes plausible to construe the ambiguities of the final scenes as being, at least in part, an abstraction of historical pressures, providing an intended hint of the familiar slide from idealism to new tyranny. Even Herrmann’s vow to only assume leadership as a temporary regent pending the princes’ next assembly, which would seem to militate against any argument that he has become dictatorial over the course of the action, can in this regard be seen to carry something of a dual connotation, echoing as it does the justifications provided by revolutionaries to authorise exceptional measures and legitimate the suspension of the constitution until a point when the current crisis had passed. Placed in this framework, the model of politics that structures the text may be seen to embody not an entirely closed paradigm but also a more reflective crossing of discourses, opening up the context for a reading of the tensions embedded in the dialectic of ends and means as less an unconscious symptom and more an implicitly critical line on the potential dangers of revolutionary ideology, particularly the self-escalation and perpetuation of terror, that comes into closer, though clearly not direct, proximity to the treatment of related issues in \textit{Michael Kohlhaas, Die Verlobung} and \textit{Pentesilea}.

In saying this, I am far from meaning to convey the idea of a sustained subversion of the play’s dominant political discourse or a deconstruction of the nationalist myth – from what has gone before it ought, I hope, be clear enough that I consider the tone of the text to be first and foremost appellative. Nor, in fact, do I believe that the more critical aspects detailed above necessarily conflict with the drama’s overriding patriotic message – not if we keep in mind its intended function as an application to those in the political vanguard. For if we consider how the reform agenda was largely predicated upon a harnessing of the positive impulses of the Revolution (including the potential of the \textit{levée en masse}) whilst avoiding the destructive excess, it seems reasonable to think that Kleist’s address may not be just a pattern book on the mobilisation and tactics of partisan war, but also an appeal for

decisive and wise leadership. The laying bare of potential dangers would appear to fit with this design – by supplying a tacit reminder of the fateful course of the Revolution, Kleist could be seen to reinforce the point that the Germans must guard against following the same pattern. No doubt such a reading requires suitable caution – it is by no means the intention to craft any kind of apologia that skirts the problematic issues of the text by attributing all dubious elements to a subversive discourse. Instead, I rather tend to the view that Kleist’s divided attitude towards revolutionary violence again leads to the building in of a double perspective – that he deliberately makes the violent calls for destruction both a model and subtle warning, and that the drama can, in this regard, be seen as being both patriotic and critical at once.

As a final point, I should like to briefly consider how these perspectives are both supported by, and manifest in, Kleist’s other political writings from the period. If we look at the essay ‘Was gilt es in diesem Kriege?’, for example, we find a starkly different paradigm of politics to that which emerges at the close of Die Herrmannsschlacht:

Eine Gemeinschaft [gilt es], die, unbekannt mit dem Geist der Herrschsucht und der Eroberung, des Daseins und der Duldung so würdig ist, wie irgend eine; 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 aller Brüder-Nation, gesetzt ware. (DKV: III, 478)

The suggested ideal of a confederation of autonomous states bears close similarity not only to Herrmann’s earlier vision, but also to the ideas presented by the Reformers and to Kant’s design for the establishment of a ‘Völkerbund’. At the same time, it also follows closely on the lines of the model for international politics outlined by Rousseau in the two essays on perpetual peace. Whether Kleist took direct bearing from this is again unclear – it might very well be the case that Rousseau’s ideas were here mediated through other discourses perhaps in broader circulation at the time. Either way, however, the terms of argument set up a stumbling block for those who judge Kleist’s nationalist mood as but a violent, reactionary precursor to later excesses, and provide instead a telling sign of a continued,
underlying attachment to an Enlightenment view of freedom and self-determination. It is this that accounts for what must from a modern perspective – though not necessarily a historical one – seem a curious admixture of values in his political writings, where apocalyptic visions of slaughter and destruction and calls for total war exist side-by-side with cosmopolitan ideals and plans for future constitutional reform. In effect, this is redoubled by an apparent tension and overlap between pedagogical and performative narrations of national identity: as has been variously noted by Hans Joachim Kreutzer and Hilda Brown (among others), Kleist’s response to the national crisis of 1808 – and the vacillations of Friedrich Wilhelm III – is to attempt to adopt the position of a poet vates, whose task is to guide his fellow countrymen and their leaders towards an appropriate stance under conditions of supreme peril. In this context, we might note a divide in his political writings between, on the one hand, an earlier series of addresses to the political elites that engage the terms of moral argument, and, on the other, a shriller, second set intended to stir the emotions of the masses. In these latter works in particular, marking the performative efficacy of language likewise becomes an important issue for Kleist in his adopted role, and so it seems only natural that he too should look to the same techniques employed so successfully by his own model, Herrmann – namely a mode of violent ‘Gefühlspropaganda’ that appeals directly to instinct rather than reason. By extended analogy, then, the Rousseauian conception of ‘persuasion’ – or rather a Kleistian variant thereof – might be seen as an operative category at the authorial level too, and this, in turn, opens up new avenues for analysis of the linguistic violence embedded within his political discourse. Clearly, one must again tread with caution here: it would be ill-judged to suggest that the tremendously brutal sentiments of, say, the ‘Germania’ ode might be passed off as nothing more than a deliberate rhetorical stratagem. That said, reading these texts under this performative aspect does permit us to go some way towards situating their rhetorical and aesthetic violence within broader traditions, and this, coupled with the fuller terms of dialogue on freedom, nationhood and war, enables new light to be thrown on the tensions that mark Kleist’s national politics, and particularly precise access to be gained to the ideological paradox that stands at their core – that the just, idealist cause of German

freedom from imperialism can only be achieved via the most violent and at times inhumane political expedients.
CHAPTER SIX

Prinz Friedrich von Homburg

In early January 1809, just a short while after completing work on Die Herrmannsschlacht, Kleist borrowed from the Dresdner Königsbibliothek Karl Heinrich Krause’s Mein Vaterland unter den hohenzollerischen Regenten. This was to provide the historical basis for a second patriotic-political drama dealing – as the title suggests – with the legend of Prinz Friedrich von Hessen-Homburg who, whilst serving as a cavalry leader during the Battle of Fehrbellin in 1675, evoked the ire of the ‘Great Elector’ Friedrich Wilhelm by charging without waiting for the order to do so, but was later granted clemency in view of his decisive contribution to victory. Given the close proximity to Die Herrmannsschlacht, the choice of material and setting is no accident: the historical battle saw the invading Swedish army under Count Waldemar von Wrangel repelled by the modest Brandenburg forces, and there can be little doubting Kleist’s intent to once more use the constellation of foreign aggression and patriotic defence to voice a political rallying call. That being said, the layers of meaning are evidently far deeper here than in the previous text, and with the re-working of Homburg’s act of disobedience into a clear instance of insubordination – for which he is first court-martialled, then sentenced to death – comes a shift in focus towards the internal structures of the state that allows for a highly complex and subtle treatment of the tensions between inclination and duty, freedom and order, self and society.

In exploring these issues Kleist crafts a masterful drama which fully deserves its place in the German canon. It is a remarkably concise and economic piece, just over half the length of Penthesilea, with no let up in dramatic effect. Between the opening dream sequence and the Romantic torch-lit conclusion, it evolves first towards an action-based battle play, then into a dramatic disquisition on principles of law, justice and morality, configured through the unfolding of the relationship between Homburg and the Kurfürst. All of this Kleist presents with an unprecedented level of formal control and artistic vision – a point duly noted by Ludwig Tieck in his preface to the first publication of the text in 1821:

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1 Cf. Lebensspuren, No. 232.
Das letzte Werk des Dichters war der *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*. In keiner seiner Dichtungen hat der Verfasser so klar und rein die ganze Fülle seines Geistes abgespiegelt, keines seiner Schauspiele rundet sich so ab und befriedigt so alle Erwartungen, die es erregt. Man sieht hier keine Verstimmung der Seele, nichts Gewalttätiges, kein Zug, keine Szene steht isoliert, auch geschieht in keinem früheren Stück dem Drama so Genüge. Aus diesem Werke mußte man mit Recht die größten Hoffnungen schöpfen, daß in Kleist ein neuer Genius unsere Bühne betreten würde.²

Other early readers held the play in similarly high regard – Heinrich Heine, for instance, famously refers to it in the second of his *Briefe aus Berlin* as being ‘vom Genius der Poesie selbst geschrieben’,³ whilst Friedrich Hebbel likewise tenders the view in his 1850 essay that *Homburg* ‘gehört zu den eigentümlichsten Schöpfungen des deutschen Geistes’.⁴ Alighting on what was for a long time to become the dominant line of interpretation, Hebbel locates the centre of interest in the exposition of the Prince’s development over the course of the drama:

> Es leuchtet wohl jedermann ein, daß uns in diesem Drama auf eine Weise, wie es sonst nirgends geschieht, der Werdeprozeß eines bedeutenden Menschen in voller Unmittelbarkeit vorgeführt wird, daß wir in das charakteristische Durcheinander von rohen Kräften und wilden Trieben hineinschauen, aus denen ein solcher meistens hervorgeht, und daß wir ihn von seiner untersten Stufe an bis zu seinem Höhepunkt begleiten, auf dem der ungebändigten schweifende und in seiner Regellosigkeit der Gefahr der Selbstzerstörung ausgesetzte Komet sich in einen klaren, auf sich selbst beruhenden Fixstern verwandelt.⁵

The implications of this process of identity formation would, in the first half of the nineteenth century in particular, occasion much scandal amongst Prussian traditionalists appalled at the idea of a military officer being shown not only as a romantic dreamer but as also exhibiting an abject fear of death, and it hardly comes as a surprise that following the third performance of the first run in Berlin in 1828, Friedrich Wilhelm III is reported to have insisted that it be pulled and ‘niemals wiedergegeben’,⁶ such was the perceived offence to prevailing standards and sensibilities. From the 1870s, however, such objections

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³ *Nachruhm*, No. 553.
⁴ *Nachruhm*, No. 565.
⁵ *Nachruhm*, No. 565.
⁶ *Nachruhm*, No. 557.
started to wane and the play began to acquire a reputation as a glorification of militant Prussian patriotism (this despite Bismarck’s famous stricture of Kleist’s hero as a ‘schwaches Rohr’). Much as with Die Herrmannsschlacht, this patriotic-nationalist tenor was later put to work by Nazi ideologists: the first ‘Reichs-Theaterwoche’ in Dresden in 1934 opened, for example, with a staging of the play, whilst the Anschluss of 1938 was likewise celebrated by a performance at the Viennese Burgtheater attended by Hitler himself.

The repercussions of Nazi appropriation, whilst not quite so severe as with Die Herrmannsschlacht, were nonetheless significant. Marxist critics took an increasingly negative view of the cultural politics of the text as prizing subjugation to the absolute authority of the state – a line given most famous expression by Bertolt Brecht in his sonnet Über Kleists Stück Prinz Friedrich von Homburg. In the west, meanwhile, there was in the post-war years a move towards more immanent approaches that sought to free the play from its nationalist associations and to channel interest towards the existential struggle of the title figure – Benno von Wiese, for instance, argues that the Prince’s development is not premised on an imperative of duty or order but rather an ‘Imperativ des Gefühls’ and that the primary value of the drama is thus absolute freedom of consciousness. As a complement to this shift, there was also a rise in individual-oriented psychoanalytic readings which, drawing on the initial contributions of Hellmuth Kaiser in the 1930s,
sought to recast the conflict between Homburg and the Kurfürst in terms of an oedipal rivalry, whether for Natalie’s affections\(^\text{12}\) or heroic ascendancy.\(^\text{13}\)

The advent of these new critical paradigms, in prompting something of an accent shift in judgements of the two central figures, also opened the way eventually for a re-evaluation of political interests and standards. From the late 1970s in particular, a series of studies emerged which, in keeping with broader postmodern perspectives, applied closer focus to the ambiguities and dissonances embedded within the structures of the text, and on this basis began to question the meaning and substance of the apparent resolution enacted in the final scenes. Bernd Leistner, for example, submits that rather than achieving a classical unity of content and form, the play presents a contradiction between ‘äußere Gestalt’ and ‘innere Struktur’ that runs parallel to the thematic ‘Ich-Welt’ contrast and which subverts any harmonious view of the denouement.\(^\text{14}\) In a similar vein, Beda Allemann likewise considers the built-in structures of anticipation to mark the core conflict as ‘unlösbar’ and stresses the psychological fixity of the Prince,\(^\text{15}\) whilst Erika Swales argues that the ‘configurations of irony’ and ‘volatile semiotics’ of the text at once both underwrite and undermine stable perspectives, revealing how the play ‘is not only concerned with characters locked in interpretative combat, but forces the reader and critic to experience its riddling structure’.\(^\text{16}\) Answering to this deconstruction of orthodox groundings, what we now find is a dizzying array of opinions and insights – many based on historical re-contextualisation – with little, if any, consensus on the most central issues of interpretation. Does the Prince undergo a convincing process of development?\(^\text{17}\) Or is he fundamentally the same at beginning and end?\(^\text{18}\) Is the Elector a God-like sovereign or wise and


benevolent educator?\textsuperscript{19} Or rather a jealous rival or arbitrary tyrant?\textsuperscript{20} And what is to be made of the conclusion: genuine resolution\textsuperscript{21} or ironic illusion?\textsuperscript{22} An affirmation of moral law and freedom?\textsuperscript{23} Or a celebration of unbending servitude to the state?\textsuperscript{24} Faced with such a bewildering profusion of judgements, we might perhaps do well, in the first instance, to ask with Ingeborg Bachmann:

Was ist das für ein Stück, das des Geistes der Knechtschaft und des Geistes der Freiheit in gleicher Weise beschuldigt wird? Von welchen Kräften lebt es, was macht seine Ambivalenz aus, und wie sollen wir es endlich verstehen?\textsuperscript{25}

6.1 ‘Ein vaterländisches Schauspiel’?

