

Zeitschrift: Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle
Band: 26 (1958)
Heft: 3

Artikel: Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811)
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-568154>

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Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811)

With Goethe, Schiller and Hölderlin, Heinrich von Kleist emerges as one of Germany's chief literary figures of his time. His work is unfortunately little known in English speaking countries. Like Franz Schubert, the composer, he was fated not to receive full recognition by Goethe. In the case of Schubert, this may have been due to the fact that Goethe who became increasingly conservative with age, regarded as revolutionary Schubert's conception of the relationship between a song or song cycle and its accompanying music, for Schubert held the strong belief that the music was as important as, and not subsidiary to, the words. His famous setting of Goethe's «Erl King» is a good example of this. Something similar may have influenced Goethe's appreciation of Kleist. When in 1808 the young poet sent to Goethe the first issue of his literary quarterly «Phoebus», it included parts of his great one-act tragedy «Penthesilea». Goethe was then aged 59 and at his most serene (a serenity to be shattered much later by his meeting with Ulrike von Levetzow which resulted in the unique «Marienbader Elegie».) and was not favourably impressed by the passionate intensity of Kleist's tragedy. Goethe probably saw too much of the long-past and, indeed, chaotic «Storm and Stress» period of his own youth reflected both in the play and its author.

Kleist and Pfuel, to whom the following letter was addressed by the poet, met when soldiering. In 1803 they travelled together in Switzerland and France. Their journey was broken by the nervous breakdown of Kleist. However, the two remained friends to the end of Kleist's life. The poet never married. His greatest «confidante» was his sister, Ulrike. Three years after Kleist had tried in vain to approach Goethe, he met in 1811 Henriette Vogel, a woman suffering from an incurable illness. They made a suicide pact in consequence of which they committed suicide at Wannsee. Pfuel proved to be one of the few who remained loyal to Kleist's memory. In one of his letters he wrote at the time of his friend's death: «As we are Christians the public defence of a suicide is always a ticklish thing. For my part I am firstly Kleist's friend and only secondly a Christian.»

Kleist used to address his friends in his letters more passionately than was common even at that time of fantastic expression of feeling. The following letter to Pfuel is, however, proof that Kleist looked at Pfuel not only as a friend but as a lover as well. Modern research into Kleist's life tends to the opinion that there may have been more letters in the same vein but that Pfuel's family either suppressed or destroyed them. Pfuel survived his friend for many years and died in 1866.

Heinrich von Kleist to Ernst von Pfuel.

Berlin, January 7th, 1805.

With your eloquence, my dear good boy, you exercise a strange power over my heart and, though I have myself given you a complete insight into my situation, yet at times you put your image so closely before my soul that I receive a shock. I shall never forget that solemn

night when — in the worst place in France — you scolded me in a truly magnificent way, very like the Archangel scolding his fallen brother in the «Messiad». Why can I no longer venerate you as my lord, you, whom I still love more than everything else? — Do you remember how we rushed into each other's arms a year ago at Dresden? How immeasurable the world seemed, like a race course spreading out before us, and our minds eager for the race! And now we have been cast down, our eyes alone can complete the race for the goal which never appeared so splendid as now when we are covered by the dust of our fall! The guilt is mine, mine; it was me who got you entangled, I cannot find the words to tell you how I feel about it all.

What shall I do, dearest Pfuel, with all those tears? To while time away, I would like to use its quickly disappearing minutes to hollow out a grave like that naked King Richard to bury in it myself and you and our infinite pain. Never shall we embrace like that again! Never again like that when we finally meet, recovered from our fall, on crutches — for there is nothing of which a human being cannot be cured.

In that former time we loved in each other the best humanity could produce, we loved the whole structure of our natures, oh, in those few tendencies just about to develop. We felt, at least I did, the lovely enthusiasm of friendship. You rebuilt in my heart the Golden Age of Greece. I could have slept with you, you dear boy, so closely did my soul embrace you. When at Thun in Switzerland my eyes beheld you going into the lake, I looked at your beautiful body with the true feelings of a girl. Your body ought to have served as a model for an artist. If I had been an artist, I might have conceived through it the idea of a god. Your small head with the curly hair set upon a strong neck, a pair of broad shoulders, a muscled body — all in all a faultless image of strength as though you had been formed after the most beautiful young steer ever sacrificed to Zeus. The whole of Lycurgus's laws and his idea of the love between young men became clear to me by the feeling you awakened in me.

Come to me! Listen, I want to tell you something. I have grown fond of my superior Altenstein who gave me some rescripts to work on. I do not doubt any more that I shall pass the test as can only be expected. I can work out a differential, and I can write a line of poetry — aren't these after all the two final achievements of human ability? I shall certainly, and soon, get a paid job. Do come with me to Ansbach and let us enjoy the sweet fruits of friendship. Let me finally gain something by all these struggles which will make life at least bearable.

You shared things with me at Leipzig, or intended to, which comes to the same thing. Allow me to do the same! I shall never marry. Be wife, children and grand-children to me! Do not follow the path you have started on. Do not throw yourself under the feet of fate. Fate is not magnanimous and will crush you. Let one sacrifice be enough. Preserve for yourself the ruins of your soul, they shall eternally remind us pleasantly of the romantic time of our lives. And should ever a war in a good cause for your country draw you onto the battlefield, then go — your value will be acknowledged when emergency is pressing. — Say

«yes» to my proposal. If you don't, I shall feel that there is no one in the world who loves me. I should like to speak to you of many more things but they are not suited to the size of a letter. Goodbye, more when we meet.

Heinrich von Kleist.

Homosexuals Get a Life Warning

Lord Chief Justice Goddard reminded the Court of Criminal Appeal yesterday that the maximum sentence for some homosexual offences was still imprisonment for life.

«That is the law as it stands,» he said.

Lord Goddard and two other judges heard an appeal by 29-year-old Ronald Green against a sentence of four years passed on him at Nottingham Assizes.

It was said the offences took place in private with other grown-up men who consented.

The Wolfenden Committee recommended that in these circumstances such acts should no longer be punishable.

The judges were told that, apart from the offences, Green was a man of exemplary character. When interviewed by the police, he readily confessed.

It was pleaded that he made an attempt to break with his past. He had taken a job away from the town where the events took place and had met a young woman he wanted to marry.

His counsel said Green realised he must serve some sentence as a mark of the disgust which society felt for such practices.

The appeal was rejected.

From: News Chronicle, London.

(A comment in German on the above article will be found in the German section of this issue.)

Memory

How peacefully you lay beside me
 Upon the gently sloping bank
Where tender grass encushioned you
 And ancient branch of twisted tamarisk
Was clouded with its fine green mist,
 To form a fretted canopy,
Through which the sky's pale-grey
 Was like a close worked patchwork.
Softly the branches sighed and swayed
 Echoing my love for you.
There was a yearning and longing in the voice of the wind
Saying those words I found so hard to say.
O lovely spot!
 Forever the memory of final understanding.

SCRIVENOR.