In attempting an answer to these questions, it seems prudent to begin by considering the implications of Kleist’s own designation of the text as a ‘vaterländisches Schauspiel’ (DKV:

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Klaus Müller-Salget, in his recent study, draws attention to the entry in Adelungs Wörterbuch that defines ‘vaterländisch’ as ‘in dem Vaterlande gegründet, aus demselben her, in demselben üblich’ and points out that Kleist could in this view simply mean ‘ein Stück, das auf heimischen Boden spielt bzw. dessen Stoff aus der brandenburgischen Geschichte genommen ist’. An alternative reference might, however, be provided by the article on the semantic parallel patrie in Diderot and d’Alembert’s Encyclopédie which associates the term, in contrast with the mere territorial denotation of pays, with devotion, self-sacrifice and love of freedom. The context within which Kleist’s play takes shape would certainly seem to suggest a more politically-oriented concept of ‘Vaterland’: though the collapse of Austrian strategy at Wagram in July 1809 may have served to dampen his nationalist (pan-Germanic) ardour, his political writings continue, right the way through to the Gebet des Zoroaster of October 1810, to stress the themes of liberty, brotherhood and loyalty to the sovereign, together with the need for re-education towards patriotic values and the development of a new ethos between individual and state. When he later describes Homburg in a letter to Georg Andreas Reimer as a ‘vaterländisches [Drama] (mit mancherlei Beziehungen)’ (DKV: IV, 496), we find, moreover, in the parenthetical reference a seemingly clear advertisement of relevance to contemporary political concerns – this is, once more, a play which strikes ‘in die Mitte der Zeit’ (DKV: IV, 415).

The issue that stands at the centre of the text is that of the complex relations between patriotism and liberty – of the conflict and interplay between competing beliefs about citizenship, statehood and subjectivity, and the centrality and legitimacy of state-sanctioned violence. A common strand in existing scholarship has been to approach this political problematic through the terms of Kantian ethics and Staatsphilosophie. An inviting point of orientation in this regard is provided by the distinction cited in the essay

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27 Müller-Salget, Heinrich von Kleist, p. 264.


Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis between ‘väterliche’ and ‘vaterländische’ forms of rule:

Eine Regierung, die auf dem Prinzip des Wohlwollens gegen das Volk als eines Vaters gegen seine Kinder errichtet wäre, d. i. eine väterliche Regierung *(imperium paternale)*, wo also die Untertanen als unmündige Kinder, die nicht unterscheiden können, was ihnen wahrhaftig nützlich oder schädlich ist, sich bloß passiv zu verhalten genötigt sind, um, wie sie glücklich sein sollen, bloß von dem Urteile des Staatsoberhaupts, und, daß dieser es auch wolle, bloß von seiner Gültigkeit zu erwarten: ist der größte denkbare Despotismus (Verfassung, die alle Freiheit der Untertanen, die alsdann gar keine Rechte haben, aufhebt). Nicht eine väterliche, sondern eine vaterländische Regierung *(imperium, non paternale, sed patrioticum)* ist diejenige, welche allein für Menschen, die der Rechte fähig sind, zugleich in Beziehung auf das Wohlwollen des Beherrschers, gedacht werden kann. (AA: VIII, 248-49)

He goes on:

Patriotisch ist nämlich die Denkungsart, da ein jeder im Staat (das Oberhaupt desselben nicht ausgenommen) das gemeine Wesen als den mütterlichen Schoß, oder das Land als den väterlichen Boden, aus und auf dem er selbst entsprungen, und welchen er auch so als ein teures Unterpfand hinterlassen muß, betrachtet, nur um die Rechte desselben durch Gesetze des gemeinsamen Willens zu schützen, nicht aber es seinem unbedingten Belieben zum Gebrauch zu unterwerfen sich für befugt hält. – Dieses Recht der Freiheit kömmt ihm, dem Gliede des gemeinen Wesen ist, das überhaupt der Rechte fähig ist. (AA: VIII, 294)

Without going into the finer details of Kant’s doctrine, we see here how his vision of patriotic statehood is first and foremost premised on an ideal of political freedom sustained by collective will and respect for the law. In this, as in so much else, he follows closely on the lines of Rousseau’s thought, and his concept of political virtue is likewise defined in relation to the tension between natural and moral freedom. ‘Freie[.] Unterwerfung des Willens unter das Gesetz’ (AA: V, 80) – that is the ideal outlined in the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, and at times Kant presents this as a natural, voluntary act of agency. At others, however, he makes clear that submission to law represents the triumph of reason as a ‘moralische[.] Nötigung’ that weakens and even strikes out man’s natural egoism and self-conceit (‘Eigendünkel’) in the name of duty, ‘was den Menschen über sich selbst als einen Teil der Sinnenwelt erhebt’ (AA: V, 74). In his delineation of the character of Homburg, Kleist no doubt comes close at points to this Kantian code of ethics. For it is
very much a reality of the text that the Prince’s premature entry into battle is largely born of personal ambition and self-aggrandisement – of a desire for fame and glory that figures as a leitmotif through much of the first and second acts. As Richard Samuel points out, Kleist insists here on ‘factual guilt’: 30 Homburg’s actions doubtless amount to an act of insubordination against an order based on sound military strategy. Two episodes in particular serve to highlight the adverse implications of his conduct. The first is the ironically-coded exchange during which Homburg upbraids the young officer who reminds him of his orders for failing to respect ‘die Zehn märkischen Gebote’ (DKV: II, 583) – commandments which he evidently does not believe apply to himself, and with which he is in the very process of breaking. The second, meanwhile, is the counter-example provided by the heroic self-sacrifice of the equerry Froben, tellingly characterised by Graf Sparren as ‘ein Opfer seiner Treue’ (DKV: II, 591). Broadening our gaze momentarily, we might also draw insight here from the essay ‘Was gilt es in diesem Kriege?’, where we find, amongst a catalogue of other images set in negative juxtaposition to the true stakes of war, that of a young and enterprising Prince ‘der, in dem Duft einer lieblichen Sommernacht, von Lorbeern geträumt hat’ (DKV: III, 632). Clearly, the issue is rendered rather more complex in the drama, though the associations of irresponsibility and self-absorption nonetheless remain apt. 31 When Homburg later speaks of the ‘Triumph […] über den verderblichsten / Der Feind’ in uns, dem Trotz, dem Übermut’ (DKV: II, 639), it is thus tempting to read his development in Kantian terms as an education towards disciplined statesmanship and patriotic ‘Pflicht’, climaxing, in his acceptance of the death penalty, with a free act of submission to the authority of moral law.

An interesting and distinctive variant on this line is provided by Jochen Schmidt, who analyses the political ethos of the drama not in terms of contemporary philosophical theories, but rather in the historical context of seventeenth-century neo-Stoic state ideology. 32 Tracing the revival of Stoic thought from the works of Lipsius, Grotius and

Pufendorf into the *raison d’état* of Friedrich Wilhelm’s Prussia, Schmidt draws attention to the renewal of emphasis on the majesty of the law and the centrality of duty and obligation to state and sovereign. Military doctrine, too, was decisively reshaped by neo-Stoic virtues towards a highly disciplined ‘Ethos der Verantwortung und des Pflichtbewußtseins, der Selbstbeherrschung und der Askese, vor allem aber eines ausgeprägten Staatsbewußtsein’.

It is these values, Schmidt argues, that set the political standards of the text and the framework for the conflict between the Elector and Homburg. In the former, he sees the archetype of the Stoic *constantia*, revealed most impressively by the level-headed response (‘Ruhig, ruhig!’ (DKV: II, 627)) that greets the possible threat of rebellion. With the Prince, on the other hand, it is rather the case that he must be reoriented to the Stoic postulates of authority (*auctoritas*) and discipline (*disciplina*), and so steered towards a new attitude of constancy and temperance (*temperantia*). The motor for this development is the encounter with the open grave, which Schmidt transcribes as a dramatic working of the Senecan formula *egregria res est mortem condiscere* – Homburg has to learn to accept and face death with equanimity. In Act IV, Scene 3, we see the evidence of this resolve, as in place of his earlier indignation, panic and cowardice, the Prince now exhibits a new composure and collectedness (*tranquillitas animi*) that comes out in the fatalistic attitude of his monologue (cf. DKV: II, 619). In what follows, Kleist adds a further layer of meaning by having Homburg acknowledge the justice of the death sentence – the psychological resignation of the previous scene is thus imbued with a moral ethos, principled by recognition of duty and law.

By placing the text in this context, Schmidt invests the straight Kantian reading with a deeper dimension of philosophical and historical relevance. At the same time, he also identifies in Kleist’s treatment of Stoic ethics a ‘doppelter Funktionswandel34 in line with contemporary political exigencies. The recourse to the model is not straightforwardly affirmative: Kleist does not glorify any extant or recently extant Prussian state, but rather lays claim to a traditional ethos which has become deformed in modern times. In doing so, ‘appelliert [er] an Preußens tiefere, ideale Identität, aus der sich für die geschichtliche Gegenwart erneuernde Energien entbinden sollen’35 Looking to the final scenes, moreover, Schmidt acknowledges – rightly, to my mind – that Homburg does not merely become a

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33 Schmidt, *Die Dramen und Erzählungen*, p. 164.
Stoic and that the persistent elements of dream and unconscious indicate a broader negotiation of Romantic (poetic) subjectivity: the appeal to an idealised Prussian identity and ethos conveys not only a neo-Stoic devotion to law, order and duty, but also a new 'dialektische Attraktion'\textsuperscript{36} between 'Traum' and 'Wirklichkeit', and between individual and collective modes of existence.

In opening up these dialectical terms, Schmidt’s interpretation goes beyond a number of the limitations that attend the classic ‘Erziehungsthese’. That said, there nonetheless remain further subtleties of character and theme to which his argument cannot quite do full justice. If, for example, we look a little closer to Homburg’s motives and actions, it would seem that although he clearly does come to a more collective (Stoic) orientation, his reasons for accepting the death sentence are not solely moral – as Klaus Lüderssen notes, the Kurfürst’s letter of pardon appeals as much to pride as reason, and the Prince’s ‘heroische Attitüde’ remains in evidence at the drama’s close.\textsuperscript{37} Nor does it suffice to view the Elector as a cool embodiment of Kantian or Stoic ethics, for not only does Kleist deliberately merge in his character both paternal (‘väterliche’) and patriotic (‘vaterländische’) identities, but he also invests him with an impulsive tendency that shines through in both the ill-judged ‘Scherz’ of the opening scene, and in his immediate reaction to news of Homburg’s collapse (cf. DKV: II, 614). Schmidt, for his part, goes some way to recognising the less fixed aspects of the Kurfürst’s character, rightly noting how, contrary to the arguments of those who place him as the detached, God-like educator, he very much intends to see through the execution, and that it is only Natalie’s intervention that eventually diverts him from this course. This is, however, seen as a ‘souveräne Sinnesänderung […] aufgrund neuer Erkenntnisse’\textsuperscript{38} rather than a political revision, and so the view that the Elector too goes through a learning curve is rejected. Given the evident significance of Natalie’s plea for a reconciliation of law and feeling (‘Das Kriegsgesetz, das weiß ich wohl, soll herrschen, / Jedoch die lieblichen Gefühle auch’ (DKV: II, 613)), I would interpret this somewhat differently, and in playing down the extent to which the Elector is pressed to adjust his own position on political and military discipline, Schmidt overlooks, I feel, a vital aspect of the drama’s fuller dialectical framework.

\textsuperscript{36} Schmidt, ‘Stoisches Ethos’, p. 102.
\textsuperscript{37} Klaus Lüderssen, ‘Prinz von Homburg – ein aristokratisches oder ein demokratisches Prinzip?’, \textit{KJb} (1985), 56-83 (p. 72).
\textsuperscript{38} Schmidt, \textit{Die Dramen und Erzählungen}, p. 172.
This perspective of a ‘double movement’ provides the central premise for what follows. Using Schmidt’s instructive analysis as a starting point, the aim is to extend and develop the lines of argument he puts forward by firstly examining a quite specific parallel to Rousseau’s inquiries into the perennial dilemma of how to order public and private values, and then looking to situate these insights in relation to the moral physiognomies of the Revolution and the German response to Napoleonic tyranny. In having Homburg confess his ‘guilt’ and declare a wish to die a ‘freien Tod’ (DKV: II, 638) as a form of sacrifice to the common weal (now identified in terms of independence from foreign subjugation), Kleist articulates his familiar concern with the realignment of individual interests towards a new patriotic spirit and outlook. At the same time, the shift in the Elector’s position, however more slight and subtly charted, carries a second implication that nods towards the need for modifications to political and military structures if Prussia is to hope to mount a challenge to Napoleonic rule. Seen in this perspective, it seems prudent to think that the text ought again to be viewed, at least in part, as an address to Prussian leaders – as a further, albeit far less direct and limited, contribution to contemporary political discourse. Any attempt to derive a coherent vision of state- and nationhood from the play ought, therefore, to again take into consideration the fundamental tensions in Kleist’s political position between, on the one hand, his admiration for the humanist ideals of the Revolution and the effectiveness of French policy in mobilising patriotic (military) energies, and, on the other, his concern to avoid the distortions of anarchic bloodshed and new tyranny, which manifests, as we have seen in the previous two chapters, in a focus on questions of leadership and structures of power. It is this constellation of impulses that accounts in good measure for the complex mix of Enlightenment and Romantic, utopian and conservative elements we find in the politics of the drama, as well as for the lingering ambiguity that leaves something of a question mark over the possibilities of the projected ideal. In both probing the modern claims of citizenship and patriotism, and casting an eye to a renewal or actualisation of earlier values, Kleist maintains, moreover, a close dialogue with the central threads of Rousseau’s political doctrine – a doctrine which not only prefigures aspects of reformist and Romantic nationalist discourse, but which also closely engages with the principles of Stoic thought, and which thus yields a good deal of

39 Cf. ‘[…] Es erliege / Der Fremdling, der uns unterjochen will, / Und frei, auf mütterlichem Grund, behaupte, / Der Brandenburger sich; denn sein ist er, / Und seiner Fluren Pracht nur ihm erbaut!’ (DKV: II, 639)
supplementary insight, detail and clarity to an understanding of the drama’s political and philosophical themes.\textsuperscript{40}

6.2 Stoicism, Self-Love and the Ideal of Unity

That Rousseau should come to structure his thought around certain aspects of the Stoic tradition might be explained, in the first instance, by way of his upbringing in eighteenth-century Geneva. For much like the Dutch Republic that bred Grotius and Pufendorf, Rousseau’s hometown was likewise a Calvinist citadel, dominated by an ethos of self-discipline and virtue that owed much to Stoic axioms.\textsuperscript{41} In religious terms, Rousseau was never an orthodox believer, but the moral rigour of Calvinist (and Stoic) doctrine doubtless left a deep and profound impression on his mind. His early reading of the Greek and Roman classics – particularly Plutarch – served, meanwhile, to redouble this outlook, testimony to which is provided by Book 1 of the \textit{Confessions}:

\begin{quote}
Plutarque, surtout, devint ma lecture favorite. Le plaisir que je prenois à le relire sans cesse me guerit un peu des Romans, et je préferai bientôt Agesilas, Brutus, Aristide à Orondate, Artamene et Juba. De ces interessantes lectures, des entretiens qu’elles occasionnoient entre mon pere et moi, se forma cet esprit libre et républicain, ce caractère indomptable et fier, impatient de joug et de servitude qui m’a tourmenté tout le tems de ma vie dans les situations les moins propres à lui donner l’essor. Sans cesse occupé de Rome et d’Athènes; vivant, pour ainsi dire, avec leurs grands hommes, né moi-même Citoyen d’une République, et fils d’un pere dont l’amour de la patrie étoit la plus forte passion, je m’en enflammoe à son exemple; je me croyois Grec ou Romain; je devenois le personage dont je lisois la vie […]. (OC: I, 9)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{40} In keeping with the traditional chronological approach to Kleist’s relationship to Rousseau, few critics have seen many direct parallels in \textit{Homburg}. Siegfried Streller, in his essay, notes a possible connection, suggesting that the Elector ‘fühlt sich, da er kein Tyrann sein will, an das Gesetz gebunden, das sich, könnte man in Parenthese hinzufügen, aus dem Gesellschaftsvertrag ergibt’, though he does not go on to trace any further implications (cf. Siegfried Streller, ‘Heinrich von Kleist und Jean-Jacques Rousseau’, \textit{Weimarer Beiträge}, 8 (1962), 541-66 (p. 561)). The more commonly held view, however, is that the dialectical structures of the drama deviate from Rousseau’s individualist or dualistic perspectives (cf. Wolff, ‘Heinrich von Kleist als politischer Dichter’, Ernst Fischer, ‘Heinrich von Kleist’, \textit{Sinn und Form}, 13 (1961), 759-844, Hans Mayer, \textit{Heinrich von Kleist: Der geschichtliche Augenblick} (Pfüllingen: Neske, 1962), and Marcel Krings, ‘Naturunshuld und Rechtsgesellschaft: Kleists romantische Rousseau-Modifikationen’, \textit{Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik}, 37 (2005), 13-27).

\textsuperscript{41} Such is the affinity between Calvinism and Stoicism that two critics have even been moved to suggest that ‘Calvinism is Stoicism baptised into Christianity’ (Ford Lewis Battles and André Malan Hugo, \textit{Calvin’s Commentary on Seneca’s De clementia} (Leiden: Brill, 1969), p. 46).
Despite Rousseau’s famed (and self-confessed (cf. OC: I, 5)) penchant for embellishment, there is scant reason to doubt the truth of these words. For most of his life, he continued to keenly identify with his homeland as a ‘Citoyen de Genève’, even though he had, in fact, lost his citizenship rights when he converted to Catholicism in 1728. In his political writings, moreover, he time and again lodges an idealised image of Geneva as an exemplar of liberty, justice, and patriotic citizenship. Twice this attitude emerges particularly clearly – in the Lettre à d’Alembert where he writes in defence of Genevan virtue against what he sees as the potentially corrupting influence of theatre, and in the dedicatory preface to the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité where he extols, above all, the Republic’s democratic culture. It is as a republican citizen, meanwhile, that Rousseau also identifies with the spirit and experience of the ancients, and the egalitarian city-states of Sparta and Rome likewise take their place alongside modern-day Geneva in his pantheon of political models – all three characterised by a shared set of political, moral and military values, and all three seemingly shot through with a distinctly Stoic emphasis on the elimination of private interest and the generalisation of the human will.

In order to gain a fuller appreciation of Rousseau’s interaction with Stoic ethics, we must, however, take a closer look at the fundamental distinction which underpins so much of his analysis of man and society – that between amour de soi and amour-propre. To briefly recapitulate, he defines the two in the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité thus:

Il ne faut pas confondre l’Amour propre et l’Amour de soi-même; deux passions très différentes par leur nature et par leurs effets. L’Amour de soi-même est un sentiment naturel qui porte tout animal à veiller à sa propre conservation et qui, dirigé dans l’homme par la raison et modifié par la pitié, produit l’humanité et la vertu. L’Amour propre n’est qu’un sentiment relatif, factice et né dans la société, qui porte chaque individu à faire plus de cas de soi que de tout autre, qui inspire aux hommes tous les maux qu’ils se font mutuellement, et qui est la véritable source de l’honneur. (OC: III, 219)

This distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forms of self-love is determined in large measure by Rousseau’s engagement with the natural rights theories of Hobbes and Grotius, two of his most important intertexts in the Discours.42 A central claim of such theories is that faced

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with conflict and disagreement between peoples one should search out a common moral principle from which a universal code of ethics might be generated. Grotius, in his *De jure bellis*, suggests that the basic impulse of self-preservation might serve such a purpose – an instinct derived, via Cicero and Seneca, from the Stoic concept of *oikeiosis* (literally ‘appropriation’) and considered quite compatible with mutual respect and recognition. In making *amour de soi* the seedbed of man’s ‘passions douces et affectueuses’ (OC: IV, 493) only, Rousseau follows and extends this same tradition, and by subtracting all baneful effects of self-love to the account of *amour-propre*, he likewise presents a variant of *oikeiosis* as a valid founding stone for a philosophy of natural rights, as well as for his own unstinting belief in the innate goodness of man.

Yet inasmuch as Rousseau may, in this regard, closely align with the Stoic perspective, there are nonetheless a number of crucial, deep-lying differences to note. These come to the fore particularly in his treatment of *amour-propre* and the psychic disorders that plague modern man in society. As a ‘sentiment rélatif’, vaingloriously soliciting recognition and esteem, *amour-propre* emerges in Rousseau’s thought as a mascot of man’s divided nature, of the rupture of his original unity and wholeness. In the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*, he offers an account of its genesis; in *Du contrat social* he provides a political model geared to resolving psychological tensions through the ideal of civic virtue. In *Émile*, meanwhile, we find a grand synthetic narrative that maps the origins of *amour-propre*, indexes its various facets, and charts an alternative pathway back to integrity and authenticity. Vital to all of this is again the insistence that the course of history cannot be reversed and acquired faculties shed. In the prescriptions he works out in both *Émile* and *Du contrat social*, Rousseau fully accepts the actualities of man’s social accretions, and so looks to new ways to order and balance them so as to permit the realisation of the subject’s full potential.

It is at this point that we can begin to see an important difference opening before us. Like Rousseau, the Stoics were also directly concerned with the perturbations of the human soul emanating from the tension between private and general will. Their view was that passion and instinct were fundamentally inimical to the individual’s pursuit of his own best interest – the Stoics believed that the wise and virtuous man must essentially be *apathēs* (without passions). Seneca, in *Epistle* 116, gives strict expression to this dictum when he writes that ‘Philosophers of our school (i.e. Stoicism) reject the emotions; the Peripatetics
keep them in check’. To achieve the equanimity and tranquillity of mind that is the very hallmark of Stoic doctrine (and which Schmidt identifies in *Homburg*), the citizen must undergo a stern and rigorous process of self-discipline designed not to moderate or control the passions which pose a threat to social order and coherence, but rather to eliminate them entirely.

What, then, is Rousseau’s view on this? At first sight, we might again find signs which seem to point to an affinity with the Stoic pattern of order – in *Émile*, for instance, he categorically states that the educator must choose between shaping either a man or citizen, and that good social institutions are those which know how the effectively ‘denature’ the individual (cf. OC: IV, 169-70). It soon becomes apparent, however, that Rousseau does not, in fact, advance any extirpation of the passions – indeed far from it. Two factors account for this. One is, as suggested above, the view that man cannot simply hand back his social acquisitions – for good or no, *amour-propre* is an ineluctable aspect of the human condition. The second, meanwhile, relates to the core dilemma, already touched upon in earlier chapters, that, in Rousseau’s eyes, a just and durable *polis* cannot be produced by passion-stifling reason alone. Political virtue – the republican’s committed devotion to the common good which is the bedrock of Rousseau’s doctrine – is a matter of heart as much as head, and only as such does it carry the requisite force to counterpoise the drives of *amour-propre*. Where so many of his contemporaries sought to automatically convert man’s natural selfishness into the collective self-interest of society via rational processes, Rousseau opts instead for a decidedly anti-Enlightenment – and in this regard anti-Stoic – ideal of patriotism drawn from Sparta and Rome: one which figures as a ‘sublimated form of *amour-propre*’. and so constructively engages the ambiguous potential of man’s passion for primacy and esteem by redirecting it from the individual to the collective. Few critics have put this quite so clearly or succinctly as Stanley Hoffmann in his essay on Rousseau’s national and international politics:

[Rousseau] wanted a polis established in which the irreversible consequences of man’s entry into civil society – the development of passions and desires, the urge to look at one’s reflection in other people’s eyes, the mirror game of social vanity – could be channelled to good, i.e., moral uses. Patriotism is such a good

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use for it combines amour-propre and virtue. The building of national character is an attempt at dissociating the two elements of amour-propre: vanity and pride, so as to smother the former under the latter. Vanity is the result of comparisons with others, and the ‘fruit of opinion’ – while pride is born of one’s own achievements. The competitions which he advocates in schools and public games, the medals and distinctions he recommends, the national (but not nationalist) celebrations he describes, are all efforts to make the seeds of human vanity sprout into flowers of legitimate collective pride.  

This ideal of patriotism furnishes us, I suggest, with a useful, alternative compass to the development of Homburg’s character in Kleist’s drama. In the opening scene, the Prince’s somnambulistic trance is employed to brilliant effect as a means of laying bare his innermost thoughts and ambitions, tellingly focused, above all, on the prop of the laurel wreath he is weaving in anticipation of military glory. The meaning of the symbolism is clear enough, betokening how Homburg cares less for the fate of the fatherland, and more for the personal status and ‘Ruhm’ that victory might afford him. As we have already seen, this desire for recognition and approbation features prominently throughout the opening two acts, notably during the battle scene, where it prompts his unordered entry into the fray, but also in the immediate aftermath where he somewhat impetuously appoints himself as a substitute for the presumed-to-be-dead Kurfürst, and as a protector to the Electress and Natalie. At the close of Act II, Scene 8, confident of winning Natalie’s hand (though by this time informed of the Elector’s survival), Homburg sees himself within grasping distance of his vain fantasies, reflected in his famous apostrophe to Caesar: ‘O Cäsar Divus! / Die Leiter setz’ ich an, an deinen Stern!’ (DKV: II, 593). In a typically ironic Kleistian twist, however, the Prince has already, by way of his actions in the field, set in chain the dramatic counter-movement that will call into question the ideals to which he aspires, and which opens up a critical discourse on the qualities of ‘Menschenruhm’ and ‘Menschengröße’. 

In having Homburg initially covet public approval in such a fashion – and, indeed, in making this the root cause of dramatic conflict – Kleist can be seen to implicitly engage the Rousseauian dilemma of *amour-propre* and the tensions to which it gives rise in the political order. What remains to be asked, then, is how this theme plays out over the latter half of the play, and whether – or in what form – the Prince’s sense of self-love and pride

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45 Stanley Hoffmann, ‘Rousseau on War and Peace’, *American Political Science Review*, 57 (2) (1963), 317-33 (p. 322).

46 For an excellent account of the various manifestations of these themes, see Brown, *The Ambiguity of Art*, pp. 360-94.
remains intact at the close? Clearly, there is a dynamic progression to chart here, beginning
from the point at which, having passed the open grave, he explicitly renounces all claim to
fame and glory: ‘Seit ich mein Grab sah, will ich nichts, als Leben, / Und frage nichts mehr,
ob es rühmlich sei!’ (DKV, II, 607). The mood of composed resignation that hovers over
Act IV, Scene 3 conveys, moreover, not only a new self-control, but also an apparent (neo-
Stoic) silencing of selfish passions: the ideals of constantia and tranquillitas animi which
Schmidt sees reflected here seemingly connote a state of apatheia, and there is certainly
little sign at this point of Homburg’s earlier egotism and capriciousness.

Subsequent events reveal, however, that this state of passionless calm is but a phase
– albeit an important one – in the Prince’s developing view of fame, heroism and death. For
in the very next scene, when Natalie delivers the Elector’s letter of pardon, we see the
flames of pride beginning to flicker once more. Initially, Homburg is thrilled to hear of his
reprieve, answering to the news with his stock response ‘Es ist ein Traum!’ (DKV: II, 620).
When he discovers the exact condition of the Elector’s offer – namely that he is to be freed
if in his own judgement he has been treated unjustly – there comes, however, an immediate
clouding in his mind, first signalled in the stage direction (Natalie erblaßt. Pause. Der
Prinz sieht sie fragend an. (DKV: II, 620)), and then held in tension through the dramatic
offsetting of his troubled ruminations with Natalie’s increasing agitation. Her blanching
(again such a characteristic Kleistian trait) flows from an anxious fear that Homburg shall
be too proud to accede to the Kurfürst’s terms, confirmed when he declares: ‘Ich will ihm,
der so würdig vor mir steht, / Nicht, ein Unwürdiger, gegenüber stehen!’ (DKV: II, 623).
Having temporarily evaporated in the face of death, the Prince’s sense of pride and heroism
thus swiftly re-emerges and reasserts itself, rekindled, it seems, by the deliberate appeal of
the Elector’s missive.

For many critics, this aspect of Homburg’s character conflicts with any moralistic
view of his development.47 Not infrequently, the pose he strikes in the latter half of the
drama is seen as an attempt to outdo the Elector in a battle of magnanimity – as a further
effort to secure heroic status, and so as an unchanged extension of earlier impulses. No
doubt, there is some justification for this, in the sense that Homburg is able to assert his
confession of guilt as a mark of honour and nobility that appeals to his heroic nature. To

47 Cf. Lüderssen, ‘Prinz von Homburg’, p. 71. See also Susanne Kaul, ‘Freier Tod und Autonomie: Zu Kleist
place this on exactly the same level as his initial self-interest, however, is to neglect two significant complexities. The first is that, in choosing this course of action, he exhibits scant concern with winning recognition and acclaim. Granted, Natalie, Kottwitz and the other generals all express admiration for his courage, but this is more a product of his conduct rather than a primary motive – Homburg acts here for himself, not others, and his view of heroism has seemingly become detached from its earlier association with spectacular public fame. This leads on to the second, even more vital, consideration, which is that rather than being necessarily decoupled, the dictates of pride and morality can, in fact, be seen to be much more resolutely linked together within the discursive-political context of the drama. Let us look again, for example, at the demands of the Elector’s offer of pardon:

Mein Prinz von Homburg, als ich euch gefangen setzte,
Um eures Angriffs, allzufrüh vollbracht,
Da glaubt’ ich nichts, als meine Pflicht zu tun;
Auf euren eignen Beifall rechnet’ ich.
Meint ihr, ein Unrecht sei euch widerfahren,
So bitt’ ich, sagt’s mir mit zwei Worten –
Und gleich den Degen schick’ ich euch zurück. (DKV: II, 620)

The key words here are ‘Pflicht’ and ‘Unrecht’: the appeal to the Prince’s sense of honour is contingent upon recognition of duty, justice and law. This reflects, moreover, in his own response, first when he warns Natalie that if she continues to press for an immediate reply he should be forced to admit that the punishment is just (‘zungst Du mich, / Antwort, in dieser Stimmung, ihm zu geben, / Bei Gott! so setz’ ich hin: Du tust mir Recht!’ (DKV: II, 622)), then again a short while later when he exclaims: ‘Er [der Kurfürst] handle, wie er darf; / Mir ziemt’s hier zu verfahren, wie ich soll!’ (DKV: II, 623). That Homburg does come to acknowledge his offence against the public order is, as we have seen, fairly evident from his confession in Act V, Scene 7, which provides, as Hilda Brown astutely notes, an explicit summary on the distinction that runs throughout the work between the striving for fame and glory on the battlefield, and an inner struggle over subjective considerations and desires.48 Here we might locate the very crux of the drama, which rests on the fact that Homburg’s view of heroism and ‘Ruhm’ is not static, but rather evolves alongside his moral development through the latter half of the play – confirmation of which is provided in the following exchange:

Doch Dir, mein Fürst, der einen süßern Namen
Dereinst mir führte, leider jetzt verscherzt;
Dir leg’ ich tiefbewegt zu Füßen mich!
Vergib, wenn ich, am Tage der Entscheidung,
Mit übereiltem Eifer Dir gedient:
Der Tod wäscht jetzt von jeder Schuld mich rein.
Laß meinem Herzen, das versöhnt und heiter
Sich Deinem Rechtsspruch unterwirft, den Trost,
Daß Deine Brust auch jedem Groll entsagt:
Und in der Abschiedsstunde, dess’ zum Zeichen,
Bewill’ge huldreich eine Gnade mir!

Sprich, junger Held! Was ist’s, das Du begehrest?
Mein Wort verpfänd ich Dir und Ritterehre,
Was es auch sei, es ist Dir zugestanden! (DKV: II, 639)

Particularly telling here is the fact that the Elector himself now addresses Homburg as a ‘junger Held’: having heard the Prince express contrition for his actions and articulate a new-found understanding of the primacy of common (patriotic) interest, he salutes his young charge for having raised himself to a truly heroic level of civic courage and virtue. And the crucial point amidst all this is that the question of pride has, in fact, played a pivotal role in setting this development in chain. At no stage does the Kurfürst make an aim of eliminating Homburg’s passionate nature – on the contrary, the challenge he sets is designed, it seems, to deliberately engage and animate the subjective drives of honour, heroism and self-worth. By linking this to a necessary concession to law, order and the demands of community, his object is, in effect, to re-channel the Prince’s *amour-propre* towards a new patriotic spirit and sentiment – to re-align his individual will with that of the collectivity, and to transform Homburg the (divided) man into Homburg the (unified) citizen. In this, the drama conveys a specifically Rousseauian theme and ethos: where Kant might posit a reconciliation between ‘Pflicht’ and ‘Neigung’ through reason, and where the Romantics (including Kleist’s friend and co-editor Adam Müller)⁴⁹ might seek this in a form of moral love, Kleist experiments with a resolution in terms of a revised or modified

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self-interest – hence why it is so apt that the play closes with a re-enactment of the earlier garden scene in which Homburg accesses a broader projection of his subjective aspirations. Setting this in relation to the frequently-voiced view that Kleist here engages the triadic cultural patterns common to the period, we might thus trace, through Rousseau, the threads of an alternative philosophical anthropology within the drama which moves the individual away from the divisive tensions of *amour-propre*, and towards a new political ideal of patriotic identity and virtue.

6.3 ‘Wär’ ich ein Tyrann ...’: Selfhood, Tyranny and Violence of the State

The question we ought to ask at this point, then, is whether this model is presented in an affirmative or critical light – are we to read the development of the Prince as triumph or tragedy? Wolfgang Nehring, in his 1971 article, offers a positive reading of the parallels between Homburg and Kleist’s marionette, arguing that the Prince passes through something akin to the same three stages of cultural evolution on his way ‘zum höheren Sein, dem Dasein des Gottes’.50 Since the early 1980s, however, this way of interpreting the essay on the ‘Marionettentheater’ has come to be seen as outdated, and the shift towards postmodern patterns has led to a series of studies which stress how the text is riddled with inconsistencies and loose ends which subvert the apparent reconciliation of individual and world, and/or deconstruct the Schillerian categories of ‘Grazie’, ‘Anmut’ and ‘Würde’51 – a perspective which has frequently been carried over into an ironic reading of the *Homburg* drama.52

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A different take on this is provided by Wolf Kittler, who links his detailed analysis of military discourse in the play to the epistemological configuration of Kleist’s dialogue, arguing that Homburg

nachdem er alle Tiefen und Höhen der Liebesleidenschaft und Todesangst durchlitten hat, wie kein anderer gestählt [ist] für einen Krieg, der keine Grenzen kennt. Das Ideal des militärischen Vernichtungsschlags ist ihm so tief ins unauslöschliche Gedächtnis des Unbewußten eingebrannt, daß es mit der Unfehlbarkeit eines Instinkts, einer mechanischen Bewegung oder aber eines Gottes aus der Tiefe der Seele wiederkehrt.53

The education that Homburg undergoes – whereby he is, according to Kittler, schooled to both act spontaneously and follow orders – reflects, in his eyes, a necessary dehumanisation of the soul in the service of (post-1806) patriotic objectives. A similar line (though without reference to the terms of the ‘Marionettentheater’) is followed by Dirk Grathoff who, paying particular attention to the Brutus verses at the end of Act II, suggests:


In taking the Brutus imagery as a reference to the Revolution, Grathoff is, I believe, quite correct. And there is, clearly, something of a parallel structure to *Die Herrmannsschlacht* in terms of the move from self-interest to patriotism, here reconfigured from the collective to the individual. Yet to directly assimilate the political import of the two texts is, nonetheless, to miss certain crucial disparities, the most glaring being the absence in *Homburg* of the violent rhetorical appeals to hatred, vengeance and slaughter.\(^{55}\) Perhaps the primary reason for this is the shift in political situation: where *Die Herrmannsschlacht* details a programmatic model of action geared ‘einzig und allein’ (DKV: IV, 428) to the current moment of national crisis, *Homburg* has a more universal orbit of reference – the external threat to the patrie is less the singularly dominant issue here, and focus extends to a broader treatment of the relationships between individual and community. In this context, the Brutus connection might well be seen to carry rather more ambiguous implications – I am disinclined to the view that Homburg’s reference might have the purpose of reflecting a straightforward intent on Kleist’s part to place the Kurfürst on the level of the enemy. With this in mind, I shall in these final sections look a little more closely at the links between the moral standards of action in the text and Kleist’s own political attitudes, focusing in particular on two key issues: firstly, the character of the Elector and the values for which he might stand, and secondly the specific terms of the resolution offered in the final denouement.

For a long time, the figure of the Kurfürst was generally regarded, much like Herrmann, as something of a ‘Wunschbild’ embodying an ideal of political sovereignty. As noted above, however, attitudes have shifted markedly over the past three decades or so, with commentators increasingly favouring an ironic or critical characterisation that subverts any apparent endorsement of Prussian absolutism. No doubt Kleist has here crafted one of his most complex characters, and there are aspects of the Elector’s conduct which are puzzling and inconsistent. He is inscrutable and secretive, seldom giving any outward sign of his intentions – the monologues that provide such important insights to Homburg’s thought processes are, for example, rarely afforded to the Kurfürst, and it is thus little wonder that the question of motive has provided such endless matter for speculation and

\(^{55}\) One might, as Kittler does, see an implicit hint of this in the final battle cry, but this is by no means self-evident. Either way, however, these issues are clearly not a central aspect of text’s political reference.
debate. All that notwithstanding, it is nonetheless possible to resolve certain controversies and to gain a deeper understanding of the character if we keep in view his historical position as absolute head of state and supreme military commander. From this angle we can, I believe, answer perhaps the most serious charge made against him – that of being a cruel and arbitrary tyrant.

This accusation is, of course, levelled in the text itself by Homburg as he rails against what he considers (at that point) to be his unjust treatment. First, in his monologue at the end of Act II, he makes the comparison with Brutus’s sacrifice of his sons and tries to convince himself that the Elector is merely indulging in a spot of Stoic posturing (cf. DKV: II, 597). As the full seriousness of his situation finally dawns on him, however, this example of inflexible but principled statesmanship yields to a collocation of tyrannical excesses:

Er könnte – nein! so ungeheuere
Entschließungen in seinem Busen wälzen?
Um eines Fehls, der Brille kaum bemerkbar,
In dem Demanten, den er jüngst empfing,
In Staub den Geber treten? Eine Tat,
Die weiß den Dei von Algier brennt, mit Flügeln,
Nach Art der Cherubime, silberglänziger,
Den Sardanapel ziert, und die gesamte
Altrömische Tyrannenreihe, schuldlos,
Wie Kinder, die am Mutterbusen sterben,
Auf Gottes rechter Seit’ hinüberwirft? (DKV: II, 602-3)

The tone of this outburst is exaggerated and inflated, and it seems clear that, whatever other faults the Elector may have, such accusations of gratuitous tyranny are unwarranted. Yet he is, however, obviously sensitive to the possibility of this kind of charge, and twice feels pressed to advance a pre-emptive defence, first in the exchange with Natalie in Act IV, Scene 1 (cf. DKV, II, 612), and then again in V, 2 when he learns of the arrival of Kottwitz and the troops (cf. DKV: II, 626). The key to the matter, certainly with regard to his treatment of Homburg, rests above all on two central considerations, the first of which relates to the initial passing of sentence in the aftermath of battle. Act II, Scene 9 begins with the Elector declaring:

Wer immer auch die Reiterei geführt
Am Tag der Schlacht, und, eh der Obrist Hennings
Des Feindes Brücken hat zerstören können,  
Damit ist aufgebrochen, eigenmächtig,  
Zur Flucht, bevor ich Orde gab, ihn zwingend,  
Der ist des Todes schuldig, das erkläre ich,  
Und vor ein Kriegsgericht bestell ich ihn.  
– Der Prinz von Homburg hat sie nicht geführt? (DKV: II, 593)

The final line betrays his suspicion – understandable given the Prince’s track record – that it may indeed have been Homburg who was responsible for leading the charge. A few lines later, however, he re-states his verdict so as to make clear that the punishment would be the same irrespective of the identity of the culprit: ‘Wer’s immer war, der sie zur Schlacht geführt, / Ich wiederhol’s, hat seinen Kopf verwirkt, / Und vor ein Kriegsrecht hiemit lad’ ich ihn’ (DKV: II, 594). In both these instances, the Kurfürst first announces the death-sentence, then orders the court-martial, and it has frequently been argued that he here partakes of a despotic act. As Hans-Jürgen Schlüttler points out, however, the Elector does not at this stage condemn the transgressor as judge but rather induces him on the charge of insubordination and states the commonly-known capital nature of the offence. One might, perhaps, question the alacrity with which he moves towards judgement and execution, and this does, of course, later become something of an issue in the text itself. In the black and white world of Prussian militarism, however, Homburg is guilty of a breach punishable by death, and there is certainly nothing in the Elector’s actions at this point to merit comparison with a Nero or Caligula.

The second element that bears relevance here concerns the Kurfürst’s right to pardon the Prince. As absolute sovereign he obviously possesses this prerogative, hence the direct appeals made first by Natalie, then by Kottwitz and the other generals. In his interview with the former, however, he makes clear his reluctance to exercise such powers:

Mein süßes Kind! Sieh! Wär’ ich ein Tyrann,  
Dein Wort, das fühl ich lebhaft, hätte mir  
Das Herz schon in der ehren Brust geschmolzelt.  
Dich aber frag’ ich selbst: darf ich den Spruch,  
Den das Gericht gefällt, wohl unterdrücken? –  
Was würde wohl davon die Folge sein? (DKV: II, 612)

Again, one is hard pressed to find fault with his position. For it would indeed be an act of despotism if he were to revoke the death penalty, inscribed as it is in law, purely on the basis of personal favour. In thematising this question of the ‘Begnadigungsrecht’, Kleist engages a central aspect of Enlightenment legal discourse: Kant, for instance, criticises the arbitrary praxis of absolutist rulers as a detriment to law and legitimacy in his *Metaphysik der Sitten* (cf. AA: IV, 203-5), whilst Rousseau expresses similarly stark reservations in *Book 2 of Du contrat social* (cf. OC: III, 376-77). In *Michael Kohlhaas* these negative associations are highlighted via the skewed nepotism and self-interest that determines the Saxon Elector’s willingness to grant pardon, and it is not only a sense of poetic but also legal justice that dictates that the title figure must ultimately pay for his crimes against the people. In *Homburg*, the situation is slightly different in that the Prince’s offence is a case of *lèse-majesté*, for which Kant specifically foresees the possibility of legitimate pardon. Before we arrive at this point, however, Kleist first takes pains to demonstrate the Kurfürst’s enlightened commitment to law and jurisdictional process, and it is only after Homburg has confessed his guilt and accepted the legal correctitude of his sentence that the verdict of the court-martial is overturned and the pardon finally granted.

This last point also helps to explain a further issue which, whilst not directly linked to the question of tyranny, has nonetheless been cited as evidence of a dubious cruel streak in the Elector’s character. This relates to what is seen as the undue prolongation of Homburg’s suffering beyond the point at which the decision to grant pardon has already been made – i.e. in Act V, Scene 4 immediately following receipt of his reply to the Elector’s offer. From this point, events leading up to the anticipated ‘happy ending’ do take a protracted turn, but this is not due to any sense of wilful play on the Kurfürst’s part, and rather reflects the necessary conditions of statecraft. Given his position as sovereign, and in light of the current military situation, the Elector cannot simply climb down on such a serious matter of state, nor can he afford to allow himself to be seen indulging in an arbitrary exercise of power towards a personal favourite. Thus he engineers Homburg’s public statement of guilt and acceptance of collective principle as a necessary expedient to

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57 For more on this point see Renate Just, *Recht und Gnade in Heinrich von Kleists Schauspiel Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1993), pp. 50-54.

58 Cf. ‘Das Begnadigungsrecht (*ius aggratiandi*) für den Verbrecher, entweder der Milderung oder gänzlichen Erlassung der Strafe, ist wohl unter allen Rechten des Souveräns das schlüpfrigste, um den Glanz seiner Hoheit zu beweisen und dadurch doch im hohen Grade unrecht zu thun. – In Ansehung der Verbrechen der Unterthanen gegen einander steht es schlechterdings ihm nicht zu, es auszubüben; denn hier ist die Straflosigkeit (*impunitas criminis*) das größte Unrecht gegen die letztern. Also nur bei einer Läsion, die ihm selbst widerfährt (*crimen laesae majestatis*), kann er davon Gebrauch machen’ (AA: IV, 204).
permit a resolution that does not threaten to undermine state authority, and which in fact
drives home a patriotic message of unity and loyalty to the illicitly gathered troops. In these
scenes, the Elector takes on a Herrmann-like role as the puppet-master steering his subjects
towards new patriotic insights, and we might again see here something of a parallel to
Rousseau’s legislator, all the more so when we consider how he ‘persuades’ Homburg
(albeit in an entirely different fashion to Herrmann) via an appeal to passion rather than
reason. Only in the final act, however, does he acquire this level of control and ascendance
– in the broader sphere of action the Elector is by no means the God-like ‘geheime
Regisseur, der auf einer anderen Ebene spielt’, but rather, as Friedrich Bruns notes,
‘deeply human’, flawed and fallible. Though not tyrannical in his conduct, he is perhaps
seen as excessively austere, and whilst both Natalie and Kottwitz doubtless overplay this
image in attempting to influence his thinking, their pleas for a more flexible and humane
form of statecraft do not fall on deaf ears. By the close, the Kurfürst has seemingly moved,
after the fashion of Adam Müller’s theories, to becoming a ‘lebendiger Ausüber des
Gesetzes’ (ES, 17): rather than embodying a static ideal of sovereignty, it is more the case
that he develops, over the course of the dramatic conflict, into a prototype for a new model
of rule that is just but merciful, and which demonstrates a greater attentiveness to
contingency, subjectivity and the wishes of the people. Coupling this with Müller’s
modelling of the state (against Kant) on the symbol of the family, Klaus Peter has even
been moved to claim that the Elector’s conveyance of forgiveness constitutes the primary
subject of the play, arguing that the ‘Thema des Stückes ist […] nicht die Erziehung des
Prinzen, daß er seinen Fehler einsieht und in sich geht; [sondern] die (Wieder-)herstellung
der Familie, daß der Vater als Vater handelt und dem Sohn verzeiht’. In discounting any
development in the Prince’s character, however, this line of reading removes the core
aspect of the drama, and overlooks, moreover, the second crucial aspect to Müller’s

61 In the fifth of the thirty-six public lectures Müller held in Dresden ‘Über das Ganze der Staatswissenschat’ in Winter 1808/09 (later published under the title Elemente der Staatskunst), he states, for example, ‘daß die erste gründliche Probe aller Verfassungen und Gesetze die Untersuchung ist: ob und inwiefern dieselbe mit den Familienverhältnissen harmoniere’ (ES, 43).
statecraft – the elicitation of maximum identification between individual and collective,\textsuperscript{63} and the willingness to sacrifice individual interest for the greater good of the (nation) state.\textsuperscript{64} It is the parallel movement of both figures that allows for the eventual reconciliation of ‘Gesetz’ and ‘Gefühl’ in a settlement that clearly owes to the dialectical structures of Müller’s thought. At the same time, however, these processes also rework and transform certain key elements that stand at the core of Rousseau’s theories, and the manner in which the drama focuses on the specific conditions of amour-propre suggests the direct mark of his attempts to synthesise self and society on the basis of a patriotic ideal that brings the spirit of the law into conformity with the dictates of the general will.

6.4 Brutus as Model? Republican Virtue and Monarchical Rule

It is at this point that we might turn to consider in greater detail the possible implications of the Brutus verses, particularly with regard to its specific revolutionary connotations. Grathoff convincingly puts the case that Kleist has in mind here Jacques-Louis David’s famous painting *Les licteurs rapportent à Brutus les corps de ses fils*. Composed between 1787 and 1789, the work was not intended as an articulation of revolutionary ideology, belonging instead to an official tradition, established in the late 1770s, of grand historical painting designed to capture and inculcate the public virtues associated with the Roman republic. Later, however, it was to acquire a new and powerful accent by way of the revolutionary cult of antiquity which lionised not only patriotism and fraternity, but also sacrifice, martyrdom, and the readiness to extrude the subversive other, and so the work

\textsuperscript{63} In the *Elemente der Staatskunst* Müller writes, ‘daß der Mensch […] ohne den Staat nicht hören, nicht sehen, nicht denken, nicht empfinden, nicht lieben kann; kurz, daß er nichts anders zu denken ist, als im Staat’ (ES, 21).

\textsuperscript{64} In a further series of lectures delivered in Berlin between January and March 1810, Müller states: ‘Das ganze Leben des freien Menschen ist ein beständiges Hingeben des Geringeren, um das Größere zu erlangen. Behauptet man nun also, das einzelne Menschenleben dürfe nicht hingeggeben werden, so läugnet man damit nur, daß es überhaupt etwas gebe, welches rechtlich dem einzelnen Menschenleben an Werth überlegen sey, und schlägt allen Heroen und Großen der Erde ins Angesicht, von denen die Weltgeschichte redet, und die nur dadurch groß sind, daß sie eignes und fremdes Menschenleben höheren Gütern oder Ideen aufzuopfern in Stande waren. Der Staat ist nicht zu denken ohne diese beständige Bereitschaft, das einzelne Glied dem Ganzen zu opfern, also, bei der nothwendigen Zweideutigkeit, den ewigen Mißverständnissen und Schwankungen in allen menschlichen Verhältnissen, ohne beständiges wirkliches Opfer des einzelnen Gliedes für das Ganze, weil es nothwendig zwei und mehrere Staaten geben muß, und diese Staaten sich nothwendig verhalten, wie einzelne Menschen, d.h. durch unaufhörlichen Streit und gegenseitige Reibungen aller Art erst zu einem immer bestimmteren Bewußtseyn ihrer Eigenheit, und zu einer immer höheren Erkenntniss des Friedens gelangen, der zwischen ihnen walten soll’ (ÜKF, 310-11). On the particular relevance of the Berlin lectures for Homburg, see Marquardt, “Ein Traum was sonst?”.
became, together with Voltaire’s Brutus play, an important emblem of revolutionary culture and iconography.\textsuperscript{65}

Noting this revolutionary connection we might present two opposing lines of argument. One is Grathoff’s view that the example of Brutus is set up as a model to follow, reflecting Kleist’s conviction that the Prussians must adopt the methods of the revolutionaries in the fight against French imperialism. In part, at least, I would tend to agree – as I shall argue presently, there are elements of revolutionary ideology reflected in the political ideal towards which the drama presses. Where I am less convinced, however, is in the argument that this amounts to an appeal for a move towards an inhumane, ‘individualitätsverachtenden Gesetzesrigorismus’ that leaves Homburg, his will broken, in the dust with all other enemies of the state: this reading seems, to my mind, altogether too static and one-sided, and misses the point that the strict and inflexible application of law is, in fact, undercut by humanist pleas – unlike in Schiller’s Wallenstein, for example, love is not here sacrificed to power politics, and the Kurfürst shows himself to be no unfeeling despot.\textsuperscript{66} It is from this perspective that Peter offers the contrasting view, suggesting that the drama ‘erklärt […] Brutus zum Inbegriff des Bösen’\textsuperscript{67} – that he serves as a negative instance from which the Elector works away towards a more forgiving and merciful position. No doubt this line of interpretation does greater justice to the less fixed nature of the Kurfürst and the more involved dialectics of law and feeling. That said, it too is marred by an imbalance, unduly favouring the Prince and failing to take full account of both the political criticism to which he is subjected, and the more positive possibilities of the Brutus image as a symbol of patriotic virtue and zeal.

\textsuperscript{65} This process of canonisation was by no means exclusive to the Brutus painting. Another of David’s major historical pieces, Le Serment des Horaces (1785), was likewise taken up as a powerful symbol of patriotic rhetoric and revolutionary virtue. Though self-consciously unorthodox, there is again little to suggest that David necessarily intended a radical or subversive message, even if the revolutionary potential of the subject matter is plain in hindsight. What may be of particular interest for our concern, however, is the manner in which the work marries the martial patriotism of the males on the left-hand side with the domestic sensibilities of the women and children on the right, and it seems quite feasible, given that the piece was hung at the Louvre at the same time as the Brutus, that Kleist might perhaps have drawn additional inspiration here for the similar off-setting of themes in the constellation of Homburg, Kurfürst and Natalie. On a similar note, it is also worth pointing out that both works (the Brutus and the Horatii) call attention to father-son relationships within the polity and convey a potential crisis of parental authority, which may again be seen as having provided further creative stimulus for Kleist’s drama.


\textsuperscript{67} Peter, ‘Für ein anderes Preußen’, p. 122.
An alternative explanation presents itself if we look a little more broadly to the iconic tradition of the Brutus figure as an outstanding exemplar of republican principles. For where during the Jacobin dictatorship republicanism was seen and cast as a doctrine of non-monarchical rule derived directly from Sparta and Rome, its modern European heritage was, in fact, altogether more diffuse. Traced from its Italian roots, the concept of the Republic as a form of state flourished in the seventeenth-century in the Netherlands and, briefly, in England following Cromwell’s ascent to power, but by the turn of the eighteenth century it was largely in decline: whilst the Dutch Republic was still admired, political discourse in Europe was dominated by monarchical ideas. Where republicanism did survive, it was, in the main, as a form of moral discourse – as a political ethos of Roman virtue and Stoic duty which tended to find expression at times of national crisis, and was by no means considered incompatible with monarchical rule. Voltaire, for example, spoke of his Brutus play as letting flourish ‘la liberté publique sous l’ombrage sacré du pouvoir monarchique’ (CWV: V, 191), whilst the Abbé Gabriel-François Coyer, in his Dissertations of 1755, took up the same example to appeal for a revival of monarchical patriotism. In his novel Les aventures de Télémaque, fils d’Ulysse (1699), Fénelon theorised a political model that combined monarchical rule with republican virtues, as did Thomas Abbt in his pamphlet Death for the Fatherland (1761). The same is true, moreover, of Rousseau in his Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne, where he details a patriotic ideal founded (as we have seen in the previous chapter) on republican tenets but plainly urges the Poles to retain their monarchy: as for so many of his contemporaries, republicanism is, in his eyes, first and foremost a set of attitudes rather than a form of state, and as such might be realised within an enlightened monarchical framework – a view commonly shared, it is worth noting, by the early leaders of the Revolution, few of whom exhibited any desire to sweep away the institution of monarchy entirely.

The relevance of this to our interest becomes apparent when we consider again how, in responding to the national crisis of his own time, Kleist appeals to a patriotic spirit that bears close resemblance to this tradition of republican thought. The subordination of private to collective interest, the willingness to sacrifice one’s life to the nation or patrie, the need for exemplary acts of leadership – these are, as we have seen, the common stock

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of his political and propagandistic writings. All are, moreover, in distinct evidence in 
*Homburg*. At the close, the classic Brutus motif is, of course, inverted, as the Prince is 
ultimately granted forgiveness and pardon – a conversion that seemingly subverts the 
strictest rigours of republican law and justice. The precise way in which this turn comes 
about, however, nonetheless serves to reiterate the primary patriotic values of the piece. In 
this regard, the reference to Brutus could be seen as double-edged, partaking of both recent 
ties to the violently severe republicanism of the Jacobins (especially that of the self-styled 
Brutus, Robespierre), and also of longer ‘positive’ associations with a patriotic ‘Gesinnung’ 
to which Kleist openly appeals in his political works. This sense of ambiguity may, 
moreover, extend in a second remove towards Rousseau, who time and again celebrates 
Brutus as an iconic republican leader (notably in his play *La Mort de Lucrèce*), and in his 
‘Dernier Reponse’ to the critics of the first discourse writes in explicit defence of the 
famous sacrifice:

Brutus, me dira-t’on encore, devoir abdiquer le Consulat, plutôt que de faire 
perir ses enfans. Et moi je dis que tout Magistrat qui, dans une circonstance 
aussi périlleuse, abandonne le soin de la patrie et abdique la Magistrature, est 
un traître qui mérite la mort. (OC: III, 88-89)

As noted in the previous chapter, Rousseau places this example of patriotic devotion in the 
same catalogue of foundational acts as the Levite’s dismemberment of his concubine (cf. 
OC: III, 113, 506). Yet where in *Die Herrmannsschlacht* Kleist rewrites the latter example 
in a positive sense as an effective means of circumventing the paradox of sovereignty and 
mobilising new nationalist energies under conditions of crisis, the shift in emphasis here 
towards inner reform means there is less strict need for such extreme founding violence, 
and so he may be seen to engage in altogether more ambiguous fashion with an exemplar 
that both lent legitimacy to the ‘denatured’ patriotism of the Jacobins, and presents a model 
of virtue attuned to his own patriotic efforts. On this basis we might, I suggest, look to 
extend the terms of Schmidt’s argument by placing the renewal of Stoic codes in the 
broader context of a revival of a republican-patriotic ethos – one that not only accents duty 
and sacrifice but which also mobilises a passionate (anti-Stoic) love of fatherland more

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69 This becomes all the more likely if we consider that Kleist may also have drawn here on an anonymous 
portrait of Mirabeau – himself a moderate republican who hoped for the establishment of a constitutional 
monarchy – stood at his desk in front of both a copy of David’s painting and a Brutus bust (cf. Bernd 
Hamacher (ed.), *Erläuterungen und Dokumente: Heinrich von Kleist – Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* 
(Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), p. 41).
likely to translate into decisive action. Clearly, the lessons of the Revolution are once more an important factor here, but the playing out of the issue and the change in context leads me to doubt that Kleist is following the same brutally pragmatic line as in *Die Herrmannsschlacht*. It rather seems to be the case that what we find in *Homburg* is a more morally sensitive vision that appeals to the patriotic energies of republican ethics, but which also reflects a keenness to avoid any austere, tyrannical excess.

This perspective becomes still more pressing when linked to a consideration of the Elector’s position as monarch. Kittler addresses the issue in one of his essays, suggesting that the drama conveys a form of total republicanism whereby ‘[d]er Feldherr und Monarch steht seinem Heer und Volk nicht mehr als Subjekt des Krieges gegenüber’ but is rather ‘wie jeder der Offiziere oder Untertanen Teil der mythischen Gemeinschaft, die man in Deutschland bekanntlich Volk zu nennen pflegt’. More significant to my mind, however, is how the established structures of political authority remain in place at the drama’s end – though the Elector may take on elements of a more republican ethos, he no doubt prevails as an absolutist ruler. A useful comparison might be drawn here with the valley scene in *Das Erdbeben in Chili* which, as we have seen, reflects a revolutionary aesthetic of democracy and equality. Here, however, the broad open spaces of the valley have been replaced by the enclosed garden ‘im altfranzösischen Stil’ – itself a symbol of absolutism – whilst the aspect of horizontality yields to a more vertically-organised spatiality. These aesthetic signals appear to confirm that the notion of the republic as ‘Staatsform’ holds no relevance here: the political model envisioned at the close admits components of the republican tradition but within the framework of a monarchical regime. In this, it largely tallies with the main lines of German response to the Revolution – with post-1793 discourses on republicanism (most notably Kant’s *Zum ewigen Frieden* (1795), Friedrich Schlegel’s *Versuch über den Republikanismus* (1796) and Novalis’s *Glauben und Liebe* (1798)), and with the ideas of the Prussian reformers, who concurred with the republican ethos of devotion to the common good, but likewise aimed to preserve the institution of monarchy. At the same time, however, it also bears a close affinity to the terms set down by Rousseau in the *Considérations*, all the more so when we take into account the backdrop of the ‘Befreiungskrieg’. Clearly, the fit is not perfect: where Rousseau favours an elective or limited monarchy, for example, Kleist offers a model of

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absolutist rule – albeit one which is deliberately qualified via the demonstration of the Elector’s enlightened attachment to law and justice. That limitation notwithstanding, there is nonetheless ample evidence both here and in *Die Herrmannsschlacht* to suggest that Kleist read beyond his (German) contemporaries back to Rousseau’s programme of reform, where he found in the combination of pragmatic ‘total war’ politics and idealist republican-patriotic values a vital point of reference which, perhaps paradoxically given its associations, helped to shape and inspire his own nationalist response to the imperialist outgrowths of the Revolution.

Reading *Homburg* through this nexus of Rousseau – Revolution – Reform allows us, as a final point, to provide a new angle on the conservative discourse embedded within the play’s dramatic structures. For where Müller’s conservatism, for example, stems from a theoretical conviction that all interventions against traditional political forces serve to destroy the organic processes of history, Kleist’s perspective is, I suggest, altogether more pragmatically-coloured. Like both Rousseau and the Reformers, his political vision is directed first and foremost towards a consolidation of the state at a time of crisis – a situation which brings with it an eagerness to avoid revolutionary tumult. This does not, however, manifest itself in a reactionary exaltation of the past, nor in a strict opposition to progress. As we have seen at various points, there is a liberal aspect to Kleist’s politics – his views may be conservatively-tinged by the experiences of the Revolution but they are nonetheless revisionary and forward-looking, and even his call for the restoration of the Holy Roman Empire under the Austrian Kaiser is as a temporary expedient to secure stability and leadership pending the drafting of a constitution (cf. DKV: III, 652). Dieter Sturma, in a recent article, identifies this as a common position amongst the late Romantics, for which he suggests the term ‘revolutionary conservatism’\(^\text{72}\) – a tag that might fit equally aptly to both the Prussian reform agenda and Rousseau’s programme for Poland, and which provides something of a gloss to the denouement in *Homburg*. As has been frequently noted, the whole of the final scene implies circularity, and traditional structures of power remain, as we have seen, intact at the close. Yet this does not amount to an authorisation of the old order of Prussian absolutism, nor does it provide a necessarily ironic or parodic

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slant on the processes of change which have occurred over the course of the action. In fact, the repetition of the garden scene as success rather than ‘Scherz’ might be taken to reinforce both the broadening of Homburg’s subjective gaze and the Elector’s new-found awareness of the needs and rights of the individual – like the famous image of the blue flower in the opening of Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, the initial scenes in *Homburg* provide a model of fantastic expectations which are destined to be realised. No doubt the dream-like aspect at the close, configured in the final exchange between Homburg and Kottwitz, denies the reader absolute closure and re-inserts an element of uncertainty – however, I do not believe that this totally subverts the meaning of what has gone before. Rather I agree with Benjamin Bennett’s view that ‘in the very act of denying us the tragic or cathartic confirmation of our idea, the play still expresses the idea symbolically’. The ceremony of the final scene thus conveys a daring idealist vision – Kleist here projects a model of patriotic politics that encompasses something of the pragmatic needs of the hour but which also articulates a romantic synthesis of the ethical-private and historical-political spheres. Fittingly, however, it is an ideal tinged with the characteristic ambiguity of his fiction – one that reflects the tensions and uncertainties of contemporary identity issues, and which remains partially hedged by a realist vision of the conflict between subjectivity and social order, between morality and politics.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

On 3 September 1811, Marie von Kleist sent the ‘Widmungsexemplar’ of Homburg to Princess Amalie Marie Anne (the wife of Prince Wilhelm), together with an accompanying note canvassing for financial support for her relative. There she writes:

Ich wage zu gleicher Zeit, Ihrer Königl. Hoheit der Frau Prinzessin ein Stück zu Füßen zu legen, welches der Verfasser ihr gewidmet hat und das sicher große Schönheiten enthält, auf das man jedoch, wenn ich nach der Wirkung urteile, die es auf mich gemacht hat, die Frau Prinzessin vorbereiten müßte, und vor allem wäre es nötig, daß sie den Dichter und all seine aus Shakespeare geschöpften Ideen über das Drama kennenlernte.¹

Kleist’s closeness to Shakespeare is, of course, well-known and, together with his affinity to the tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus, commonly recognised as a vital ingredient of his dramatic art.² And of all his plays it is perhaps Homburg which gives fullest, and most controlled, expression to his Shakespearian qualities. Traditionally, the drama has been likened to the serious comedy Measure for Measure: the themes of justice, mercy and the application of law, the ideal of leadership tempered by compassion, Claudio’s extreme fear of death and the Duke’s great philosophical speech on the subject – all of these elements are echoed in Kleist’s text.³ Of additional significance, however, is Shakespeare’s broader and particular skill in blending visionary idealism and realism which not only bears on the Homburg drama, but which also presents as a major feature of Kleist’s life and work – in the merging of his fascination with the imaginary and his desire for a close proximity to human experience, and in the contest between his striving for perfection and order and his acute awareness of the contradictions inherent in the modern world.

¹ Lebensspuren, No. 506.
This dialectic of idealism and realism provides an important framework for negotiating Kleist’s relationship to Rousseau. The perspective is not, in itself, especially novel – its antecedents can be found in much of the older critical literature on Kleist where his reading of Rousseau is traced as a direct response to the metaphysical crisis of 1801, his loss of faith in the secure rationality of Enlightenment virtues being seen to prompt a turn towards a ‘sentiment intérieur’ as moral and cognitive instance. In this view, the Rousseauian roots of Kleist’s fiction take on a despairing cast, as the pure dictates of love and trust are denied by the incomprehensible structures of the world, whilst individualistic ideals of subjectivity and autonomy are thwarted by ideological and cultural forces – in Die Familie Schroffenstein, for example, where Ottokar and Agnes fall foul of the violent feud between the two households, and in Das Erdbeben in Chili, where Jeronimo and Josephe succumb to the frenzied brutality inspired by the canon’s sermon. In both these works, Kleist constructs an attractive idyll outside society, but on both occasions it proves fragile and illusory, a temporary bright spot on an otherwise bleak landscape. In the earlier literature, these collapses were taken to reflect a tragic scepticism regarding the possibility of Rousseauian ideals with which the young Kleist identified; in recent times, the tendency has been to view them as a laconic, ironic comment on the utopian nature of Rousseau’s doctrine.

Yet as tempting as such interpretations may appear, both lines of argument are, as I hope to have demonstrated, altogether too thinly drawn and fail to do full justice to the more complex terms of Kleist’s engagements. In the main, their shortcomings stem from a crucial misreading of the central premises of Rousseau’s philosophical anthropology and political theories. For as we have seen, at no point does Rousseau pursue a solution to social ills in terms of an ahistorical utopia, nor is he blind to the deep-rooted effects of cultural factors – on the contrary, as Arthur Melzer points out, he is one of the first modern thinkers to ‘discover history’ and to recognise that the human condition is, in fact, riveted to time. The conjectural account of the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité details how man has been corrupted in history and is now trapped by the resultant mechanisms of injustice and inequality, and across his entire body of work Rousseau continues to probe and dissect this historical problematic, opening up profoundly original insights into the social origins of suffering and violence. In the fragment L’état de guerre (originally titled

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Que l’état de guerre nait de l’état social), he provides a particularly forceful critique of the cruel connections between man’s alienation from nature and the emergence of political rule, tyranny and war:

J’ouvre les livres de droit et de morale, j’écoute les savans et les jurisconsultes et pénétré de leurs discourse insinuans, je déplore les misères de la nature, j’adore la paix et la justice établies par l’ordre civil, je bénis la sagesse des institutions publiques et me console d’être homme en me voyant citoyen. Bien instruit de mes devoirs et de mon bonheur, je ferme le livre, sors de la classe, et regarde autour de moi; je vois des peuples infortunés gemissans sous un joug de fer, le genre humain écrasé par une poignée d’oppresseurs, une foule affamée, accablée de peine et de faim, dont le riche boit en paix le sang et les larmes, et partout le fort armé contre le foible du redoutable pouvoir des loix. (OC: III, 608-9)

The immediate and enduring power of Rousseau’s Kulturkritik thus lies in the radical challenge it poses to the Enlightenment conceptualisation of history as progress, together with the way in which it uncovers the darker underside of reason and its reproductions, under the mask of Law, Imperative and Right, of the violence it intended to escape. In opening up such perspectives, Rousseau explores the modern dialectics of agency and structure, subjectivity and order, rebellion and assimilation, and it is these tensions that form the very nerve centre of his entire thought. Critically, he offers no easy escape from the modern condition, neither via a return to pre-political society, nor through any kind of revolutionary quick-fix – indeed, such is his apparent scepticism toward even his own chimeras that George Armstrong Kelly has been moved to claim that ‘in an age of change, an age of enormous complacency and enormous claims, Rousseau may have been the greatest realist of all’. In Kleist’s work, we see an immanent trace of these outlooks in the fictionalisations of the relationship between subject and society, not only in his attacks on property ownership (Die Familie Schroffenstein) and legal (Der zerbrochne Krug), political (Michael Kohlhaas) and religious (Der Findling) corruption, but also, and perhaps more significantly, in his renderings of the complex interactions of the individual with prevailing political and cultural norms – a theme which crystallises particularly sharply in the constellation of the star-crossed lovers, not only in Schroffenstein and Das Erdbeben, but also in the violent intercultural milieus of Die Verlobung in St. Domingo and Penthesilea.

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In the latter two works, Kleist lays considerable stress on the historical, political and psychological processes that influence human development, and in both we again encounter a transient idyll undermined by the forces of cultural conditioning. To view this as either a desperate or ironic off-setting of a naïve Rousseauian idealism against violent reality is, however, misguided: it is rather the case that Kleist here takes up the tensions and paradoxes transmitted by Rousseau’s analyses and forces them, against backgrounds of radical slippage and revolutionary upheaval, into tragically extreme – and extremely tragic – situations of violence.

The experience of the Revolution and its aftermath doubtless plays an important role in giving shape to the terrain of politics and aesthetics in Kleist’s work, and, by extension, to his relationship to both Rousseau and the central tenets of Enlightenment thought. The impact of revolutionary events on contemporary intellectual discourse can scarcely be overstated: indeed, such was the tendency to causally link the Revolution to Enlightenment philosophy that attitudes towards the claims of the latter came to be decisively shaped by the stance one took towards the former. For those who remained loyal to the initial ideals and ethos of the Revolution, the Enlightenment embodied the vision of a democratic society founded on law, justice and reason. For critics and opponents, however, it was a movement of ideas that undermined traditional structures of authority and patterns of belief, and reduced the question of liberty to a brutal struggle between despotism and anarchy. Rousseau’s position within such debates is suitably complex, reflecting something of the shifting patterns of his revolutionary image: where the men of 1789 acclaimed him as one of the leading lights of the Age of Reason, Robespierre later honoured him as a patron of ancient virtue, patriotism and civil religion who challenged the secular atheism of Enlightenment and was, as a result, persecuted by his fellow philosophes. Thus Burke, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), for example, couples Rousseau to his critique of Enlightenment ideology and revolutionary enthusiasm, whereas Hegel, in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), later levels the charge that the republican constitutional arrangements of *Du contrat social* engendered the conjunctions of freedom and power that came to drive the Jacobin Terror. Neither accusation is entirely groundless, yet both are stridently polemical and manifestly partial, fixing on a single aspect of Rousseau’s doctrine and ignoring all qualifying details: Burke, for instance, neglects on the one hand the implications of Rousseau’s attack on Enlightenment rationalism and, on the other, the more pragmatic politics of his constitutional writings, whilst Hegel, in making
Rousseau the progenitor of modern collectivist tyranny, passes over the vital safeguards he attaches to the ideas of popular sovereignty and legislation, and the critique of modern politics implicit in his philosophy of history. The ultimate irony amidst all this is, of course, that Rousseau was himself averse to popular violence, and inasmuch as he is often credited with having prophesised the coming of a revolutionary age in Émile, he also goes some considerable way to envisioning its most dubious outcomes. The origins of such misgivings lie in his anthropological reconstructions of history and culture – anticipating Kant’s position in his ‘Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?’, Rousseau likewise holds that revolutionary action will never occasion a true reform of thought nor a shedding of prejudice, and is thus most likely to play out in license, vengeance and new modalities of tyranny. Kleist, for his part, seems to avoid the trap of collapsing Rousseau’s theories into revolutionary ideology – the Paris letters of 1801, for example, provide ample evidence to show how he considers post-revolutionary France to represent a betrayal rather than an expression of Rousseau’s teachings. Not that he is entirely insensible to the potential dangers lurking within the Genevan’s doctrine, and there are, as we have seen, various points, perhaps most notably in Das Erdbeben, where he appears to be casting a critical eye over certain sinister elements which had been adopted and exploited in the revolutionary arena. That said, however, it is, time and again, the sceptical patterns that emerge out of Rousseau’s critique of history and culture which recur, in extended and radicalised form, as a major force and nexus in Kleist’s own fictional and dramatic responses to the Revolution, as he explores questions of legitimacy and effect via the dialectics of agency and conditioning, the reversals of victims and perpetrators, and the slide from idealism to violence: in Das Erdbeben, for example, the promise of a new social order is shattered by violent demagoguery and mob brutality; in Die Verlobung, the presented vista is of a campaign for liberty and justice that has diverged into a policy of unmitigated revenge and retribution; whilst in Michael Kohlhaas, further insights are afforded to the psychological processes that attend and drive this slide. In Penthesilea, meanwhile, we find a variation on the theme in the dialectic between the revolutionary origins of the ‘Amazonenstaat’ and its current oppressive conditions: here the principal focus turns from the distortions of anarchic bloodshed towards the tendencies of new revolutionary regimes to replicate pre-existing structures and to replace tyranny with tyranny – an outlook which likewise bears on the
violence in *Die Verlobung*, and which might even be extended, as we have seen, to the closing scenes in *Die Herrmannsschlacht*.6

The manner in which these issues play out in such brutal paroxysms of violence and destruction has, unsurprisingly, led many critics to interpret Kleist’s texts as works of resignation and denial. Marjorie Gelus, for example, suggests that in confronting the revolutionary challenge to Enlightenment values, Kleist ‘dwell[s] at morbid length on the threats to order, rather than constructing ideological antidotes to those threats’,7 whilst Anthony Stephens argues similarly that his ‘intellectual positions are reactive rather than affirmative’ and that he is ‘more often concerned with undermining the conceptual bases of the various conventional positions he quotes than asserting confidence in a set of values distinctly his own’.8 That Kleist does exhibit a primary interest in exposing the deficiencies of social, political and cultural paradigms is a point few would demur: his dramas and particularly his tales seem to be fixed on the violent collision of values and the collapse of secure notions of agency and identity, and so to issue a subversive challenge to Idealist teleologies of emancipation. In these terms, his works may be read as part of the Romantic reaction against an Enlightenment insistence on reason and order, testifying to a preoccupation with feelings of dislocation, alienation and emotional intensity, and outlining a modern crisis of thought, speech and representation – hence why he has, in recent times, also been claimed for the postmodern tradition of decentred instabilities. Yet these elements cannot, in the manner of deconstruction, be separated from any connotation of reference, and in fact the Romantic aspects of Kleist’s poetics derive, if not exclusively then primarily, from the social and political context within which his works are embedded, reflecting the epistemological and cultural uncertainties attendant upon the Revolution’s radical reshaping of modern discourses of reason, freedom and power. The tensions that suddenly erupted in 1789 were, moreover, very much part of the critical apparatus with which Enlightenment theorists themselves idealistically called for an unshackling of humanity from the darkness of instinct and obscurantism: whilst both romantic and, later, postmodern writers put rationality on trial, so too, paradoxically, did the Age of Reason – several of the

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6 This pattern of idealism playing out in violence might also be observed in certain other of Kleist’s texts which appear less, or even barely, concerned with revolutionary themes. In *Der Findling*, for example, there is a similar movement from Piachi’s initial act of pity (no doubt a reference to Rousseau), to his eventual refusal of absolution and stated wish to follow Nicolo to hell and resume his revenge.


leading thinkers of the seventeenth- and eighteenth centuries (including, notably, Kant) were very much alive to and concerned with the limitations that attend categories of understanding. Rousseau, of course, occupies a prominent position within this tradition – few, if any, of his contemporaries ever plumbed the inconsistencies and paradoxes of reason and knowledge quite as deeply as he, nor made such a convincing case for the competing dictates of feeling and sentiment. It is on this basis that he has been frequently cited as an original source for the coming tide of Romanticism, and we again see here some rather substantial parallels to aspects of postmodern thought – it is not without reason that Robert Wokler suggests, for example, that one might be tempted to see Rousseau as having been ‘both the Heidegger and Foucault of the eighteenth century, anticipating Heidegger’s ontological puns and the playfulness of his language […] and Foucault’s brutally sharp cleavage of the categories of knowledge to the disciplines of order and punishment’. The connections between savoir and pouvoir, so often viewed as a Marxist, Nietzschean or postmodern theme, are, clearly, foregrounded in Rousseau’s philosophy of history, which provides, as Wokler goes on to note, a particularly rich account of ‘mankind’s self-inflicted incarceration in the great Panopticon of our civilisation as a whole’. If, moreover, the epistemological condition of postmodernism is, as Lyotard claims, characterised by an incredulity towards ‘metanarratives’ that attempt an all-embracing explanation of experience and knowledge, then one would be hard-pressed to find a more apparent precursor than in Rousseau’s view of history and civilisation as a cruelly ironic process of corruption rather than progress.

In making these points, I do not mean to suggest that Rousseau’s writing might be annexed to a postmodern aesthetic or ethic, or to place undue emphasis on the anticipatory character of his thought: his reflections on violence, though pertinent to the present day, were addressed directly and explicitly to seventeenth- and eighteenth century intellectual modes – to Enlightenment theories of society, to Hobbes’s writings on history and politics, and to the broader tradition of thought on natural law – and can only be fully understood in this context. Nor is it the intention to position him within the anti-philosophe camp; on the contrary, in fact, for although he clearly does not fit neatly with the distilled vision of an exclusively rational project based on individual self-interest, there is, as far as I can see, no

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way to deny he was a child of the Enlightenment, perceived as such by himself and others, friends and enemies alike. Even as he voiced quite radical doubts about the operation of reason, Rousseau never left the terrain of Enlightenment entirely, nor did he ever go so far as to openly reject its basic goals and ideals: the scepticism of his earlier works, for instance, is directed above all towards the totalising claims of a purely rational metaphysical, moral and political discourse, whilst the theories of state- and nationhood outlined in his later works are constructed as alternative models for working away from modern conditions of alienation and towards the Enlightenment promise of wholeness and emancipation. In this sense, Rousseau may be seen as perhaps the first thinker to fully recognise the dialectical character of what subsequently came to be termed the ‘Enlightenment Project’, and to view the universal dissemination of reason as both an advance and loss: as Mark Hulliung has convincingly argued, his doctrine signifies an ‘autocritique’ of Enlightenment, one that candidly uncovers its deficiencies and limitations but looks to correct and re-shape them from within, and which in this regard embodies that capacity for self-inquiry and self-criticism all too frequently underestimated by postmodern thinkers.  

The opening up of these ambivalences and tensions in Rousseau’s attitude towards Enlightenment readings of history, politics and culture thus presses us to revise and reframe our understanding of Kleist’s engagement with his philosophy. At the same time, it also encourages us to look a little more deeply to the fuller complexities and ambiguities of his response to contemporary intellectual currents, which in turn invites new perspectives on the underlying moral orientation of his texts. On the one hand, Rousseau’s assault on the conditions of modernity no doubt goes some considerable way to shaping the contours of what Walter Müller-Seidel terms Kleist’s ‘tragisches Lebensgefühl’, evident in his explorations of the fate of the individual in society and his counterpointing of Enlightenment and humanist values with the violent contingencies of the real world. Yet inasmuch as the picture that emerges out of these inquiries is indubitably sceptical, this


need not, I believe, be taken to entail a complete loss of faith in all prospect of human progress. For much like Rousseau, Kleist turns his ironic gaze in the first place towards a version of Enlightenment that sanctions overreaching claims to an absolute, transcendental authority divorced from the ambiguities of life and the vicissitudes of human psychology; and the singular bleakness of Der Findling notwithstanding, his experiments tend to be tinted with a note of hope that suggests the possibility of learning from the tragic events that unfold – in Das Erdbeben, for example, in the tentative promise of the closing line, and in Die Verlobung, where the playing off of Gustav’s desperate reliance on absolute racial categories and Toni’s moral self-realisation does not undermine the value of aesthetic and ethical education per se, but rather underscores the obstacles to change presented by the injustices of cultural prejudice and the violent polarisations of revolutionary dynamics.

This perspective also bears in a different way on Kleist’s response to the crisis of Napoleon’s tyranny, which not only parallels the enlightened nationalism of the Reformist initiative of a ‘revolution from above’, but also that of Rousseau’s earlier recommendations for Poland. Three elements can be broadly defined here. One is the affirmative view, expressed both in Die Herrmannsschlacht and his other programmatic essays and poems, that the Germans must adopt a revolutionary politics of mobilisation and ‘total war’ in the anti-colonial struggle against the French. A second relates to the emphasis placed, in orientation against the experience of the Revolution, on the need for stable political structures and, above all, wise and decisive leadership: in both Die Herrmannsschlacht and Homburg (and, indeed, in the Guiskard fragment to which he had returned in early 1808), Kleist sketches models of military command and political sovereignty that record not only a serious engagement with contemporary exigencies (including the sublime spectre of Napoleon) but also a close dialogue with Rousseau’s discourses on legislation, legitimacy and foundational violence. The third, meanwhile, pertains to the endorsement of a new spirit of patriotic duty, interest and identity – of an ideal of ‘Brüderlichkeit’ that became, as Herrmann Timm has shown, an important rubric in the wider Romantic response to the Revolution. In France, the concept of ‘fraternité’ had been introduced belatedly in an attempt to reinforce the revolutionary impulse as it faltered against the reaction of the

ancien régime; in the German context, it was moved by Romantics such as Schleiermacher, Hölderlin and Novalis so as to take necessary first place in the revolutionary triad: not ‘liberté, égalité, fraternité’ but ‘Brüderlichkeit, Gleichheit, Freiheit’ – this is, as Timm notes, the political slogan of German ‘Revolutionsromantik’. The traditions of which the fraternal ideal partook – of classic Republican values, theories of festival and civil religion, and more modern ideas of nationhood and nationalism – had no doubt been given fresh impetus in the revolutionary arena; they all owed, however, a manifest intellectual debt to the theories of Du contrat social and the Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne, the latter work in particular stressing the need for such conceptions of ‘fraternité’ as a precursor to political ‘liberté’. In this regard, we might place a further important bridge to the discourses of early German national politics: where Jacques Mounier, for example, cites the terrorist crescendo of 1792-94 as marking a clear watershed between positive and negative response to Rousseau, we find a sign here of how the late Romantics too, in answering to the complex and dangerous turns of the Revolution, did not simply reject his doctrine, damned by association, but rather continued to recognise its contemporary relevance and sought to renew his ideas in line with current political concerns. In Die Herrmannsschlacht and Homburg, Kleist links to this literary-political tradition, taking up Rousseau’s patriotic constructions of liberty and pressing them into the service of the German national cause.

Reading Rousseau’s later political writings thus becomes a vital requisite for a full and accurate understanding of his influence on and legacy in Kleist’s work. Already we have seen how close attention to the specific terms of the Kulturkritik articulated in the earlier Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité presents an essential corrective to the facile chronological view of identification and (ironic) rejection, revealing an important nexus of anthropological and socio-political issues that continue to intersect and combine throughout Kleist’s fictional and dramatic texts. Only by taking account of Rousseau’s later works, however, might we proceed to an appreciation of just how closely Kleist’s engagement also ties to his response to contemporary politics, the content of Du contrat social and the Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne providing an important philosophical and

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discursive framing to the perennial question of the legitimacy of revolutionary and state-sanctioned violence. In this context, the lesser-known text on Poland acquires particular significance: if attention were to be limited to *Du contrat social*, one might be inclined to restrict Kleist’s outlook to a critique, similar to that delivered by Hegel, of Rousseau’s tantalising abstractions and demands for the subordination of the individual to the collective will – a line followed by Hans M. Wolff, for example, in his essay on *Penthesilea*.\(^{19}\) When we extend our gaze to the *Considérations*, however, we recognise an original model that inspires and shapes Kleist’s own patriotic ideals and ideologies: one which negotiates certain dangerous tendencies – the paradox of sovereignty, the deceptions of persuasive rhetoric, the need to extrude the subversive other – and admits violence as a necessary concession in the fight against foreign pressures. Here we come close to a principal root of the tensions in Kleist’s politics: as is true of so many of his contemporaries – one thinks immediately of Fichte and Arndt, for example – his outlook unfolds on two fronts, examining the conditions of liberty, justice and selfhood against, on the one hand, state agencies of violence and, on the other, Napoleon’s imperial tyranny. It is this dual focus that largely accounts for the overlap of cosmopolitan and nationalist, progressive and reactionary elements in his writings, as well as for the variations in his treatments of subjectivity and political structure, particularly in *Penthesilea*, *Die Herrmannsschlacht* and *Homburg*. Read across the lines of Rousseau’s thought, we may be encouraged to read the two patriotic dramas not as works of resignation but rather of a transferred idealism that also preserves and reflects something of the two-sided face of German political Romanticism. Disappointed by the course of the Revolution, and the apparent failure of the Enlightenment project for a unity of morality and politics, the Romantics turned the search for positive alternatives to the present back towards models drawn from the Middle Ages and classical antiquity, at the same time mobilising the German national past against the French. The conservative tendencies seemingly signalled by these patterns are, however, counterbalanced by forward-looking characteristics which crystallise particularly sharply when set in the context of the connections to the Enlightenment and the Revolution. For as Klaus Peter notes, the Romantics were, under the influence of the Revolution in France, ‘searching for a post-revolutionary state that would combine freedom and obligation in

such a way that state law and moral law would be one and the same” – in other words, German political Romanticism looked to continue the Enlightenment attempt at a moralisation of politics. That Kleist saw his own nationalist ideology, for all the violent rhetoric, as a consistent outgrowth of the Enlightenment ideal of freedom might be seen from the image of the blood-darkened sun in ‘Was gilt es in diesem Kriege?’ (cf. DKV: III, 479), which not only signals the possible coming of the apocalypse, but also symbolises the anti-colonial struggle against Napoleon as a fight for the survival of Enlightenment values.

In Homburg, meanwhile, the ceremony at the close tentatively fulfils the Romantic extension of the Enlightenment quest for a synthesis between freedom and society.

Linking this aspect together with our other lines of inquiry, it thus seems clear that to consider the tradition of Enlightenment thought as the ‘other’ of Kleist’s work, the ‘modern’ against which he revolts, is altogether too simple and arbitrary: inasmuch as it is more productive to view the Romantic period as an era in which, following the Revolution, discordances latent within the fabric of eighteenth-century society and thought came to the fore, so Kleist demonstrates across his oeuvre a far more nuanced understanding of the tensions and ambiguities embedded within the structures of reason-based philosophy. In exploring the limitations of knowledge, the relationship between agency and structure, and the necessary expedients of war against imperial tyranny, he adopts a ‘Dialektik der Aufklärung’ that was not discovered by Adorno and Horkheimer in the 1940s, but had rather been uncovered contemporaneously by the leading thinkers of the age, and then given new and dangerous inflections by the experience of the Revolution and its wars. It is in this context, as one who embodies and explores these paradoxes, that Rousseau stands as an abiding companion to Kleist, and the parallels between the positions staked out are, at times, remarkable. Placed in this wider horizon of interest, we are thus able to get a fuller and deeper sense of Rousseau’s lasting significance as a vital inspirational and reflective foil for the violent constellations of Kleist’s fiction and drama.

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